# “Everything Was Different”: An Existential Phenomenological Investigation of US Professional Basketball Players’ Experiences Overseas

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## DEDICATION

Ich widme diese Doktorarbeit meinen Eltern und meinem Bruder. Danke für die Unterstützung über die vielen Jahre! Soweit von euch entfernt zu sein, ist oft nicht einfach gewesen. Aber in den USA habe ich mir einen Traum erfüllen können und Interessen verfolgen können, die mir sehr nahe stehen. Auch wenn wir uns selten sehen, so seid ihr doch immer ein wichtiger Teil meines Lebens!

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## Abstract

Globalization in the sports world is a phenomenon that has received considerable attention in the sport studies literature (Maguire, 1994, 2004). A significant aspect of globalization is labor migration in professional sports, which has been investigated extensively in recent years (e.g., Magee & Sugden, 2002; Takahashi & Horne, 2006). Basketball is one sport that has been discussed in this context (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). The sports encounters of athletes in foreign cultures are often diverse and entail differing pressures, rewards, and interdependencies (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). Players may deal with significant stressors such as performance expectations as is typical of professional sport settings, while simultaneously adjusting to organizational and cultural differences. In light of the various challenges of sport participation in an unfamiliar culture, the purpose of this study was to investigate US professional basketball players' experiences of playing overseas using an existential phenomenological interview approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Ten current and former professional male players, ages 24 to 55, participated in the study. The diverse sample of this study included six Black and four White players who had competed in a total of 26 different countries. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed eight major themes, four of which pertained to athletes' personal lives (*Learning Local Mentality*, *Experiencing Isolation*, *Connecting with Others*, *Exploring Physical Environment*) and four that dealt with basketball-specific aspects of the participants' experiences (*Dealing with "The Business," Adjusting to Team Resources*, *Managing Team Dynamics*, *Playing* "*The Game"*). It was concluded that while playing overseas required these players to manage difficult stressors (e.g., organizational pressures) it also afforded them with unique opportunities for personal (e.g., learning about foreign cultures) and professional (e.g., gaining a

different perspective on the game of basketball) growth. In contrast to previous literature (e.g., Cronson & Mitchell, 1987; Kroll, 1979), co-participants in the current study emphasized the positive aspects of their experiences overseas rather than focusing solely on the pressures and obstacles they encountered. Both the positive and negative aspects of their overseas experience seemed to contribute to the self-actualization (Cochran & Cochran, 2006) of these players, as athletes and as people.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Globalization in the sports world is a phenomenon that has received considerable attention in the research literature (Maguire, 1994, 2004). One aspect of globalization is that of labor migration in professional sports, which has been investigated extensively in recent years (e.g., Magee & Sugden, 2002; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Takahashi & Horne, 2006). Labor migration in this context involves the movement of athletes in various sports within and between countries and continents (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). These athletes' experiences are presumably characterized by numerous opportunities and challenges.

### Brief Review of Literature

Previous researchers have examined migration of athletes in several different sports, including professional soccer (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a, 2000b; Magee & Sugden, 2002), baseball (Takahashi & Horne, 2006), and basketball (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). The focus of the present study was on the sport of basketball. On the trans-continental level, movement of sports labor in professional basketball occurs primarily, though not exclusively, from the US to Europe. By the mid-1990's, over 400 Americans were competing in Europe's professional men's basketball leagues, with the best athletes playing for Spanish and Italian clubs (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). On a global level, the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) is the organization that governs professional basketball. FIBA consists of five continental conferences: Pan-American, Asian, African, Oceanic, and European, with over 200 affiliated national governing bodies (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). The elite North American league, the National Basketball Association (NBA), operates independently and is not governed by the FIBA.

While there has been a significant increase in labor migration in professional basketball in recent years, this player movement has been limited by quotas and nationality restrictions imposed by national governing bodies. Such protectionist labor barriers are typically implemented to address local concerns expressed by host cultures, such as the fear that local players will be denied opportunities to compete at the highest professional level due to an influx of foreign players (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). Despite foreign player restrictions, US athletes continue to be highly recruited and employed by different teams with which they are typically affiliated for a limited period of time (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a).

US players appear to migrate to foreign leagues for a number of reasons. The US high school and college systems are responsible for the considerable talent production of these players (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). While a limited number of young elite athletes are able to transition to the NBA, which is widely regarded as the best professional basketball league in the world, the large majority are unable to make an NBA roster. Therefore, many of these players seek out playing opportunities overseas in order to extend their careers. Some players are able to sign with an NBA team (e.g., C.J. Watson of the Chicago Bulls) after gaining professional playing experience in Europe or elsewhere (nba.com).

More recently, additional reasons for US players deciding to play overseas have been discussed in the popular media (e.g., on ESPN). For example, Josh Childress, who was enjoying a very successful career with the NBA's Atlanta Hawks, chose to sign with the Euroleague club Olympiacos Piraeus in 2008. This Greek-based team offered Childress a three-year contract worth $20 million, which far exceeded the salary he would have been able to secure in the NBA and made him the highest paid player in the world outside of the NBA (Thamel, 2008b). While

Childress' case may be the most transparent example of the possible financial benefits of choosing an overseas career over an NBA career there are additional financial attractions to playing overseas as well. For example, the taxes of players like Childress who compete in Europe are paid for by the club, which can be an important consideration for professional athletes who, given their significant income, would pay high income taxes in the US (Thamel, 2008b). Moreover, it is not uncommon for a foreign club to provide US players with a complementary apartment and a car (Thamel, 2008a), which may be perceived as additional benefits of choosing to play overseas.

Lastly, FIBA teams play approximately half the number of games in a season as do NBA teams. This shorter schedule might be another attraction for US players who have the luxury of choosing between playing in the NBA or overseas. A shorter season might provide them with an opportunity to spend more time with their families, enjoyed extended rest and recovery, train, travel, or engage in other activities. In some cases players' families also make the move overseas while in other instances their families choose to remain in the US. If the former is the case, a shorter season means that the athletes are able to spend more time with their families because they spend less time traveling to away games during the season. If the latter is the case, players are able to spend more time with their families when they return to the US after a relatively short season.

In 2005 the NBA implemented a new eligibility rule restricting players from entering the draft and signing with an NBA team until they are at least one year removed from high school and at least 19 years of age (nba.com). This rule was intended to encourage elite high school athletes to attend college for a minimum of one year in order to build their basketball and

personal skills before making the transition to play in the NBA. In 2008, a much-heralded high school basketball phenom, Brandon Jennings, chose to sign with the Italian club Pallacanestro Virtus Roma rather than wait for the results of a standardized test that would determine his eligibility to play for the University of Arizona (Katz, 2008). After a disappointing season in Italy, Jennings entered the 2009 NBA draft and was drafted eighth overall by the Milwaukee Bucks. Jennings is currently enjoying a successful NBA career as the starting point guard of his team (nba.com), which many attribute to his experience of playing overseas. It is possible that other elite high school players may follow in Jennings' footsteps by skipping college in order to play overseas and then make themselves eligible for the NBA draft.

Another issue in the player migration experience is exposure to a new and "different" cultural environment. The sports encounters of US players in another culture are often diverse and entail differing pressures, rewards, and interdependencies (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). More specifically, US players usually deal with high performance expectations, as is typical of professional sport settings, while simultaneously having to adjust to organizational and cultural differences. The most significant aspect of overseas transitions is arguably "culture shock," which can surface in both the basketball-related aspects of athletes' lives as well as their other everyday life experiences. While basketball may serve as a vehicle for integration into the host society (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a) migrant workers can also be confronted with issues of alienation. Players' experiences may be impacted not only by how they are perceived by their foreign basketball organization, but also by the perceptions of residents of the host community. In this context, issues with the community, organization, teammates, coaches, officials, and media personnel (Maguire & Pearton, 2000b) may arise, largely due to the fact that most US

players do not speak the local language and may fail to pick up on the culture-based subtleties of interpersonal communication. For example, US athletes may not be aware of potential differences in the new system they are entering compared to the US college or NBA system they are familiar with. Such differences might include expectations for player-fan interaction, ways of presenting oneself to the media, working with teammates, coaches, and management, etc.

Falcous and Maguire (2005) point out that clubs' reliance on non-EU players is characterized by a continual turnover of players. Some athletes might play for several different teams within a single season as they continue to seek out the most favorable working conditions. Player turnover can also be due to teams' dispensing of players who do not fulfill expectations (Falcous & Maguire). Unlike the NBA, FIBA-associated teams do not typically allow players to unionize, which sometimes can lead to overwhelming legal issues that players are unwilling to contest. It is reasonable to presume, then, that US players' experiences overseas might be characterized by a lack of stability as a result of frequent geographical relocation and accompanying adjustment issues. While previous research has investigated migration patterns in professional sports (e.g., Maguire & Pearton, 2000a, 2000b; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Takahashi & Horne, 2006) and examined local fans' perceptions of US players (Falcous & Maguire, 2005) , there is a lack of research investigating US players' first-person experiences of playing in foreign cultures.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate US professional basketball players' experiences of playing and living overseas. In order to accomplish this purpose an existential phenomenological interview approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) was used.

## Significance

In light of the aforementioned challenges professional athletes might encounter when playing and living in a foreign culture, further research is needed to explore these athletes' first-person perspectives. If a deeper understanding of such experiences can be gained, the findings would contribute to the scholarly literature as well as provide helpful information for players considering a career overseas, their coaches, their agents, sport psychology consultants, and their families. Arguably, the challenge for those athletes pursuing a professional playing career outside of their native country is two-fold: The players have to deal with the business and performance demands of their job and adjust to a foreign culture. The intent of this study was to not only derive a deeper understanding of players' experiences from a research perspective, but also provide participants with an opportunity to gain more meaningful insights into their own experiences.

## Assumptions

For the purpose of this study it was assumed that participants (1) had the ability to reflect on their experiences and provide accurate, open, and honest accounts and (2) would discuss professional and personal aspects of their experiences overseas. In this context, and hereafter in this dissertation, the term *co-participant* is substituted for *participant* to indicate that the interviewees, as the experts of their respective experiences, were equal partners in the interview process along with the interviewer.

## Limitations

The results of this study are limited in three ways. First, it is possible that the co-participants were not completely honest about their experiences and/or failed to recall aspects of

their time overseas accurately. Secondly, the results pertain only to male professional US players and, accordingly, may not generalize to females' experiences. Thirdly, only African-American and Caucasian players participated in the study, and their experiences may not be representative of US players from other ethnic backgrounds.

**Delimitations**

The sample of co-participants was delimited to US professional players who had spent at least a significant portion of one season competing overseas. "Overseas" in this context was defined as anywhere outside of the US, including South America and Canada. The co-participants were recruited from Germany and from a Southeastern region of the US. Lastly, due to the importance of the spoken word (Merleau-Ponty, 1973) in phenomenological research, all co-participants were native English speakers.

# CHAPTER 2

## Literature Review

### Overview

US professional basketball players' experiences overseas are presumably twofold. Specifically, athletes are faced with the challenge of adjusting to foreign cultures and social environments while simultaneously encountering performance expectations from self and others (e.g., management, coaches, teammates, family) and dealing with the pressures of playing for contracts. Hence, it is important to understand how these players negotiate their identities in unfamiliar environments and how their experience of performance pressure is manifested. Accordingly, this chapter is divided into two main parts. In Part One the concept of identity, and more specifically cultural/national identity and cultural athlete identity, is discussed. In Part Two the topics of stress and arousal, arousal-performance theories, stress and professional sports, and stress and professional sports in a foreign culture are addressed. While Parts One and Two are presented separately, the concepts outlined in each should not be viewed as unrelated. Rather, all should be considered overlapping and interrelated concepts in the context of the current study.

### Part One: Identity

The experience of pursuing a professional basketball playing career in a foreign country arguably represents a considerable life transition for US players and may conceivably have a significant impact on their sense of self. Both cultural identity (e.g., Ding, 2009; Holliday, 2010; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007) and athletic identity (e.g., Martin, Eklund, & Mushett, 1997; Miller, 2009) have received considerable attention in the empirical literature and each is addressed in the following sections. Additionally, the different research paradigms used

in previous research and their relevance to the exploration of US professional basketball players' experiences overseas are outlined.

**Cultural/national identity.** Cultural identity is a complex phenomenon, involving various life trajectories, and frequently surfacing in multiple national locations (Holliday, 2010). These life trajectories include religion, family history, occupation, community, politics, and language, amongst others. Based on his research with 28 participants representing 14 different nations, Holliday argues that culture appears to be in dialogue with social structure rather than being defined by it. His results revealed that cultural identity structures were characterized by five themes. The first, Nation, was generally regarded as an important aspect of cultural identity, though "an external one which may be in conflict with more personal cultural realities" (p. 168). In some cases, nation served as a significant source of identity and belonging; in others, it was viewed as being incongruent with identity. Lastly, the results suggested that nation may be an external part of one's identity that can be left behind when moving to a different country. In fact, one can learn to associate with the new country (s)he moved to in favor of the country of citizenship, for example.

A second theme emerging from Holliday's (2010) research was that of movable groups and realities. More specifically, participants spoke of their experiences with the confusing aspects of culture, particularly the sense of not belonging when moving between different cultures. In some cases, this theme was magnified if the individual belonged to a minority group in their own country, yet his/her family does not identify with that country, as is the case for many African-Americans in the United States (Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000). Additionally, prejudice experienced from locals (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010) might exacerbate this

experience. Participants in Holliday's (2010) study seemed to identify more with subgroups and realities, such as the region in which they resided, than with nation. Other aspects of cultural identity that were more specific to smaller geographical areas and, perhaps, in contrast with that of nation, included religion, ethnicity, class, community, workplace, clothing, appearance, age, and sexuality. Hence, despite being an important aspect of cultural identity, nationality appeared to be mediated by other realities and seemed variable across different contexts.

Participants in Holliday's study also discussed trajectories of multiple shifting realities, which were particularly related to movement. More concretely, the emigration of families over significant distances and over generations was viewed as breaking apart the relationship between ethnicity and nationality, often leaving another aspect (e.g., religion) as the only major constant. Additionally, frequent geographical movement may be associated with fluidity in one's cultural identity and perhaps a lack of consistency as cultural boundaries may blur together. Another theme that emerged from participants' responses was that of layering and compartmentalization. That is, some individuals identified with different cultures simultaneously, and over time were able to embrace aspects of different cultural experiences that might have clashed in other contexts. For example, a person might comfortably wear clothing and eat foods representative of two or more different cultures in one context but not in another. Simultaneous identification with one's own cultural heritage and that of another culture is consistent with a bidimensional model of acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2007), which has also been described as a blending of the elements of one's heritage culture and the receiving culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). In such cases, the individual is adaptable in the way (s)he views him/herself and others and in the

way s(he) presents him/herself in situations of potential ambivalence and fragmentation (Ding, 2009).

The last theme characterizing participants' identities in Holliday's research was that of language and reference. Similar to food, music, and clothing, language often served as a tool to relate to one's culture and express oneself in culturally sensible ways. Language is typically associated with a certain cultural history but "is not a simple matter of a national language representing a national culture" (p. 174). Some comprehension of a foreign language may also allow an individual to venture into other cultures and expand his/her cultural identities despite not being a native speaker of the respective language.

**Cultural athlete identity.** The International Olympic Committee (n.d.) describes athlete identity as the way one perceives his/her sporting role, which comprises goals, values, thoughts, and sensations related to one's sport. These are largely a product of one's cultural background and upbringing. In order to define athlete identity in more specific terms, it is important to distinguish between the personal and social constructions of cultural identity (Ngo, 2008). Every athlete constructs his/her own personal cultural identity, which is a result of encounters and experiences throughout the person's lifetime. However, society may view the individual differently, often imposing stereotypical ideas of cultural identity on the person and, hence, ignoring the complexity of identity (Ryba & Wright, 2010). For example, an African athlete coming to the United States to pursue collegiate athletics may quickly be viewed by others simply as a "black" athlete. Thus, it may be argued that the athlete's identity is not only simplified but also falsified by ignoring the personal cultural identity of the athlete. Ryba and Wright (2010) argue that an "athlete's identity is a series of complementary and contradictory

identifications operating simultaneously, with some coming to the foreground or receding depending on the context" (p. 16). For example, an athlete can be "black" but does not necessarily have to be African American. From the perspective of the spectators, the individual may "blend in" with other "black" teammates on the playing floor but the player may experience him/herself as significantly different from those teammates. Moreover, black teammates may view the player as a non-African-American despite the color of his/her skin.

An athlete's identity and experiences are interrelated. That means his/her identity is shaped by life experiences and vice versa (Ryba & Wright, 2010). This is an important concept to understand considering the vast array of new experiences athletes in this study conceivably make through their participation in the globalization of athletics (see Maguire, 1994, 2004). More specifically, the immense challenge these athletes accept of moving between countries and continents to pursue playing opportunities likely interacts with and enhances their identity development. Hermans and Dimaggio (2007, as cited in Ryba & Wright, 2010) point out that increasing globalization appears to be having an increasing impact on identity formation, which is often characterized by the experience of uncertainty. This uncertainty may be the product of displacement in an unfamiliar culture. Several aspects of culture can contribute to the athlete's sense of displacement, including language, social environment, cultural norms and customs.

According to Hall (1996, as cited in Ryba & Wright, 2010), "culture and identity are shaped within social relationships" (p. 8). These social relationships may differ considerably for athletes in a foreign culture in comparison to relationships experienced in their home country and, hence, impact their identity development accordingly. For example, an athlete may encounter local fans, some of whom may see him/her as a big asset to the team they are

supporting and some of whom may consider him/her unappreciative of the host culture and a threat to local players' playing opportunities (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). If the former is the case, the athlete may feel appreciated and supported. If the latter is the case, however, the athlete may experience him/herself as an outsider, who then may either act in congruence with this role or try to embrace the local culture and change fans' perceptions by attempting to integrate into the host community. In situations like this, the athlete may experience significant acculturative stress as a result of contradictory pressures perceived toward and against assimilation into the receiving culture (Schwartz et al., 2007).

Various approaches and viewpoints have been proposed for examining cultural (athlete) identity. Cultural background impacts how people view themselves and make sense of the world (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Hence, culture represents an important aspect of identity. Postpositivist researchers are particularly interested in variations among cultural groups and typically assume heterogeneity between groups and homogeneity within groups (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). For example, researchers might presume differences in cultural identity between African-American and Caucasian college basketball players. While such research has made valuable contributions to the field of sport psychology and addressed the general lack of cultural research in athletics, it has failed to consider and appreciate individual differences within cultural or identity groups (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). For instance, it may be that an African-American and a Caucasian college basketball player would have more similar than different conceptions of identity as a result of their cultural upbringing (e.g., if raised in the same neighborhood) than would two athletes from the same ethnic group. Moreover, it is possible that they may not even identify with the ethnicity categories of African-American and Caucasian.

An alternative to the postpositivist approach to cultural research is the postmodernist approach. Postmodernism dismisses concepts of self and identity that solely reside in the mind or are merely tied to genetic factors (McGannon & Mauws, 2000, 2002, as cited in McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Thus, postmodernism acknowledges the value of various methods, theories, and discourses in understanding identity in sport and refrains from favoring any one approach over the others. Postmodern researchers also recognize the contributions of postpositivist paradigms. McGannon and Johnson (2009) provide an example of a researcher that might adopt a postpositivist quantitative approach to investigate how two cultures perceive competition in athletics. After noting the similarities and differences, the researcher might then explore individual athletes' perceptions of these similarities and differences (e.g., in order to investigate the ways in which athletes' experiences are empowering or disempowering) using a postmodern qualitative approach.

Another research approach closely related to that of postmodernism is poststructuralism. The focus of this approach is on the role of language with regard to cultural identity. More specifically, "self and identity are a discursive accomplishment that is simultaneously local, social, cultural, and political" (Richardson, 2000a; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, as cited in McGannon & Johnson, 2009). In essence, poststructuralist thinkers are interested in ways people use language in particular situations to construct their self-identity. That is, language is presumed to represent a medium for cultural reference (Holliday, 2010). Proponents of a poststructuralist approach would also be concerned with the social, political, and behavioral effects of specific self-constructions (McGannon & Johnson, 2009).

The role of language would appear to be a particularly important consideration for the present research, as US basketball players pursuing professional playing careers overseas are frequently confronted with language barriers and, perhaps, differing cultural understandings of language, even in English-speaking countries. These language issues may conceivably interact as competing discourses with players' identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). For example, an athlete may view himself as a masculine, heterosexual male in his own culture but may be perceived as homosexual due to his use of language, including body language, in another culture. As a result, the athlete's perception of self in the foreign culture may be challenged, and he may feel compelled to present himself differently to his new social environment in order to uphold his self-identity. This may lead to considerable discomfort for the person and, possibly, to an "identity crisis" of sorts, which may not only affect the enjoyment of his cultural experience, but perhaps be detrimental to his sport performance.

In addition to language, an athlete may express his/her cultural identity by dressing in a distinct way, engaging in certain non-sport activities, and displaying other personal preferences (Lidor & Blumenstein, 2009) that may perhaps not be appreciated or understood by members of the host culture. Lidor and Blumenstein (2009) cite a specific example of a team comprised of Jewish, Arab, and foreign football players who requested different radio stations to listen to on bus rides to away games, which led to conflict amongst team members. The authors explained that while disagreements in music taste and dress code did not have a significant impact on the cross-cultural relations amongst teammates, they served to distinguish subcultures within the

football team. Another factor that might have reinforced cultural differences in this context was players' practice of different religions (Lidor & Blumenstein, 2009).

It is reasonable to expect that US players pursuing a professional basketball career outside of their home country could experience similar disagreements with local teammates and seek out more "familiar" subgroups within the team. US players on foreign teams might form their own cliques, which would allow them to maintain and enjoy aspects of their identity that may not be valued by their foreign teammates. For example, US players competing for a Chinese team might feel a need to discuss and analyze their personal performance in great detail, while their Chinese teammates, who grew up in a collectivist culture, might not be as concerned about their individual performance as long as the team as a whole played well.

Another aspect of identity that might influence US players' cultural experiences is differences in the level of discipline demonstrated towards their sport by various members of the team. Lidor and Blumenstein (2009) found that foreign football players and gymnasts from Eastern Europe were more committed toward their sports than were native Israeli teammates. The Eastern Europeans had developed their skills under cultural conditions that emphasized hard work, discipline, and total commitment to the sport. Additionally, they were socialized to treat the coach as the unquestionable leader and felt that athletes were obligated to respect the coach's authority and accept his/her coaching philosophy (Lidor & Blumenstein, 2009). Given the prominence of basketball in US sporting culture, it is possible the US professional basketball players' identities connected to pride in the sport and a high level of commitment. If so, this identity could be challenged by playing the sport in other cultural contexts or in some of the

lower professional divisions where a high level of commitment may not be shared by all teammates.

Quotas regarding the number of US players allowed per team have been established in different countries with leagues that operate under the rules of International Basketball Federation (FIBA) (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). Teams often invest much of their financial resources to pay US players because they expect those players to carry a significant workload and enhance the prospects of winning (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). However, particularly in the lower divisions where teams are often comprised of professional and amateur players and carry much lower budgets, the quotas may be more limited. As a result US players may find themselves surrounded by fewer US teammates and more local players, many of which might be amateurs that hold a full-time job outside of basketball to support them and their families. In such cases, local players' level of commitment to basketball may be significantly less than that of their US teammates, which in turn might serve to challenge US players' sport identity. Some that take great pride in being a basketball player and perhaps used to being well-respected and recognized in their homeland may suddenly feel misunderstood, and perhaps unappreciated, in another culture.

For the purpose of the present research a postmodern perspective (McGannon & Johnson, 2009) was adopted because it offered a useful lens for making meaning of co-participants' responses with regard to their identity as basketball players in a foreign country. Moreover, the methodological approach utilized in this study, namely existential phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) is more consistent with a postmodern than postpositivist perspective because it offered vehicle for understanding the meaning of individuals' lived experiences. It is

reasonable to expect that a variety of adjustment issues, such as unfamiliarity with one's social environment, food, and local customs, could shape co-participants' experiences in different ways. Moreover, their ability to expand their identities and adjust out of necessity and/or motivation for personal growth was considered to be a possible determinant of the quality of their experiences and perhaps the chosen location and duration of their stay.

As mentioned previously, poststructuralism deals with the use of language in particular situations that people employ in order to construct their self-identities (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Since it was considered likely that the majority of co-participants in this study would have spent significant time pursuing professional basketball playing opportunities in countries where English is not the primary language, it was expected that language or communication would represent a salient aspect of their experiences. However, it was not presumed that language would be the only aspect or that it would be the dominant one, as some poststructuralist researchers might prefer.

Schwartz et al. (2007) describe assimilation as an adoption of the receiving culture irrespective of cultural heritage. However, the occurrence of assimilation was considered unlikely amongst the majority of co-participants in the present study for two reasons. First, these athletes may have only spent limited time in a foreign country and may have done so largely for professional reasons before moving on to their next playing destination or eventually back to the US. Also, the basketball culture itself, which the athlete is primarily exposed to in his professional role, might contain various elements reminiscent of US culture, such as the use of basketball-specific English language, American teammates, and so forth. Hence, the process of integration, whereby the player adopts the receiving culture while retaining his own cultural

heritage (Schwartz et al., 2007) might be a likely response for many players and, arguably, represent an ideal outcome. By integrating into the foreign culture, players might enhance the prospects of an enjoyable cultural experience and perhaps more consistent performance success. More specifically, they might be more open to new cultural experiences, befriend local teammates, and embrace local customs while simultaneously holding on to their American cultural background. Such a combination would allow them to expand their cultural identity yet without sacrificing continuity and stability. It would also allow athletes to adjust to different playing locations and pursue a long-lasting career outside of the US, should their playing performance produce additional contract offers and/or extensions.

Another possible player reaction to the host culture might be separation (Schwartz et al., 2007). In more concrete terms, the athlete might strictly retain his US cultural heritage while refusing to adopt the receiving culture. If this were the case, it is likely that the individual would experience isolation and possibly depression, not being able or perhaps willing to embrace the host culture and experience personal growth. While the player's basketball performance might not necessarily suffer, the response of unappreciative local teammates and fans to what they perceive as a gesture of cultural disrespect might decrease the player's chances of playing his best. In addition, the negative overall experience in the host culture, particularly if such separation occurred over an extended period of time, could heavily impact the quality of the athlete's experience and his level of enjoyment.

**Summary.** Cultural background heavily impacts people's perceptions of self and the world (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Given that the athletes in this study had pursued professional basketball careers in foreign cultures, it was presumed that their experiences could

be shaped considerably by their own sense of self as US American players in an unfamiliar world. Co-participants' reactions to their overseas encounters, in this context, might vary and could be characterized by different discourses whereby their identities and experiences shape each other (Ryba & Wright, 2010). This interaction of identity and experience would be expected to occur across professional (basketball) and personal life domains. Accordingly, co-participants' perceptions of their overall experience overseas would likely be dependent on their ability to negotiate their cultural and athletic identities successfully and manage frequent geographical relocation (Holliday, 2010).

## Part Two: Stress and Arousal

Arguably, the pursuit of a professional athletic career in a foreign culture is characterized by numerous stressors that athlete might encounter. Not only is the athlete confronted with potential stress emanating from the business aspects and performance expectations that come with the professional athlete status, but he is also challenged to adjust to a foreign culture and strange environment away from the comfort of his home. To date, relatively little research has investigated professional athletes' perceptions of stress in general, particularly the stress experience by athletes in team sports (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). In the next section, the concept of stress and various stress models/theories that explain the stress process are discussed. After that, the role of various potential stressors professional athletes might encounter, particularly when playing in a foreign culture, is addressed.

**Stress and arousal-performance theories.** Though there is little agreement amongst experts regarding the definition of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), McGrath (1970) proposed a simple definition that seems appropriate for the present research. McGrath defined stress as "a

substantial imbalance between demand and response capability, under conditions where failure to meet that demand has important consequences" (p. 20). Elaborating on McGrath's definition, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained that "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). However, Gill (1994) has pointed out that, according to Lazarus (1990), stress cannot be defined as a solitary construct because it consists of a complex system of interrelated processes.

Various models and theories have been proposed to explain the stress process. McGrath (1970) developed a four-stage model that begins with the individual being confronted with a physical or psychological demand (Stage 1). For example, an athlete may be asked to execute a new skill in front of his/her teammates. Next, the individual perceives the possible threat such a demand might represent (Stage 2). For example, one individual may embrace the opportunity to demonstrate a skill in front of others while another person may experience anxiety. In Stage 3 the individual's physical or psychological stress response is based on his/her perception of the situation. For example, an individual experiencing high stress may show cognitive (e.g., worrying excessively) and/or psychosomatic (e.g., increased muscle tension, upset stomach) reactions. Finally, in Stage 4 the individual displays behavioral mannerisms that reflect his/her level of stress. For example, if the aforementioned athlete experiences high cognitive and somatic anxiety as a result of being asked to demonstrate a skill in front of teammates, (s)he may respond by performing the skill incorrectly.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) recognized the role of cognitive appraisal processes in the onset of stress. Cognitive appraisal theory holds that people experience stress when they interpret

a situation as stressful. Accordingly, individuals categorize their experiences in terms of the magnitude of threat to their well-being. For example, a professional athlete who sustains a painful knee injury may instantaneously experience high levels of stress due to an appraisal that the injury could be a significant threat to his/her physical well-being, financial well-being, and professional future. It is important to note that cognitive appraisal of a situation is highly individualized (Lazarus, 1984), meaning that people may appraise an event on a continuum from not stressful to extremely stressful. The notion of cognitive appraisal is similar to the processes at work in Stage 2 of McGrath's (1970) model, where people's perceptions of the same demand are presumed to differ. For instance, a sedentary individual who works from a home office may appraise a significant knee injury differently than the aforementioned professional athlete.

Generally, appraisal theory distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary appraisal*. *Primary appraisal* is best captured by the question "Am I in trouble or being benefited, now or in the future, and in what way?" whereas *secondary appraisal* is concerned with the question "What if anything can be done about it?" (Lazarus, 1984, p. 31). Both forms of appraisal are considered to be important to the stress appraisal process although the latter, *secondary appraisal,* also addresses the issue of coping. That is, an individual appraising a situation is also presumed to be contemplating available coping options. For example, an athlete who perceives significant pressure from the coach may consider quitting his/her sport, switching teams, or confronting the coach – different coping options that have the potential to alleviate the experienced stress in different ways.

Another stress theory is Hobfoll's (1998) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. The central tenet of COR theory is that "people strive to obtain, retain, and protect that which they

value" (Hobfoll, 1988, as cited in Hobfoll, 1998, p. 55). Additionally, people aim to muster resources of significance and put them to optimal use. Hobfoll holds that there are three categories of such resources: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary resources include things that are directly necessary for survival, such as food and shelter. Secondary resources are considered to be tools "that increase the likelihood of obtaining or protecting primary resources" (Hobfoll, 1998, p. 54). Examples of secondary resources are health insurance and transportation. Finally, tertiary resources are only symbolically linked to survival yet are presumed to play a vital role in the maintenance of social hierarchies. For instance, a professional athlete may own a large house or an expensive car, thus distinguishing him/herself from those who are unable to afford such luxury items. Stress is presumed to occur when the acquisition and maintenance of these various resources is being threatened and/or diminished. For example, a professional athlete may experience stress upon being cut from a team, hence losing financial resources. Stress might also result if the person does "not receive reasonable gain following resource investment" (Hobfoll, 1998, p. 55). For instance, a player may try out for multiple teams, investing significant effort and time in hopes of making a roster, only to find out that no team is interested in him/her. COR theory does not specifically address coping mechanisms for stress, though it might be argued the theory implies that one copes with stress by striving to preserve and develop resources.

In addition to the above-mentioned theories of stress, which are more general in nature and, thus, applicable to variety of different contexts, specific performance-based theories exist as well. While stress and anxiety/arousal may be viewed as synonymous in some situations, performance-based theories typically use the latter terms to describe an athlete's emotional state

and how it may affect performance. One of the early theories explaining the relationship between arousal and performance is Drive Theory (Spence & Spence, 1966). Proponents of Drive Theory believe that as an athlete's arousal or state anxiety increases, his/her performance increases as well. Though this theory has managed to survive for a long time, little scholarly support from the domain of sport exists for it (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). Moreover, there are anecdotal reports of athletes who, when overly aroused or anxious, display diminished performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Another well-known theory explaining the relationship between arousal and performance is the Inverted-U Hypothesis (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). According to this view, there is an optimal level of arousal at which any given athlete performs at his/her best, with too much or too little arousal having a negative impact on performance. However, a weakness of the Inverted-U Hypothesis is that it fails to include a cognitive appraisal process on part of the performer (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). While the hypothesis enjoys modest support in the field of sport and exercise psychology, it has been questioned for its failure to consider individual differences (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). In response to this concern, Hanin (1980, 1986, 1997) developed the Individualized Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model which purports that athletes have a zone of optimal state anxiety for performance. Outside of this zone, performance decrements occur. In contrast to the Inverted-U Hypothesis, the IZOF model holds that the optimal level of anxiety does not necessarily occur at the midpoint of the continuum, but is individualized.

Yet another approach describing the anxiety-performance relationship is Multidimensional Anxiety Theory (Martens et al., 1990). Contrary to Hanin's IZOF model, this theory holds that two components of state anxiety, namely cognitive anxiety and somatic arousal,

can influence performance in different ways. More specifically, cognitive anxiety or worry is predicted to be negatively related to performance while somatic arousal, which is physiologically manifested, is presumed to be related to performance in an inverted U fashion, meaning that increases in arousal elevate performance to a point but further increases in arousal diminish performance.

The Catastrophe Model proposed by Hardy (1990, 1996) centers on the interaction of arousal and cognitive anxiety. According to this model "physiological arousal is related to performance in an inverted-U fashion, but only when an athlete is not worried or has low cognitive anxiety" (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 89). Under conditions of high cognitive anxiety, however, increases in arousal eventually reach a threshold just beyond the optimal arousal level. At this point the "catastrophe" occurs, meaning performance declines rapidly and remains at a low level for an extended period of time (Hardy, 1990).

Lastly, Kerr's Reversal Theory (1985, 1997) deals with the different ways arousal can affect performance depending on how the athlete interprets his/her arousal levels. For example, one athlete may experience excitement when confronted with the opportunity to shoot game-deciding free throws, whereas another player may feel highly anxious in such a pressure situation. According to Reversal Theory, an athlete's interpretation of his/her arousal can also shift instantaneously from positive to negative or vice versa.

A basic understanding of the main stress and anxiety models is of relevance to the present research because professional basketball players are likely to be confronted with a variety of stressors during their basketball experiences in a foreign country. These stressors may occur in various shapes and forms and may range from cultural adjustment stress to stress and anxiety

emanating from performance expectations of the club and coaching staff. In the following sections potential sources of stress faced by professional athletes in general and those that are specific to the cultural transition that occurs when living in a foreign country are addressed. Hereby, it is important to understand that while these potential stressors are presented separately, they are often interrelated and may overlap.

Opportunities for athletes to pursue professional playing careers outside of their home country have increased as a result of globalization (Maguire, 1994, 2004). Many governing bodies allow only a limited number of US players on each team roster within their respective countries (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). In 1998, FIBA agreed in principle to allow players to move freely between clubs worldwide (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). At that time teams were permitted by rule to carry no more than 10 foreign players however national organizations were allowed to determine their own quotas, which could be less than that number. For example, most European leagues opted for two foreign players per team while governing bodies in Great Britain set their quota at five (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). Some national governing bodies (e.g., Germany) have changed their quotas at various times over the years.

The results of numerous studies (Maguire & Stead, 1996; Maguire & Tuck, 1999; Stead & Maguire, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Stead & Maguire, 2000a, 2000b) of athletes playing in a foreign culture suggest that playing at the highest level is one of the chief motivations of migrating players. Such also appears to be the case for US basketball players who are unable to make an NBA roster. In order to work their way up the ranks in FIBA basketball many of these players switch teams frequently (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). In some cases, athletes might change playing locations after being released by their team. As a result of frequent geographical

relocation, professional athletes might be confronted with a variety of stressors (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). Some of these sources of stress might include adjustment to a new climate or locating a local grocery store or post office (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). The more significant potential stressors athletes might face due to both geographic relocation and the pursuit of a professional playing career are discussed in detail below.

**Social stressors.** Arguably, the most stressful aspect of relocation is the challenge of developing a new social system (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). Upon entering his/her new environment, the athlete may miss being surrounded by familiar faces and, hence, is confronted with the often uncomfortable task of having to make new friends. Additionally, in some cases, the athlete may leave his/her family behind, which may exacerbate his/her level of stress (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Even moving away from extended family can be a significant source of stress for some athletes. Players that have always depended on family and friends for social support or, in extreme cases, have been "fixed in perpetual adolescence" (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987, p. 122) can experience considerable stress when suddenly faced with the enormous challenge of juggling various day-to-day responsibilities and developing a sense of independence (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Additionally, athletes with parents that have played a key role in their professional athletic development may experience increased levels of adjustment stress upon leaving home (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987).

As a result of attaining celebrity status, in some cases, the quality of the athlete's social life may be affected by a lack of privacy and difficulty in developing meaningful and reciprocal relationships (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987), which could contribute to athletes' stress levels. For example, footballers in one previous study (Noblet & Gifford, 2002) reported experiencing

considerable stress as a result of public scrutiny emanating from negative relationships with supporters, sponsors, and the media. While the expectations of local fans is something most players are accustomed to experiencing in the US, fan expectations can also produce a unique source of stress when they come from citizens of a different culture (Lazarus, 1984).

In their investigation of fans' consumption of local basketball in an English village Falcous and Maguire (2005) identified a constellation of often-contradictory factors that shaped these fans' perceptions of US players. For example, fans believed winning required the recruitment of the best talent available and supported the hiring of US players whom they perceived to be superior in talent to local players. However, fans also worried about the marginalization of local players or that US players were depriving indigenous athletes of playing opportunities. Some fans also voiced the concern that US players lacked the commitment and loyalty to the club that was shown by local players (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). The potentially resulting conflict between local fans and US players could conceivably be another source of stress, particularly for those players who experienced strong fan support during their collegiate playing days.

**Family stressors.** Upon relocating as a family, finding a suitable home and, for athletes with children, an appropriate school can be particularly stressful event (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987) that may contribute to tension within the family. In this context, athletes playing in a foreign culture are not the only ones who must deal with the stressors that exist in those situations. Their spouses or partners can also encounter significant challenges in a new and different environment. For example, spouses/partners may experience considerable difficulty in pursuing professional interests (e.g., due to a lack of available jobs in the geographic area) or

establishing a social support network (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). If so, the spouse/partner will rely more heavily on their athlete/partner for emotional support, which can become an additional source of stress for the athlete who has to deal with the usual commitments of work (e.g., practices, athletic training sessions, etc.), traveling with the team, or, perhaps, be emotionally unavailable if recuperating physically or emotionally from the stresses of a professional athletic career (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). The potentially ensuing conflict with spouses/partners can magnify the effects of other stressors, particularly if the athlete experiences guilt as a result of not being able to meet the emotional needs of his/her family. In some cases, however, the athlete might marry a local person (Maguire & Pearton, 2000b). As a result, the aforementioned family issues may not only be avoided, but the spouse might help the athlete feel more comfortable in the host culture, which may ultimately become his/her permanent home.

**Language barriers.** While playing basketball may serve as a vehicle for the integration of US players into the host society (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a) athletes may also be confronted by subtle nuances of alienation, which may be a result of cultural and language barriers. For example, the attitudes of local media may be negatively impacted by the fact that most US players do not speak the local language and, hence, fail to pick up on the culture-based subtleties of interpersonal communication (Maguire & Pearton, 2000b). Language barriers can also make other tasks, such as seeking out health care, stressful for US players (e.g., Gregg & Saha, 2007; Hudelson & Vilpert, 2009). Communication with health care providers is crucial for professional players whose job security partially depends on their health. Hence, those athletes seeking out medical care for injuries or sickness, whether through a team doctor or independently may be confronted with a significant stressor if unable to communicate effectively. A failure to

communicate with health care providers could become considerable source of stress if ailments are not diagnosed and/or treated appropriately by a local physician. In some cases interpreters may be available to facilitate the treatment process (Gerrish, Chau, Sobowale, & Birks, 2004), but the level of proficiency of interpreters can vary considerably. Language barriers could be equally problematic in interactions with the coaching staff, which could in turn have a detrimental impact on athletes' performance if the athlete does not understand the coach's instructions and diminish the quality of the athlete's relationship with the coach (e.g., Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Trzaskoma-Bicsérdy, Bognár, Révész, & Géczi, 2007).

**Team stressors.** While game performance is crucial, the majority of a professional athlete's life is spent in practice. For some professional athletes, long training sessions, as preferred by some coaches, can be a major source of stress in their jobs (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Such stress may be magnified when athletes feel they have no input in the decision-making of the coach or the organization. Coaches that prefer an autocratic leadership style (Horne & Carron, 1985) usually exclude athletes from having a say in the day-to-day activities and culture of the team, including the structure and duration of practices (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Such a leadership style can be difficult for some athletes to handle, particularly if the athlete is more experienced and feels he/she has valuable opinions to share. The athlete's potential reluctance to approach the coach, perhaps due in part to the aforementioned language barriers, to resolve disagreements and conflicts (Noblet & Gifford, 2002) might exacerbate his/her stress levels.

Some athletes have reported that sarcastic remarks, anger, unwarranted criticism, and verbal abuse they receive from coaches can be significant stressors in their professional lives

(Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Additionally, negative relationships with teammates can lead to feelings of increased isolation from the team, which can be stressful. The feeling of isolation from teammates is also common for players when they first join a team (Noblet & Gifford, 2002) and might be magnified as a result of being in a foreign culture. It is reasonable to assume that indigenous players, similar to local fans (Falcous & Maguire, 2005), might perceive US players as threatening (e.g., they might fear losing playing time to US teammates) and treat them accordingly. If so, such treatment would likely have a negative impact on US players' experiences in the host culture and represent another source of stress.

**Performance pressures.** Despite the ever-present fact of foreign player restrictions, US athletes continue to be highly recruited by foreign teams (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). However, if players fail to perform quickly at the expected level they may only be affiliated with a team for a limited period of time (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). In addition, to high performance expectations, the existence of quotas and resulting competition for a limited number of available jobs can produce added stress for professional players. Accordingly, the level of stress emanating from performance pressure experienced by professional athletes, arguably, can be significant as these athletes' livelihood depends on their performance.

In order to be able to perform well, it is important for athletes to stay healthy and injury-free. Athletes can experience a negative emotional reaction in response to injury, which might keep them from participating in their sport for an extended period of time (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). Stress due to injury can be further exacerbated if athletes become isolated from their team and are unable to engage in team activities (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Thus, the transition back from injury and reintegration into the team can further complicate the challenge of meeting

performance expectations. When injured, it is important for athletes to utilize a variety of coping strategies, including positive reappraisal, using various forms of social support, and developing problem solving strategies (Nicolas & Jebrane, 2008).

A number of previous studies have focused on competition-induced stress in sports (e.g., Feltz, Lirgg, & Albrecht, 1992; Gould & Weinberg, 1985; Kroll, 1979). Particularly in the context of a foreign culture it is important to consider that an athlete's level of self-esteem is frequently dependent on his/her athletic performance. Thus, athletes in the midst of a performance slump due to adjustment stress may experience a lowered self-esteem, which may then reinforce poor performance. Given the enormous amount of pressure on professional athletes to perform at a high level at all times (Noblet & Gifford, 2002), effective coping strategies become particularly essential and are necessary to ensure that the athlete can have a long-lasting career.

**Financial stressors.** One perhaps less obvious stressor a professional athlete may face when playing overseas is a dramatic increase in income. The combination of a lack of experience in managing personal finances and a carefree attitude often results in excessive spending and bad investments. Additionally, the athlete may feel a financial obligation to support extended family and friends (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987). Financial security can also be threatened by injury and poor performance, either of which could lead to unemployment. Athletic careers are frequently short-lived and players may experience uncertainty about their professional lives after their sport careers have ended (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Some athletes are able to handle the question of how to prepare for the future from a financial investment or educational standpoint while others fail to think ahead and in so doing set themselves up for personal and financial turmoil.

**Summary.** Athletes who pursue a professional playing career in a foreign country may be exposed to various stressors, some of which are similar to those they would encounter in their home country (e.g., pressure to perform) and some of which are unique (e.g., adjusting to a new culture and language). The potential sources of stress include both basketball/performance-related stressors (e.g., pressure to meet the coach's and the organizations expectations) and personal life stressors (e.g., building a social network, coping with family issues). Although, some overlap may exist between these categories (e.g., coach-athlete communication can impact player performance as well as the player's cultural adjustment if the coach does not speak English). Stress emanating from the two categories can be explained by general theories of stress, such as Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus, 1984) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1998) and by arousal-performance theories, such as Drive Theory (Spence & Spence, 1996) and the Inverted-U hypothesis (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). In the context of the current research US players' evaluation of and response to a variety of stressors was assumed to be an important aspect of their experiences of playing in foreign countries.

# CHAPTER 3

## Method

In this chapter the philosophical origins of existential phenomenology are addressed. More specifically, existentialism and phenomenology are discussed, and the important phenomenological concepts of figure and ground (Merleau-Ponty, 1973) are introduced. Lastly, the procedures that were used in the present research are outlined.

### Existential Phenomenology

The goal of phenomenological research is to describe people's lived experience of phenomena rather than constructing abstract explanations (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson 1997). This approach is quite different from traditional scientific inquiry which requires that a phenomenon be observable, measurable, and verifiable by other observers. However, it is preferable to the traditional scientific approach, which is primarily concerned with "why" effects occur in a population rather than understanding the "what" of an individual's experience (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989).

In order to effectively capture a person's lived experience, the phenomenological approach requires the researcher to establish a free-flowing dialogue with the participant that is not constrained by any predetermined interview structure (Pollio et al., 1997). Throughout the phenomenological interview, the participant is assumed to be the expert (Dale, 1996). Hence, the researcher's focus must remain on ideas voiced by the participant. Due to the two-way process of communication in a phenomenological interview and the primary importance of the participant's contribution, the term *co-participant* (Lather, 1991) is used to describe the interviewees in this research. Using an existential phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), US

professional basketball players' first-person accounts of their life experiences overseas were investigated in the present study. The philosophical underpinnings of this approach are discussed in the following sections.

**Existentialism.** Existentialism is concerned with who people are as human beings and how they may accomplish living an authentic life (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The philosophy of existentialism was developed by Kierkegaard in the nineteenth-century in reaction to traditional philosophy of that day that typically separated meaning from life (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Over the years, writers such as a Jaspers, Sartre, and Camus contributed further to the development of existentialism by exploring human concerns such as anxiety, commitment, despair, and choice and how people make meaning of their life circumstances (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology, as developed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl and later advanced by Martin Heidegger, provided a systematic way for existentialists to explore human issues. Husserl considered consciousness the essence of his phenomenological approach, and his method consisted of thoughtful and specific description of human phenomena (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Moustakas (1994) described the empirical phenomenological approach as "a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of experience" (p. 13).

The phenomenological method not only allows the researcher to gain insight into human issues but it also provides co-participants with an opportunity to understand and bring meaning to situations they have encountered in their lives (Nesti, 2004). A key aspect of the phenomenological method is that the interviewee is viewed as the expert on the topic of inquiry

and, as mentioned previously, is sometimes referred to as a co-participant along with the researcher. The focus in phenomenology on co-participants' first-person descriptions (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) makes it an ideal method for exploring US professional basketball players' experience of playing overseas. It arguably yields richer accounts than would be possible with quantitative methods, such as questionnaires or interview guides (Dale, 1996) and has the potential to shed considerable light on a topic that has received little attention in the research literature to date.

**Figure and ground.** The concept of figure/ground was originally coined by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1921 and is central to the phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Hereby, *figure* refers to what is predominant in consciousness when experiencing the phenomenon (e.g., playing basketball) and *ground* represents the context in which the experience occurs (e.g., foreign country) (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Put another way, "figure and ground co-create each other in human experience" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 18), meaning neither one can exist in the same form in the absence of the other. In addition, something may emerge as figural in one situation and recede into the (back) ground in another situation where something else may become figural. The four grounds typically discussed in the existential phenomenological literature are *Body*, *World*, *Time*, and *Others* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962).

## Procedures

The procedures used in this study were based on Thomas and Pollio's (2002) recommendations for conducting existential phenomenological research. These include

*Exploring Researcher Bias*, *Selection of Co-Participants*, *Data Collection*, *Data Analysis*, and *Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure*.

**Exploration of Researcher Bias**

An important step in the phenomenological research approach is the exploration of researcher bias (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This is accomplished by the researcher's participation in a bracketing interview and the recording of field notes. Both steps are described in detail below.

**Bracketing interview.** Bracketing has been described as "a suspension of theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, and presuppositions" (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 47). Thus, the bracketing interview serves to explore biases on the part of the researcher that may interfere with the phenomenological interview (Dale, 1997). More specifically, the researcher participates in a bracketing interview with the goal of gaining awareness of his/her expectations for the research. By making his/her presuppositions visible, the researcher is less likely to let those presuppositions interfere with his/her understanding of co-participants' lived experiences (Dale, 1997). However, Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out that total bracketing of presuppositions can never be achieved.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview with a Ph.D. student in sport psychology who had previous experience in phenomenological research. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to determine the researcher's expectations of what co-participants' experiences might be like. The researcher acknowledged his familiarity with the game of basketball and explained that he had competed and on the amateur club level and coached on the youth level in Germany. Moreover, he explained that he

had grown up in Germany and believed that his international background in combination with his basketball-related experiences would allow him to relate to co-participants effectively and increase his credibility. The researcher reported that he expected co-participants to address both cultural differences and differences in how the game of basketball was played overseas. More specifically, he anticipated that co-participants would talk about the need to adjust to their new cultural environment and to fit into a more team-oriented style of play compared to the way basketball is played in the US. The researcher also acknowledged that co-participants might discuss business-related aspects of their experience such as short-term contracts and issues with being paid by their club on time. Moreover, he expected co-participants to reflect on the challenges of being away from home. Lastly, the researcher thought that co-participants would talk about their relationship with coaches, teammates, media, and fans. Throughout all interviews with co-participants and the data analysis process, the researcher periodically referred to the themes derived from the bracketing interview as a way of reminding himself to stay focused on his co-participants' reported experiences rather than his own expectations.

**Field notes.** Field notes are notes a researcher records immediately following a co-participant's interview. These notes include descriptions of the setting of the interview, the nature of communication (both verbal and non-verbal) demonstrated by the co-participant, and the researcher's personal reactions. Additionally, notes are made of any unusual events such as interruptions (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The material in Appendix A consists of examples of field notes recorded in this study.

Since all 10 co-participants provided detailed accounts of their experiences and seemed willing to share their thoughts, the researcher primarily referred to his field notes to determine

whether co-participants' responses were impacted by unexpected or unusual occurrences. For example, during the phone interview with one co-participant (Othella), the dialogue was interrupted for several minutes when the co-participant went to answer a knock at his door. However, as indicated in the field notes, the interview continued smoothly thereafter. In another case, a co-participant (Freddy) discussed his experience in the presence of his coach and the coach's son who were curious to observe the interview. It was determined that due to the strong rapport between player and coach (the two seemed very comfortable with each other in their verbal communication prior to the interview and joked with one another), the co-participant did not modify his responses. In the researcher's field notes, it was indicated that the co-participant had discussed the positive relationship he had with the coach and the organization in an honest and open manner in the coach's presence.

**Selection of Co-Participants**

After obtaining approval from the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted players in Germany and the Southeastern region of the US either directly via email or face-to-face or through their coach. Potential co-participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and requirements of the study. Recruitment of players in Germany proved more difficult than expected as a number of players who had been recruited by their coach to participate in the research had returned to the US following an early exit from the playoffs. Hence, the researcher was unable to interview these players at the time of his visit to Germany. However, he was able to recruit additional co-participants through a basketball summer league in the Southeastern region of the US at a later point in time.

For the purpose of this study co-participants had to (a) be male; (b) hold US citizenship; (c) possess international playing experience on the club level (rather than the national team level); and (d) be English-speaking. In addition to these criteria, co-participants had to be willing to discuss their experience in an interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Upon meeting the eligibility criteria for inclusion, each co-participant was scheduled for an interview at a convenient time and place. The final number of co-participants was determined by saturation in the data. That is, recruitment of additional co-participants was ceased when no new information or themes emerged from the interview data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). During Interviews nine and 10, it became apparent that no new themes were emerging. Accordingly, data collection was concluded following Interview 10.

**Co-Participants**

The co-participants in this study were 10 current and former US professional basketball players. Five had recently played overseas and were now between seasons, one was playing in the NBA, and four were retired. All co-participants were males, which is typically the case for the majority of sport migrants (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a). The sample was derived from US players who had competed or were currently playing professionally in Germany, some of whom had additional playing experience in other countries outside of the US, and current and former professional players from the Southeastern region of the US who had international playing experience. To be eligible to be included in the sample, co-participants had to have achieved full-time professional status, meaning they had to have earned or were currently earning a living solely through their international professional basketball participation.

The co-participants had a mean age of 32.3 years. Four of the co-participants were White and six were Black. On average, they had spent 6.2 seasons overseas and played in three (3.2 to be exact) different countries. Nine of the co-participants had competed at the highest level in at least one of the countries they played in whereas one had played in the second division and lower in the sole country he had competed in professionally. Three of the co-participants had gained playing experience in Greece and/or Spain which, arguably, feature the most competitive professional basketball leagues outside of the US. For each co-participant, his age and ethnicity, the number of seasons he competed overseas, and the number of countries he resided in during that time are listed in Table 1, along with his respective pseudonym and interview duration. Countries the 10 co-participants had played in included Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, China, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Iceland, Indonesia, Italy, Lebanon, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela. The co-participants received no financial compensation for their participation.

**Data Collection**

Locations of co-participants' interviews were at their homes or an office setting. Nine of the 10 co-participants were interviewed face-to-face. Co-participant Six was interviewed via phone. He was the oldest co-participant and one of the few players the researcher knew prior to the study. This might explain why his interview was the most extensive of the ten even though the interview was not conducted face-to-face. Additionally, due to his current professional background, the co-participant seemed to have a strong personal interest in the topic of inquiry.

All co-participants provided demographic information (see Appendix B) and gave their consent to participate in the study (see Appendix C) prior to the interview. The duration of the interviews ranged from 28 to 69 minutes and all interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Playing experience appeared to be unrelated to interview duration. After the interviews were transcribed the audio record files were deleted. Pseudonyms were substituted for the names of co-participants' and other individuals as well as places mentioned in the interviews in order to maximize confidentiality. Below, the nature of the interview process and pilot interviews is explained.

**Interview process.** For the purpose of this study players were asked to respond to the following question: "When you think about your experience of being a professional basketball player overseas, what are some things that stand out to you?" This question was intended to elicit a wide range of descriptive responses from co-participants and reveal the figural aspects of their experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Additional follow-up questions were occasionally posed using the respective co-participant's language. The purpose of these questions was to probe for additional information or gain clarity on previously provided answers. The researcher allowed the co-participant to determine the flow of dialogue, assuming a non-directive approach, while helping the co-participant "focus on unfolding themes and details" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 26). Questions were reworded as necessary to provide co-participants with clarity. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher summarized the main points discussed by the co-participant and asked if anything else stood out that may not have been addressed previously. When the co-participant was unable to think of anything further to add, the interview was concluded.

**Pilot interviews.** Two pilot interviews were conducted in order to determine whether the interview question was appropriate and understandable to co-participants and to enhance the researcher's interviewing skills. Thematic analysis of the pilot interview transcripts revealed that

Table 1

*Co-Participant Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Age | Ethnicity | Seasons | Countries | Interview Duration (min.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brandon | 25 | White | 1 | 1 | 52:56 |
| Mark | 30 | White | 1 | 1 | 52:07 |
| Rick | 35 | White | 11 | 1 | 51:35 |
| Freddy | 29 | Black | 7 | 3 | 51:11 |
| Eric | 36 | White | 13 | 6 | 32:04 |
| Othella | 55 | Black | 10 | 1 | 69:19 |
| Jared | 27 | Black | 3 | 9 | 50:38 |
| Jalen | 36 | Black | 12 | 6 | 51:28 |
| Lamar | 24 | Black | 2 | 2 | 28:53 |
| Wesley | 26 | Black | 1 | 2 | 28:25 |

the interview question elicited clear and detailed responses and the researcher was able to refrain from introducing his biases, as previously identified through the bracketing interview. Because appropriate IRB approval had been obtained previously and both pilot participants' interviews were informative and insightful, the two transcripts were eventually included in the study sample as Interviews One and Two.

## Data Analysis

**Interview transcription and validation.** Each interview was transcribed verbatim either by the researcher or a university student with transcription skills (see Appendix D for the confidentiality statement that was signed by the two student transcribers). The researcher then read the transcript multiple times "to obtain a sense of the whole" (Dale, 1996, p. 315). After that, the co-participant was invited to read his interview for clarity and accuracy and allowed to make alterations to the transcript if necessary (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Of the 10 co-participants, seven accepted the invitation to read their transcripts. Of these, six chose not to alter their transcripts, while one asked the researcher to remove a short reference to a former teammate whom he did not want to identify in the context of an event he described.

**The interpretive research group.** Four of the 10 transcripts were presented to the interpretive phenomenological research group at the University of Tennessee (see Appendix E for the confidentiality statement signed by the members of this group). During the group sessions, the transcript was read aloud, with one reader acting as the researcher and another as the co-participant. Throughout the readings, the group paused frequently to discuss meaning units (i.e., words or pieces of text that appeared significant or noteworthy) and potential themes (i.e., recurring major ideas or experiences emphasized by co-participants) that stood out. Two

professors with significant expertise in existential phenomenological research facilitated the discussions. In this context, group members' diverse perspectives, which are a product of "disciplinary training, gender role socialization, and cultural heritage" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 34) were encouraged. Group members were asked to write their thoughts and ideas on their copies of the transcript and return them to the researcher at the end of each session. This process allowed the researcher to compile a set of notes that could be used in the final interpretation of each transcript and in the development of the final thematic structure. The group was alerted to the results of the researcher's bracketing interview prior to analyzing the transcripts and, thus, was able to determine whether the researcher conducted each interview in a non-directive manner (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Ultimately, the group process assured sufficient rigor of the phenomenological research approach while also easing the burden of interpreting numerous transcripts. Such assistance helped the researcher avoid "any sense of monotony or doubt that may plague an isolated researcher" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 35).

Throughout the interpretive group process, meaning units were identified to help the researcher develop sub-themes and themes (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). More specifically, in order to decide what was thematic, the researcher pondered the meaning of words and pieces of text "in the context in which they were uttered and their relationship to the participant's narrative as a whole" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). The rationale for looking across co-participant interviews was "to improve the researcher's interpretive vision" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). Lastly, the researcher developed a thematic structure that captured each theme and demonstrated the themes' relationships to each other. The researcher then shared the structure with the research group and, after some discussion, consensus was achieved on a final thematic structure. The

structure was then depicted in the form of a diagram that contained "both the major grounds as well the figural aspects of the phenomenon" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 38).

**Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure**

The diagram of the final thematic structure and a brief explanation of each theme (see Appendix F) were sent to each co-participant for validation. Co-participants were asked to indicate whether they thought the thematic structure depicted their experiences accurately (Dale, 1996; Nesti, 2004). Of the 10 co-participants, five responded to the request. Three of these co-participants had also provided feedback on their transcripts, while two only commented on the thematic structure. All five co-participants reported that the thematic structure was representative of their experiences. For example, one co-participant replied, "I like what you did. It's right on point" (Wesley).

**Issues of validity.** Both methodological and experiential criteria were considered in establishing validity of the results. Methodological criteria deal with "whether the methods used are rigorous and appropriate to the research topic; experiential issues concern whether the findings are *plausible* and *illuminating*" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 41). A reciprocal relationship exists between these two criteria: The more rigorous the methodology, the more plausible and illuminating the findings can be expected to be. Moreover, if a research study produces highly plausible and illuminating results, readers are more likely to perceive the method as appropriate and rigorous (Pollio et al., 1997).

**Issues of reliability.** Reliability typically refers to the consistency of research findings (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). However, while a certain level of consistency may be found between interviews in phenomenological research, identical replication is neither possible nor desirable,

as “human description and meanings change over time as a result of changing experiences” (Thomas & Pollio, p. 40). Thus, in phenomenological research, reliability is achieved through thematic consistency and the identification of general structures. These may be replicated by additional studies on the phenomenon of interest. However, due to ambiguous realities and “because researchers are bound by the limits of their own perspectives and judgment, there may be more than one legitimate interpretation for any particular set of data” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, the goal of replication is to extend, rather than repeat, the themes identified in the original study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

# CHAPTER 4

## Results

The primary purpose of this study was to explore US professional basketball players' experiences overseas. In order to accomplish this purpose, existential phenomenological interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) were conducted with 10 players. In this chapter, the thematic structure that emerged from the analysis of co-participants' interviews is provided. Additionally, themes and sub-themes are discussed and supplemented by illustrative quotes provided by the co-participants.

### The Thematic Structure

Figure 1 shows the thematic structure that emerged from the co-participants' interviews. The structure consists of eight themes: *Learning Local Mentality*, *Experiencing Isolation*, *Connecting with Others*, *Exploring Physical Environment*, *Dealing with "The Business*," *Adjusting to Team Resources*, *Managing Club Dynamics*, and *Playing "The Game."* The first four themes represent dimensions of personal life overseas while the second four represent themes specific to co-participants' professional lives in basketball. Each theme contains two or more sub-themes which are discussed below. The various dimensions of co-participants' experiences represented by the eight themes occurred against the far ground of the *Overseas World* and the near ground of *Self-Actualization*.

### Far Ground: Overseas World

The far ground of the *Overseas World* refers to the various countries and cultures the co-participants spent time in as professional basketball players and represents the context in which co-participants lived the specific experiences captured by the eight figural themes. One co-

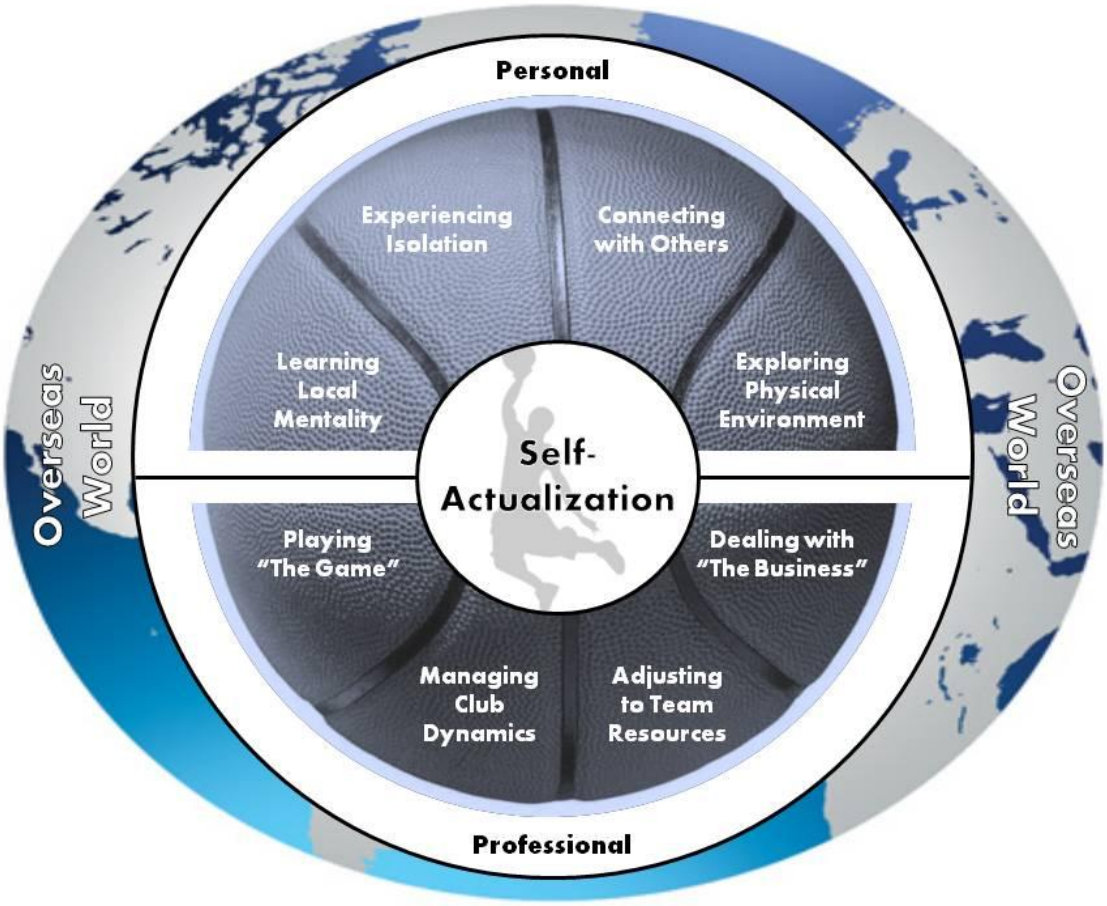



*Figure 1*. Thematic Structure of US Professional Basketball Players' Experiences Overseas

participant, for example, talked about a number of differences he encountered upon entering the foreign world. He stated:

> Yeah when I first came over here…everything was different…I've never lived in another country before or anything like that. So everything seemed different, just walking down the street, going into stores, trying to communicate with, with people and…living on my own for the first time… (Rick)

Others referred to factors such as the weather and the availability of American restaurants in describing the *Overseas World*, again comparing them to their more familiar experiences in the US. One co-participant explained, "…Finland…was cold all the time and I didn't really want to travel anywhere" (Freddy), whereas another stated, "[Iceland] didn't have a lot of Americanized stuff. They might have had one or two American restaurants in the capital. Now they got 20 to 30…Spain's the same way…It's McDonalds or Pizza Hut or Burger King" (Jalen).

**Near Ground: Self-Actualization**

The near ground of the thematic structure refers to co-participants' individual growth and development and their resulting sense of self-actualization during their time overseas. The concept of self-actualization emphasizes people's individuality and resilience and their natural desire and capacity "to grow in a positive, productive, and pro-social direction" (Cochran & Cochran, 2006). Arguably, in order to be able to grow and mature, a person needs to be able to assess their development over time. This implies a process of constant comparison of one's past and present life. Co-participants in the current study frequently drew comparisons between their previous life in the US and their experiences overseas. Specifically, they described their notion of self-actualization and growth as holding onto familiar US values and experiences, contrasting

them with comparable experiences overseas, and discovering and embracing new cultural aspects and values. One co-participant described his experience of personal development as follows:

> … the first thing that probably stands out is just going over there and uh adjusting and maybe adapting to a new country personally I've never been, uh, just not speaking the language, not being familiar with their culture and then trying to adapt to it and just, uh, just grow and be independent and learn, learn things that, that they do, and then also learn a lot of things about myself. (Wesley)

Another co-participant discussed the challenge of being away from home and building comfort over time, thus, growing as an individual:

> …that experience definitely coming over my first year, um, made me a stronger person, having to deal with…adversity and being away from, uh, the comfort level of being at home. And now being in Germany for so long, I basically have that comfort level, uh, because I've been here. (Eric)

The specific processes of comparing and discovering that seemed to be associated with co-participants' self-actualization were also evident in each of the figural themes discussed below. These themes represent the most salient aspects of co-participants' experiences within the contexts of the two grounds.

**Learning Local Mentality**

This theme refers to co-participants' gradual development of an understanding of the local lifestyle and value system in the cultures they experienced. The theme is comprised of four sub-themes: *Appreciating Work-Family Balance*, *Encountering a Healthy Lifestyle*, *Recognizing Attitudes toward Others*, and *Adjusting to Social Life*.

**Appreciating work-family balance.** Several co-participants emphasized the sharp contrast they saw in how locals in a foreign culture and people in the US viewed the role of work. More specifically, they learned that overseas, the family frequently took precedence over one's work, or, in some cases, the two were integrated (i.e., traditional family businesses). One co-participant stated:

> Uh, the Europeans, I think, you know, they don't work as much as Americans do on a general basis. In America it's always about, you know, completion and production and being better than the next person…you know, you go to Spain, you go to Greece…you are like okay, I think this could be done today but you take care of it tomorrow. (Eric)

One athlete added, "…overseas they cut their hours …they get off from two to five so they can go home and be with their family. Then they go back from six to nine…It ain't always just work…" (Jalen). The idea of combining family and business was captured by another co-participant who explained, "…all their businesses were family-oriented. Uh, they got started from like, uh, generations back…" (Wesley).

**Encountering healthy lifestyle.** Co-participants discussed the active lifestyle they often witnessed in foreign cultures, which contrasted with that of many people in the more sedentary US culture. One athlete explained, "I've noticed that [in Germany] there's a lot of bike riding going on and walking and using public transportation …it's a healthier lifestyle…" (Freddy). Another co-participant listed several potential contributions to people's physical and emotional well-being that were not as evident in the fast-paced lifestyle of people in the US, such as:

> …people riding their bikes, doing more exercise, um, simple things, you know, walk over to the store, doing those things, um, spending time with coffee, tea time, you know, cake time here in the afternoon like you do here in Germany, um, you don't have that in the States…[where] it's always go-go-go, rush-rush-rush… (Eric)

Overall, co-participants' remarks indicated a perception that the lifestyle of people overseas was generally more balanced than that of people in the US.

**Recognizing attitudes toward others.** Some co-participants talked about the interpersonal dynamics they witnessed among locals and the attitudes they seemed to hold towards other people. One athlete discussed locals' melancholic mindset and their initial hesitancy in opening up towards others compared to his experience in the US:

> …the American way of thinking is, is very positive, very open-minded about new ideas, uh, and being optimistic. Then there is another side of it of opening up very quickly but sort of, uh, keeping it, uh, like…the, uh, tip of the iceberg. And, uh, in, in Germany it's…rather pessimistic, melancholic…the way people think…but then on the other side, when you get to know people, you go below the…tip of the iceberg. (Othella)

Another co-participant talked about racist attitudes towards a group of people he had encountered with locals during his time in Australia:

> …the other thing that's kind of weird, I don't think it ever played a factor on our team, but the Australians are extremely racist…the racism towards Aborigines is incredible, just like blatant…it's just one of those things that made it different living in a different country, you know. (Mark)

This co-participant's experience of racism, fortunately, was not shared by other co-participants.

**Adjusting to social life.** A few co-participants addressed differences they recognized in how locals approached their social life, particularly with regard to partying and going out. One player discussed the "social schedule" locals operated on and explained, "…one difference too was… they don't leave to go to the bar or club till one o'clock or something in the morning…that was an adjustment for me…" (Brandon). Another co-participant expressed his appreciation for the role alcohol played in local people's social life by saying, "…the people over there drink a lot and smoke…they like their wine and beer…in a good way, you know, not to get drunk or belligerent, but just, you know, to relax…they don't let you drink and drive though" (Jalen). He felt that locals' attitudes toward drinking were different from many people in the US who, when they drank socially, abused alcohol, or, or how at parties, physical altercations due to excessive alcohol consumption were a frequent occurrence. However, the comments of another suggested that the party scene in South America could be wild as well:

> There's some of the spots I will say that I would take nobody…South American spots man, they'll get you in trouble…you'll forget you're playing basketball I'm telling ya. They party hard over there. You got to be careful…party hard with freakin' exotic women everywhere…that's kind of tough on a basketball player…a single one at that. (Jared)

**Experiencing Isolation**

Co-participants who found it difficult to cultivate relationships with locals reported feeling isolated and lonely. This sense of isolation seemed to be comprised of the following two sub-themes: *Missing Home* and *Facing Language Barriers*.

**Missing home.** Several of the co-participants discussed being homesick, particularly during their early experiences in a foreign country, which contributed significantly to their sense of loneliness. One athlete described his early struggles during his first experience overseas as follows:

> You're a long way from home…you're there on your own. You're a grown man now…so that was different, not having your family there for you. You know in Turkey, my first year overseas, I didn't think I was going to make it. (Lamar)

Another co-participant shared similar feelings and stated, "I mean for me personally the difference is my family and friends and the people I grew up with and what I'm used to…is not here…" (Rick). One player described how his sense of time seemed to be heightened in a foreign culture as he attempted to cope with being away from home:

> …I don't know nobody, and I'm like all by myself…and then your mind plays, plays tricks on you, like I got to be in this spot roughly 6 to 8 months…you're trying to break it down as small as you can…I got four weeks here and then once I take that down it'll be five months… (Jared)

**Facing language barriers.** Almost all of the co-participants pointed to the language barriers they faced in non-English speaking countries as a significant challenge. The inability to communicate with locals, whether to socialize or make simple inquiries such as about product

labels at the grocery store, seemed to contribute to co-participants' feelings of loneliness. One athlete explained, "…you don't want to go out anywhere 'cause you don't speak the language…so you kind of tend to just stay by yourself and it gets lonely" (Jalen). Another co-participant described his sense of isolation by saying, "…that's a weird thing not to…be able to understand what's going on around you, to be walking and you're like in a…bubble…so you're just in your own little world because you have no idea what's going on around you" (Freddy). Sharing his frustrations, one athlete added, "[It's] very difficult when you're by yourself here…and, uh, you don't speak the language, you only speak English, uh, people aren't really integrating you with their culture because you're the American, you're the outsider…" (Eric).

**Connecting with Others**

This theme refers to the connections co-participants attempted to make with others in the US or the host culture in an effort to enhance their level of emotional comfort or become more socially integrated. Four sub-themes were identified with this theme: *Staying in Touch with Home*, *Making Friends*, *Having Local Family*, and *Utilizing Language as Facilitator*.

**Staying in touch with home.** Co-participants discussed the challenge of being away from home extensively and reported that they kept in touch with their families and friends by communicating via phone and internet as well as by visiting occasionally. Additionally, some co-participants addressed the importance of having access to American TV programs and movies, hence, feeling closer to home, and perhaps having common things to talk about with their family and friends. As one athlete explained:

> …the first couple of years it was, it was difficult…now I think it's a lot easier for players to come over cause you got the internet, you got movies in English…when I was here in,

> in France my first year, I had no VCR, I had no cable, and no internet. Phone calls were about 50 to 70 cents a minute… (Eric)

Another player emphasized the importance of the internet for various purposes that allowed him to feel more connected to home. He contributed the following comment:

> …you got to have the internet so you know what's going on the world, like in the USA…I used to watch TV shows [and] movies…talk to people, Facebook…Skype…all that stuff on the internet. You know I did that every day. (Lamar)

**Making friends.** Several co-participants discussed the importance of being able to meet people and establish friendships locally. In some cases, the athletes were able to get acquainted with people in the community. However, most co-participants reported building friendships with teammates, both American and local. One player explained, "…you know my teammates were my friends…so we would hang out…living in a new place it's good to have…friends right away so that makes the transition kind of easier…" (Rick). Another player added, "…I usually tried to make it a point to become friends with several people in the community because… without them I would have no idea what's going on in their community" (Jalen).

**Having local family.** A few co-participants shared that they were living overseas with their families and had made the host country their temporary home. Some had their wives with them and others were raising their children in the host country. One co-participant explained that Germany "feels like home because…obviously now I'm married with two kids so I mean this…has been…my family's home for you know the past six, seven years" (Rick). Another player (Freddy) discussed the comfort he felt in being connected to his local wife's family. He explained that he appreciated his local family members' support in adjusting to the culture. One

athlete simultaneously mentioned a sense of pressure regarding the need to integrate into the local culture and the benefits of making connections locally through his family:

> …the problem is a lot of Americans usually isolate themselves. And when you're single you, you do that but when you have a family you have to integrate yourself into that city or that country's culture to become a part if you want to make it work and have a good time. (Eric)

**Utilizing language as facilitator.** Some co-participants discussed their willingness and ability to learn the local language, which served as a facilitator in connecting with the local culture and people. One co-participant explained, "If you're willing to learn and, uh, speak to people in their first language then they see that you're…making an effort because most of the Germans do speak English…" (Eric). He shared that while he was able to understand German fairly well, though he didn't speak it fluently, his wife and kids had mastered the language. Hence, his family was able to build friendships in the community. Another player stated,"…I realized, okay, I'm going to be here for a while and, uh, had already another year in my contract, so while I'm here, I might as well learn some more German…" (Freddy). In some cases locals were able to communicate in English, which helped co-participants relate more easily. As one co-participant put it, "…people all speak English…they go to school…they got to learn English. So that's always good… [If they don't know English]…I find out the main words…the key is to find out the main words…" (Jared).

**Exploring Physical Environment**

This theme refers to co-participants' leisure time, which was often spent traveling, sightseeing, or exploring other leisure opportunities locally. In some cases players were able to

discover and enjoy new things (e.g., landmarks), or they sought out familiar places (e.g., American restaurants) or new places they were able to compare to familiar ones in the US (e.g., native restaurants and clubs). Two sub-themes associated with this theme were: *Traveling the Country* and *Investigating Local Leisure Opportunities*.

**Traveling the country.** Several co-participants talked about opportunities they had had to travel in countries and cities, sometimes enjoying sight-seeing in the process. One co-participant shared, "…I've [done the] tourist thing…you got to see the Eiffel Tower, you got to you know just go to London and see the bridge and Big Ben…just seeing different cities…I think is, is important" (Freddy). This sentiment was also shared by a second player who stated, "…you go sight-seeing to different countries and different land sights in the city if you want…just traveling a bunch of different countries…different cities…I'd never been to Rome, so it was really cool to go there" (Wesley).

**Investigating local leisure opportunities.** Several co-participants talked about leisure opportunities they had explored locally, including clubs and restaurants. One athlete compared the entertainment venues that each of his two playing destinations had to offer:

> …in Madrid like we had places to go, you know the hip-hop, you know nice little club, you know, you can hang out there. And in my…place in Turkey we had none of that…they have like Turkish music, which I don't like at all… (Lamar)

Another player (Freddy) acknowledged that while he enjoyed partying early on in his career, he adjusted his approach over time, particularly after starting a family, and stayed away from party scenes. One co-participant listed various leisure time opportunities he had discovered in his environment overseas. He explained, "[I] went to local bars, went to local restaurants, um

spent time at the local parks, local hospitals…and kept myself busy like that a lot of the time" (Jalen).

**Dealing with "The Business"**

This theme refers to the business elements of being a professional basketball player that co-participants confronted in the foreign clubs they played for. Sub-themes that comprised this theme were: *Handling Contractual Issues*, *Coping with Pressure*, and *Evaluating Accommodations*.

**Handling contractual issues.** Most players discussed significant issues with contractual agreements that they either experienced firsthand or knew other American players dealt with overseas. A few players chose the qualifier "shady" to describe how some foreign club teams conducted business with players. One co-participant, for example, reported:

> …a lot of the agents will even tell you that going over there, "look, you sign a guaranteed contract but nothing is really guaranteed. You just try to find the best settlement and then you get out."…it is a business over there but it was just such…a dishonest business and, and shady…anybody could get cut at any time no matter what your contract said… (Brandon)

Another player, who had had a positive experience in Australia from a business standpoint, said that he was aware such experiences were less frequent for US players in Europe. He stated:

> …anybody would, you know, get rid of anybody for whatever reason. Australia isn't so bad but like Europe's really bad…they can fire you on the spot. It doesn't really matter contracts or any of that shit…Australia was a little better. I think like actually they had to

> have like just cause, um, 'cause there was a players' union…which I don't think they have in Europe. (Mark)

One co-participant discussed his frustration over the short contracts teams typically offer overseas and explained, "You got to think about security, take care of your family but you know the way the system works…you have a one-year or two-year contract and then when you're done you go on…" (Eric) In some cases, as one co-participant (Jared) reported, teams even signed players for as short a duration as the playoffs, which could end for the respective club after a single game if they lost.

**Coping with pressure.** Upon signing a contract with a foreign team, players reported often experiencing immense pressure to perform at their highest level at all times. Failure to perform up to expectations could lead to contract termination by the club. One athlete commented on the stress he encountered as a result of performance expectations by saying, "…they will ship you out as fast they brought you in if you don't…perform to what uh their expectations are. And you know that's some sort of stress you have to deal with; but it's part of the business" (Eric). Another co-participant shared similar thoughts about the pressure he experienced from his club to produce on the basketball court. He stated:

> …they pay you to perform. So my first couple of months I wasn't really performing to what they thought I should. So they brought me in and was like…"you got one more game to show us what you got or we're going to find somebody else"…that's when I knew it was a business. (Jalen)

**Evaluating accommodations.** For several of the players, one advantage of being a professional basketball player overseas was that their team provided them with accommodations

or other expenses, such as housing and transportation. The quality of these accommodations, however, seemed to vary from team to team. One co-participant who had been in a variety of situations emphasized the importance of making good choices when given different housing options by the club. He explained:

> …some of the places will give you an option between like, uh, if you want to stay in an apartment, a house, or a hotel…So normally I've been in situations where it's been, you know, a house and it might be two other players or another American…And I've been in some good apartments and I've been in some okay apartments but…I normally pick the hotel route… (Jared)

Another co-participant emphasized the need to closely evaluate living conditions and accommodations offered by the club as part of the contract:

> Most of the places I've been, they were really good to me…[but] I heard really bad things [from other guys]…you go into a place and they don't have, you know, running water or you don't have a phone, you can't contact anybody, you don't have a vehicle, you can't go anywhere, you're stuck in your apartment until someone comes and picks you up and takes you to practice… (Freddy)

**Adjusting to Team Resources**

This theme refers to the resources teams provided, which were directly (e.g., athletic training and strength and conditioning services) and indirectly (e.g., team travel arrangements to away-games) linked to player performance. Since all the co-participants in this study had playing experience in high school and college in the US, they were aware of differences in the available resources in their home country and the host country. They also talked about how they had to

adjust to what they perceived as less than adequate resources in the foreign culture. Sub-themes associated with this theme included: *Utilizing Club Personnel, Playing in Local Gyms,* and *Traveling with Team.*

**Utilizing club personnel.** Several players talked about the availability of coaches, doctors, and trainers on their foreign teams and the different levels of satisfaction they experienced with each depending on the quantity and quality of staff. As one player put it:

> The better professional team, the more stuff you're going to have. The less professional, the less you're going to have. Like my first year I went in, I don't even know we had a trainer. You know. Then I've been on teams where we had two trainers. (Jalen)

Another player who was playing for a lower division team explained that his team's limited financial resources meant fewer support staff were available to players and, in some cases, far fewer staff than they had had on their American college teams. That player stated, "A lot of their clubs over here you have the head coach and that's it…and maybe if you're lucky there is one or two other people…that are working…full-time for the club…" (Rick).

**Playing in local gyms.** Some co-participants commented on the low quality of the facilities they trained and played in overseas compared to those facilities they remembered from their college days in the US. One player who had been retired for some time explained, "When I came to Germany back in 1977, um, they were playing mostly in like school gyms and I had just come from a, from a program where we played in front of 12 to 20 thousand people" (Othella). Another player who was currently active shared a similar perspective when he stated, "…a lot of the gyms over here are, uh, like high school gyms or, or even worse…" (Eric).

**Traveling with team.** A significant issue some players encountered was the long drives to away-games, as illustrated in the following comments:

> …one of the things to, to get used to was, um, the low budget on the team…man, we took some small buses and, and sometimes two, two or three mini vans where you know you got six or eight guys all lined up in this row…they didn't feed you…you brought your own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the road for this three-hour drive… (Brandon)

The relatively primitive travel accommodations represented a sharp contrast to the more convenient flight arrangements and charter bus trips most players were accustomed to from their college, and in one case NBA, playing days. One player explained:

> …over here [in Germany]…the past two years we've had trips, you know, five, six, seven, eight hours on the bus, you play the game, you get right back on the bus and you, you, uh, travel straight home…nothing's paid for by the club… (Rick)

Several co-participants indicated that the long bus trips had a significant impact on their playing performance since they typically arrived at the competition site fatigued and with tight muscles. Moreover, they often had to take the court immediately and play a well-rested home team.

## Managing Club Dynamics

This theme addresses the dynamics with other people co-participants encountered in the respective clubs they played for. The theme also refers to the delicacy with which the players had to manage these interrelations. Sub-themes that comprised this theme included: *Relating with Coaches*, *Bonding with Teammates*, *Interacting with Fans*, and *Dealing with Management*.

**Relating with coaches.** Co-participants' perceptions of the coaches they played for and the way coaches treated them varied significantly. One player commented on the differences in coaching styles he had encountered and the satisfaction he enjoyed with his current coach:

> [As a former player, my coach] has seen the hard "Yugo-style" where you practice twice a day hard every day…some coaches like the laid back mentality where you just go once a day and you just perform on Saturday…Mitch (pseudonym for his current coach) does a little bit of both…if I had a problem…he's always been cool. Some coaches don't care. (Freddy)

In contrast, another player was highly dissatisfied with the coaching he had received and viewed it as inadequate, saying, "…the coaching wa-was so, uh, mediocre and elementary that… I'm not even sure…the guy could have qualified to, to be a very good high school coach (in the US)" (Brandon). Some of the conflict this player experienced in his relationship with his coach might have been attributable to the athlete's perception that his coach potentially viewed him as an "arrogant American" who thought he knew more about the game than the coach himself.

One co-participant addressed the importance of being able to relate to at least one of the coaches on the coaching staff and the challenges that sometimes arose if there was just a head coach and no assistants due to a club's limited budget. He explained:

> …A lot of their clubs over here you have the head coach and that's it…when you're on a basketball team there's always um players that maybe don't get along with the coach…but when you have three or four coaches…you'll probably always have one or two coaches…that you can bond with… (Rick)

Additionally, language barriers, in some cases, appeared to have an impact on the coach-player relationship as illustrated by the following quote:

> And as far as basketball goes, the coach didn't speak English. You had somebody to translate for you, one of the teammates usually, and they translate for you but it's kind of difficult 'cause he'll (the coach) sit there for 30, 45 minutes and say this, this whole big spiel, and then the translator gives you two sentences. (Jalen)

**Bonding with teammates.** Co-participants' dynamics with teammates were highly complex. A few players discussed the separation they felt between themselves and their local teammates, particularly during the early stages of a season when everyone was still somewhat unfamiliar. One co-participant who was one of the few full-time professional athletes on his team explained:

> …a lot of teams only have two or three professional players…so because they're the only people getting money and…they're the best players…they're more responsible for, for the success of the team. And it kind of puts a separation…between those players and, and the rest of…the team… (Rick)

In some cases, this sense of separation might have been a result of players' perception that local teammates' perceived the Americans on the team as "selfish" and unwilling to share the basketball (Brandon).

One athlete discussed the fierce competition for playing time amongst teammates he encountered: "You had to earn your spot…you got people that's not playing much in the games, and then come practice time they're trying to, you know, get some coach's respect so they're going to come hard at practice, uh, against you…" (Lamar).

**Interacting with fans.** Most of the co-participants described their encounters with local fans in very positive terms. One athlete who remained overseas after retiring from his professional playing career described his perception of local fans very fondly:

> …the thing that amazed me was after I stopped playing…how we as a team, uh, touched many people's lives. And even now, I stopped playing in 1987…I still have people approach me and talk about, uh, how they enjoyed uh that time…[during] those 10 years uh where I played. (Othella)

Another player compared his encounters with fans to his experience in college and talked about the similarities. He explained:

> …the fans are always eager, they're always supportive at games, they're always standing and jumping uh during the games…the fans are pretty much similar to like college [in the US]…they all um stuck with the team through thick and thin… (Wesley)

In contrast, one co-participant saw a considerable difference in the player-fan dynamics in comparison to his experience in the US. He stated:

> …in college, you come out and there's, you know, kind of a rail where the, you know, the fans can't come in contact with the players after the game… but…over there it's like, you know, you just come into the sports bar and…you're just like one of the guys all of a sudden…but nobody is really praising you, you're not like any type of little celebrity around there. (Brandon)

**Dealing with management.** A few co-participants described the dynamics they encountered with club management. Their experiences seemed to vary. One co-participant, who was very pleased with his experience but realized his situation might be unique, explained,

"…some clubs you have no interactions uh with the office… Here it's a little different…the club seems to be more of a family…[which] I don't think happens very often in this business" (Freddy). Another player's perception of the way the club he competed for was managed was less positive. He repeatedly pointed to conflicts with various members of the organization:

> …I don't like to kind of place a stereotype on… all European leagues or organizations but mine…was very poorly run…it lacked…structure and…there was really a lack of leadership in any area because…anytime anything went wrong people …were blaming…each other but not necessarily to their face. (Brandon)

**Playing "The Game"**

This theme refers to how the game of basketball is approached and played overseas. Sub-themes that constituted this theme included: *Understanding Your Role*, *Adjusting to Level of Play*, *Adapting to Style of Play*, *Learning the Rules*, and *Preparing to Compete*.

**Understanding your role.** In order to be able to have success overseas players had to understand what their club expected of them on the court and what they needed to do to meet those expectations. In many cases players were asked to assume a role that they perhaps were not accustomed to from their college playing days. One co-participant, who had enjoyed tremendous success in a supporting role on his college team, which had won a national championship, was thrust into a situation where he was expected to carry his foreign team. He explained, "…in my second year uh in Germany…we had about 34, 35 games and I played every minute of every game except for the last game where I fouled out a couple of minutes before the end…" (Othella). Another athlete talked about the performance demands that most foreign clubs imposed on US players by saying, "…they bring an American in, they want him to score, they

want him to rebound, they want him to win, they want him to make their team win 'cause…they're giving all their money to pretty much two guys…" (Jared). However, in some cases, foreign teams might carry as many as eight Americans and only four local players, which decreased the pressure on any one of the US players to carry the team (Eric).

**Adjusting to level of play.** Several of the co-participants compared the level of competition overseas to the level they had played on in college. In some cases, the athletes experienced the quality of foreign play as a "downgrade." One co-participant stated:

> …when I first came over here [to Germany], uh, it was kind of a step down, the league that I played in, because I started in the Regionalliga [regional league] so, um, you know, Division I college basketball is more professional… (Rick)

A similar perception was shared by another player who had played on a highly competitive college teams. He explained:

> [In college] we were doing some things that were…leading edge as, as far as, uh, practice and, and games were concerned. But….players who, um, I was playing with [in Germany] weren't that far advanced as the players I had played with before so, uh, it was taking some things a step at a time… (Othella)

In contrast, another player stated that he had encountered a high level of competition on his foreign team and reported, "[The Spanish league] had top players…day in and day out [you had to] practice hard…compete at practice…10, 11 guys could be…playing" (Lamar).

**Adapting to style of play.** Some co-participants commented on how the style of play overseas differed from that in the US and required some adjustments on their part. One player stated, "…the game itself is different. You have to slow yourself down overseas. It's real, real

fundamentally sound overseas…" (Jared). Another co-participant explained, "…it's a nice experience cause you know they play a different game overseas. It's more…fundamental, I think. More people can shoot…Spain was more physical than Turkey. Spain was a better league. All teams are good" (Lamar). Generally, co-participants expressed an appreciation of the style of play they were exposed to in the countries they played in.

**Learning the rules.** Part of adapting to the game of professional basketball overseas for these co-participants included learning FIBA rules. Some of these rules were considerably different from US college rules, which presented a significant challenge for co-participants. One player referred to differences in the goal-tending rule and explained, "…the rules are…different…being able to hit the ball…when the ball is…in the cylinder. And also, uh, [the] traveling [rule] over there is a lot different…" (Wesley). Another athlete elaborated on the travel rule by saying, "For Americans, that first step, we are allowed to take one long step and a dribble…or we are allowed to fake right and go left with that dribble. Overseas…it's called a travel every single time" (Jalen).

**Preparing to compete.** Several players commented on game and career preparation. Some emphasized game and season preparation while others mentioned ways the international system attempted to prepare local players to play with their American counterparts on the professional level. In reference to preparation for the season, one co-participant addressed the significance of timing:

> [Starting with a team in the middle of the season] was different…you have to get used to it, learn the plays and stuff…it was better in Turkey 'cause I was right there from the

> beginning…got to know the coach, practice with them a couple of weeks. I knew the system and…what to expect there… (Lamar)

Another player discussed the level of professionalism with which teammates approached practice. He stated, "…a lot of the guys that play in the second league, especially the German players…it's not their job…they have a job and then they play basketball for fun, or they go to school and they play basketball…" (Rick). He saw those players' attitude toward preparation as being in a stark contrast to his own serious and professional approach to every practice and every game.

One co-participant specifically referred to the structure through which local players were brought up to become professionals. He explained:

> …Australians are basically picked out early, like from in like 7th grade you're like picked to go to this institute, and that's where you go to high school, and it's all sporting people…it's like going to boarding school for…athletes…there's nothing really like that here [in the US]. (Mark)

In summary, co-participants discussed both personal and professional aspects of their experiences overseas. The nature of these experiences, in some cases, was similar across co-participants and, in others, varied considerably. It appeared that all co-participants experienced personal growth and accomplishment as a result of their encounters overseas regardless of whether they described their experiences in mainly positive or negative terms. The significant personal growth many co-participants encountered was noteworthy, since their primary motivation for going overseas seemed to be to enhance their prospects of playing professional basketball back in the US. In conclusion, the meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) of these co-

participants' experiences seemed to emerge from their sense of self-actualization, which they experienced as a result of comparing their previous life in the US to their new life overseas. Through this constant process of comparing, their personal and professional development became figural.

# CHAPTER 5

## Discussion

The quote "Everything Was Different" (Rick) chosen for the title of this dissertation seems to capture, in a global sense, the experiences overseas of the co-participants in this study. The athletes repeatedly talked about differences they had encountered, comparing and contrasting aspects of the overseas world with that of the more familiar US culture. They also discussed new experiences they had that were more difficult to contextualize in terms of their previous life in the US. Their experiences as professional basketball players overseas were complex and extended far beyond the confines of the basketball court, culminating in personal and professional development and growth in the midst of numerous challenges. To date, several researchers have investigated the migration of professional athletes overseas (e.g., Maguire & Pearton, 2000a, 2000b; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Takahashi & Horne, 2006). However, few studies have examined the overseas experience of basketball players (Falcous & Maguire, 2005) and none have obtained in-depth accounts of athletes' personal experiences. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate US professional basketball players' experiences overseas from the athletes' first-person perspective. In this final chapter discussion is devoted to the *Major Findings*, *Connections to and Extensions of Previous Research*, *Practical Implications* of the results, *Future Directions* for research, and a *Conclusion*.

### Major Findings

Eight major themes emerged from the existential phenomenological interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) conducted with the 10 US professional basketball players in this study who had played or were currently playing overseas. These themes included: *Learning Local Mentality*,

*Experiencing Isolation, Connecting with Others, Exploring Physical Environment, Dealing with "The Business," Adjusting to Team Resources, Managing Club Dynamics,* and *Playing "The Game."* The first four themes represented those aspects of co-participants' experiences that pertained to their personal lives overseas, whereas the latter four themes captured their experiences playing the game of professional basketball in that context. Though the themes are displayed separately in Figure 1 and discussed individually in the previous chapter, it is important to emphasize that interrelationships of varying degrees existed among all of the themes. For example, negative dynamics with teammates on the court may have contributed to one player's sense of isolation and loneliness in his personal life while prompting another player to remedy the situation by making better connections with teammates in order to enhance the quality of his personal life. These interdependencies (Falcous & Maguire, 2005) are neither surprising nor unique since the different roles people assume across their various life domains typically interact and overlap to shape each person's sense of self. An athlete's identity, then, may be described as "a series of complementary and contradictory identifications operating simultaneously, with some coming to the foreground or receding depending on the context" (Ryba & Wright, 2010, p. 16).

Existential phenomenology is concerned with four major grounds which provide the context within which people experience phenomena of various natures. These grounds are *Time*, *Body*, *World*, and *Others* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The eight themes of this study represented co-participants' figural experiences and encounters in an overseas context. More specifically, figural aspects of the experiences occurred in the context of two major grounds. The far ground was the *Overseas World* within which the players lived and pursued their endeavors

as professional athletes. This ground was consistent with Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) major ground of *World*. The "abstract" world became more figural and relatable to co-participants through the experiences captured by the eight themes.

The near ground was *Self-Actualization* and referred to the sense of personal and professional growth co-participants experienced as a result of adjusting to their new environment, which they frequently compared to their past history in the US. Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) major ground of *Time* is reflected herein, as growth is a process that occurs over time (e.g., learning FIBA rules and adjusting to the style of play overseas in order to thrive on the basketball court). The grounds of *Body* and *Others* are also evident in some of the themes in the present study, though they did not emerge as *major* grounds. For example, some co-participants discussed the lack of access to adequate athletic training and medical care to help them deal with injuries, which would also impact their ability to perform and, in turn, help them recognize the importance of a healthy body. Moreover, all of the co-participants referred to relationships and interpersonal dynamics with friends, family, teammates, or coaches, which illustrated the impact that other people had on their overseas experience.

Lastly, it is acknowledged that the majority of the findings of this study are consistent with the researcher's expectations as revealed in the bracketing interview. However, some of the results were clearly unexpected. For example, one surprising finding was the emphasis some co-participants gave to leisure opportunities such as going out to clubs and partying; and the influence of such activities on the overseas experience. Particularly early on in their careers, co-participants enjoyed socializing at clubs and parties. This is typical of young people and, in some cases, of US college student-athletes. Perhaps co-participants in this study as suggested by

Freddy's comments, over time, matured as individuals and assumed a more professional attitude towards their basketball careers. Interestingly, the most unexpected discovery was relatively little mention of the act of playing the game of professional basketball overseas by some of the co-participants. Such a "non-finding" suggests that these co-participants' other cultural encounters might have been so figural and significant that they minimized the impact of their basketball-related experiences.

While all co-participants discussed cultural aspects of their experience, those who spent the most time overseas and had the most diverse experiences provided the most detailed accounts of their encounters. Specifically, several of those players emphasized their sense of appreciation for local culture and people and indicated that they went through a developmental process throughout their time overseas that allowed them to pick up on cultural subtleties and expand their identities. Hereby, the ability to develop and enjoy a more balanced lifestyle that was not solely devoted to professional endeavors seemed to characterize co-participants' development. In contrast, those players who spent relatively little time (e.g., one season) overseas, while certainly getting exposure to obvious cultural differences such as foods and language, arguably, had less rich experiences. Hence, they might have been unable to undergo the same kind of developmental process their more experienced counterparts enjoyed during their long careers overseas.

In retrospect, all co-participants, regardless of experience level, seemed eager to share their experiences and provided detailed descriptions of their time overseas. This may have been due in part to the researcher's ability to establish rapport quickly prior to each interview by informing the respective co-participant of his basketball playing background and his German

citizenship and appreciation of international basketball. Co-participants' high comfort level throughout the interview process was evident in their open verbal communication and body language and, in many cases, their participation in extensive small talk with the researcher following their interview.

**Connections to and Extensions of Previous Research**

Due to the scarcity of qualitative research on professional athletes' experiences overseas, the findings of this study might largely be viewed as novel in the context of the existing empirical literature. Hence, in this section the results are discussed in an integrated format that connects and extends the findings to those of previous studies.

Globalization in the world of professional sports has been discussed extensively in the literature (Maguire, 1994, 2004). A significant component of this globalization is arguably the migration of professional athletes from different sports (e.g., Magee & Sugden, 2002; Takahashi & Horne, 2006) including basketball (Falcous & Maguire, 2005) to overseas locations. However, missing in the research conducted prior to this study are the experiences of the athletes who have participated in labor migration. Hence, the present dissertation study represents the first attempt to investigate US professional basketball players' experiences overseas using an existential phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). As mentioned earlier in this document, existential phenomenology is consistent with a postmodern perspective (McGannon & Johnson, 2009) which acknowledges and values individual differences and discourses as well as the commonalities between individuals belonging to the same cultural sub-group. In this context, realities are seen as pluralistic, meaning that they differ from and within one person to the next and, yet, are ever-evolving and changing.

One important concept to consider in the context of the present research is that of cultural or national identity. Holliday (2010) explained that cultural identity is a complex phenomenon that revolves around various life trajectories, frequently in multiple national locations. Co-participants in this study referred to several of these trajectories, which seemed to shape their sense of self as "Americans" in a foreign culture. For example, all 10 athletes discussed the role of language. In some cases, language served as a barrier, hindering co-participants' ability to relate to natives and the local culture. In other cases, co-participants were able to utilize language as a social facilitator, either communicating with locals in English or developing proficiency in the local language in order to relate to the host culture more effectively.

Consistent with Holliday's (2010) findings, some of the players in the current study felt a sense of not belonging in the host country, particularly during their early experiences overseas, which posed a significant stressor. While language barriers contributed to this belief, other factors such as different value systems and customs exacerbated players' experience of separation as well. Similar to international students' experiences in Charles-Toussaint and Crowson's (2010) research, players' perception of separation was sometimes linked to prejudices they encountered from locals (coaches and players) who, the athletes thought, assumed that Americans were "arrogant" and "selfish." However, perhaps the most important finding of the present study was that, to varying degrees, all co-participants developed a sense of comfort over time and came to appreciate the cultures they lived in. For example, players reported enjoying local foods and customs and valuing aspects of the local lifestyle and mentality such as a greater focus on family. Even those who had encountered considerable personal (and professional stressors and challenges (e.g., Cronson & Mitchell, 1987; Kroll, 1979) overseas concluded that

they were able to benefit and grow from their situations and, hence, experience a sense of self-actualization. In retrospect, those athletes seemed to appreciate the opportunities they were provided with and sought out during their time in foreign cultures. These findings were in contrast to previous literature (e.g, Cronson & Mitchell, 1987), which focused primarily on obstacles and negative aspects of professional athletes' experiences.

Interestingly, in discussing his sense of personal growth, one player (Eric) in the present study even described himself as "Euro-American." This athlete had spent significant time in a particular host culture, incorporated local values into his sense of self, and integrated those values with beliefs and characteristics he had developed in the US. Another co-participant (Othella) indicated that by spending extensive time overseas he had, in some respects, developed a level of comfort with the local language and mentality that made him feel more comfortable in Germany than he did when back in the US for visits. Both of the previous experiences appear to represent examples of integration whereby individuals adopt the receiving culture while retaining their original cultural heritage (Schwartz et al., 2007).

In addition to their sense of cultural identity, the co-participants in this study also discussed their athlete identity. In some cases the two identities seemed to interact and overlap while in others they appeared to be contradictory aspects of co-participants' total sense of self (Ryba & Wright, 2010). For example, some players expressed frustration with local teammates whom they felt were not approaching the game with the same kind of professional dedication they were used to. This result is consistent with Lidor and Blumenstein's (2009) finding that football players and gymnasts competing overseas were more committed to their sport than were their native Israeli teammates. However, consistent with Noblet and Gifford's (2002) research,

present co-participants also seemed to understand that that for some of their foreign teammates, education and, perhaps, preparation for another career took precedence over their athletic commitments.

Co-participants, in several cases, felt their identity as professional athletes was challenged by what they perceived to be a lack of available resources on their teams. For example, teams might not have the financial resources to provide adequate athletic training services, professional playing facilities, and transportation. Several players experienced this lack of services as a significant stressor. On the other hand, co-participants' sense of identity as professional athletes appeared at times to be strengthened by what several described as strong fan support. Though some of the present co-participants experienced negative fan reactions similar to those discussed by Falcous and Maguire (2005)--such as the stereotyping of US players as selfish and ego-oriented--they also encountered local fans that were loyal and supportive and who stood behind their team "through thick and thin." Moreover, contrary to Cronson and Mitchell's (1987) argument that the celebrity status of professional athletes in the public eye can produce a lack of privacy, co-participants in present study generally felt the bond they had with local fans did not invade their personal lives.

In addition to the cultural encounters co-participants shared, they also discussed aspects of their experiences that related to their lives as professional athletes. For example, players described stressful encounters that were frequently the result of a failure to meet specific performance demands of the team (Lazarus, 1984). Their on-court performances, which despite the player's best efforts might be deemed unsatisfactory by coaches or management could threaten the job security and create high levels of stress. Consistent with Hobfoll's COR theory

(1998), such a stress response would be expected for a player that perceives his livelihood to be at stake if he does not perform at a high level at all times (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Co-participants in this research often experienced magnified stress reactions due to what several described as the "cutthroat business" they were dealing with. Injury concerns not only threatened some players' well-being and health--which Hobfoll (1998) describes as secondary resources--but the unavailability of appropriate medical and athletic training services contributed to athletes' concerns when decreased performance due to injury might lead to contract terminations by the club.

Other factors co-participants mentioned that directly or indirectly affected their performance included inexperience and unfamiliarity with the local style of play and the rules of the game. For example, one player (Jalen) reported that early on in his career he had difficulty adjusting to the rules and often violated the "traveling" rule, which led to a turnover for his team each time. Another player (Othella) stated that, initially, he had difficulty adjusting to the expected role of being the main scorer on his team after having previously been a secondary role player on a successful US college team. In both cases, the inability to meet expectations may have not only been linked to increased stress levels but may have also produced ineffective shifts in arousal level that produced diminished performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). For example, Jalen's stress response to the "foreign" traveling rule might have also increased his arousal level to a point that he would rush his movements and take an extra step prior to his dribble. This possibility is suggested by Jalen's statement: "The game itself is different. You have to slow yourself down overseas. It's real, real fundamentally sound overseas."

Another potential stressor related to these co-participants' athletic performance appeared to be the nature of their sport practices. Long training sessions have been identified as a major source of stress for many athletes (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Though co-participants' experiences with regard to the physical and mental demands of the practices they encountered varied, some felt that the autocratic style (Horne & Carron, 1985) or Eastern-European methods of physical drilling and punishment (e.g., running sprints following a loss) adopted by their coaches were "over the top" and stressful. However, other co-participants indicated that their coaches treated them with respect and seemed to understand when to push their players and when to allow them to rest and relax, which, in turn, decreased the athlete's stress level. Although performance data were not obtained in the present study, it is possible that the latter coaching approach may have produced better game performance on the part of co-participants. In addition to their relationships with coaches, co-participants also discussed the dynamics of their interactions with local teammates. Some indicated that particularly early in the season they sensed a degree of separation between themselves and their teammates. They attributed this separation to a variety of factors including language barriers, cultural differences, jealousy, and disagreements regarding the roles different players should be playing. Some of the co-participants experienced this discord as a significant source of stress, particularly during the early stages of the season, while others mentioned that the feeling of separation usually diminished as local and foreign players became more familiar with each other.

In addition to stressors related to athletic competition (e.g., Feltz, Lirgg, & Albrecht, 1992; Gould & Weinberg, 1985; Kroll, 1979), co-participants mentioned a number of stressors discussed in earlier research on professional athletes and their families (Cronson & Mitchell,

1987). These included the stress of relocation, lack of a social support system, and unfamiliar climates. The challenge of making friends and social connections overseas was usually magnified by language barriers and unfamiliarity with the local customs and culture. However, being away from family and friends in the US, forced several co-participants to develop a sense of independence (Noblet & Gifford, 2002) and, perhaps, overcome what some previous researchers have characterized as a state of being "fixed in perpetual adolescence" (Cronson & Mitchell, 1987, p. 22).

Overall, the co-participants in this research encountered acculturation stress (Fuertes & Westbrook, 1996) in both the personal and professional domains of their lives. However, over time, they seemed to be able to develop positive responses to many of the encountered stressors and utilize their time overseas as an opportunity to grow as people and athletes.

**Practical Implications**

Several practical implications may be suggested from the findings of the current study. Due to the complexity of US professional basketball players' experiences overseas, it would appear that athletes contemplating playing overseas would benefit from technical and emotional preparation prior to the move and on-going support during the experience. Coaches, agents, sport psychology consultants, family members, and friends could all provide support that enhances players' chances for a successful personal, business, and performance experience overseas. Additionally, athletes might be encouraged to adopt a positive mindset in order to increase the prospects of a positive experience both on and off the overseas court.

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research and represent suggestions for overseas coaches, agents, sport psychology consultants, family/friends, and athletes playing overseas or considering the possibility.

Overseas coaches can:

- make US players feel welcome by showing interest in the players' personal lives.
- outline performance expectations and clarify US players' roles (taking into consideration potential language barriers), particularly if different from what these players might be used to from their college experience.
- discuss team roles openly, so as to avoid excessive conflict and jealousy between US and local players.
- hold US players to a high standard on the court with respect to performance statistics (e.g., points, rebounds) while simultaneously recognizing and rewarding effective process behaviors (e.g., effort) and, thus, alleviating some of the pressure club management might place on US players.

Agents can:

- make players aware of the (un)availability of crucial resources overseas that they may otherwise take for granted (e.g., the provision of athletic training services).
- provide athletes with supplemental materials to help deal with a lack of club resources (e.g., digital video files showing how to tape a sprained ankle if an athletic trainer is unavailable).

- make players aware of potential risks regarding contracts and help them find a comfortable and rewarding situation, even if that means a decrease in the agent's commission.
- connect professional players with an overseas support network, particularly inexperienced players who may have never been outside of the US.

Sport psychology consultants can:

- encourage players to focus on factors under their control (e.g., effort, communication, skills training) and provide them with appropriate strategies for doing so (e.g., goal-setting, relaxation skills).
- help players see the potential for professional and personal growth overseas and encourage them to take a pro-active approach to their new situation (e.g., interact with local teammates and community members off the court rather than isolate themselves).
- advise athletes to prepare for performance demands overseas by visualizing themselves in their expected role (e.g., primary scorer) and studying materials to facilitate their transition (e.g., books and video files detailing FIBA rules).

Fans can:

- demonstrate support for US players by cheering them on even when they are not performing well.
- make US players feel welcome in the local community by approaching them in a friendly and open manner and not treating them as "celebrities."

Family/Friends can:

- provide emotional support from a distance by checking in with the athlete from time to time and inquiring about his needs.
- encourage the athlete to seek out opportunities for personal growth (e.g., traveling to interesting cities and countries) and consider the positive aspects of the experience, particularly when the player may be suffering from homesickness.

Athletes can:

- set goals for personal growth (e.g., attempt to learn the local language by interacting with three foreign teammates every day).
- develop and maintain a focus on controllable factors by concentrating on the "essentials" (e.g., the availability of practice facilities and gym) rather than the "luxuries" (e.g., state-of-the-art hardwood floor, day-long access to athletic training services), particularly when competing for a low-budget team.
- maintain a connection to family and friends at home while simultaneously building connections locally by studying local customs and values and striving to integrate into the host culture.
- take an active role in learning and understanding the way the game of basketball is played overseas in order to develop the necessary skills and enhance on-court performance.

**Future Directions**

The current study provides a strong foundation for future cross-cultural research in professional sports. While the present research focused on US basketball players' experiences overseas, future studies might examine US coaches' experiences in foreign cultures. As some co-

participants pointed out, FIBA teams are sometimes coached by US coaches. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that these coaches may face similar and perhaps different challenges as the athletes interviewed for this study.

The sample of athletes in this research was limited to males. However, numerous professional women's basketball leagues exist outside of the US, and the clubs competing in these leagues often recruit US players. Hence, future research might examine the experiences of US professional female basketball players overseas to determine the extent to which they might differ from those of their male counterparts.

This study focused on professional basketball players' experiences in foreign countries. As discussed previously, researchers have investigated labor migration in other sports such as soccer (Maguire & Pearton, 2000a, 2000b; Magee & Sugden, 2002) and baseball (Takahashi & Horne, 2006). However, these studies did not obtain first-person accounts of the athletes' experiences. Hence, future investigators might utilize an existential phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) to examine the overseas experiences of professional athletes in other sports.

Additionally, future researchers might investigate foreign athletes' experiences in the US, at both the collegiate and professional levels. Due to the structure of organized sport in the US, which differs considerably from that of the European system, foreign athletes' encounters in the US might differ considerably from those of the co-participants in this research.

**Limitations**

Despite the important findings of this research, there were also several limitations to the study. Co-participants (who were still competing) were interviewed during the off-season.

Accordingly, their cultural experiences might have been more figural to them at the time of the interview and their basketball-specific experiences might have receded into the background. It is also possible that, in some cases, co-participants would have emphasized their professional experiences more if they had been interviewed during the season. While the sample of co-participants was quite diverse, it only included male athletes. Thus, it is possible that the experiences of female professional players might differ in some respects (e.g., due to potentially different playing locations, pay scales, etc.) to those of males.

None of the players in the current study had the opportunity to play in the NBA prior to their overseas experience, and only one made it to the NBA after playing overseas. It is possible that athletes who have the opportunity to sign with an NBA team but choose to play outside of the US would have different perceptions of their experience in another culture. Lastly, co-participants in the current study had all garnered extensive playing experience in college and in many cases away from home prior to pursuing a professional career overseas. None had made the transition to playing overseas upon graduating from high school. It is reasonable to suggest that younger players lacking college experience and, hence, maturity might encounter more significant adjustment issues than the co-participants in the current study, which in turn could impact their personal and professional experiences overseas.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that US professional basketball players' experiences overseas are characterized by numerous opportunities for growth and development and, hence, self-actualization, both on a personal and on a professional level. In some cases, players seek out such opportunities by traveling the country and making efforts to meet local people and learn

their language. In other cases, players grow and mature as a result of experiences that are out of their control, such as when they are released by their team or their contract ends and they are forced to move on to their next destination. Individuals in the present study who embraced opportunities for personal and professional development and sought out positive experiences appeared to experience a higher level of satisfaction and enjoyment than those who did not.

While the findings of this research indicate that US players' experiences overseas occur in two realms, personal and professional, it is important to remember that these domains are inextricably intertwined. Accordingly, the present co-participants appeared to be constantly negotiating their identities between their basketball and personal lives. Their experiences as professional basketball players overseas were multifaceted and provided ample opportunity for personal and professional self-actualization. For the most part, these experiences turned out to be positive in spite of, and sometimes because of, numerous challenges.

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# APPENDICES

*Appendix A*

Example of Field Notes

- Explained before interview that he currently does not have contract as team hasn't decided whether they'll play ProA or ProB next season
- Would like contract over multiple years where he can coach youth teams and gain coaching experience while playing
- Didn't seem confident that such a situation was available to him; would prefer to stay in Germany but would consider going back to the States with his family and coaching or doing something else if necessary
- Married to a German, 2 kids
- Seemed willing to share, though generally quiet nature, friendly and polite
- Kept many statements general though they might have been specific to his experience
- Avoided names of coaches, players, etc.
- Did not tell stories or reflect on humorous situations
- Perhaps a "business-like" approach to the interview on his part similar to how he described his approach to basketball
- Interview was conducted in his apartment
- In retrospect after listening to tape, he seemed agitated when explaining why basketball was a job for him → unclear whether he was agitated by my questioning or the fact that he plays with a lot of players who might not be full-time professionals and hence might not take basketball as seriously
- Talked in quieter voice when he addressed being away from family and friends in the States → I noticed he sounded perhaps sad when I listened to the tape

*Appendix B*

Demographic Information

Interview #:

Age:

Years Playing Overseas:

Countries:

Email:

Phone:

Facebook/Myspace:

Skype:

*Appendix C*

Informed Consent Statement

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study examining your experience of being a professional basketball player in a foreign country.

If you agree to participate in the study, I will schedule a convenient time to conduct an interview with you. I anticipate the interview to take between 30 and 90 minutes. The time frame can be adjusted based on your availability and at your convenience. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed. I might contact you again to ask follow-up questions after looking at your interview. I will then attempt to identify the major interview themes and write them up in a paper. You will have an opportunity to review the themes and let me know if they describe your experience accurately.

Participation in this study will give you an opportunity to share specific situations that stand out for you from your time as a professional basketball player overseas. Your data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons helping with the study unless you specifically give permission in writing for me to do otherwise. All persons will treat your interview as strictly confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. I hope that the results of the study can be used to educate US players planning to start a professional career overseas about what to expect. Also, I hope to inform coaches preparing players for professional careers in foreign countries about things they should make those players aware of.

My faculty advisor, the research team assisting me in thematizing your interview, and I are the only ones who will have access to your audiotape. It will be kept in a locked file cabinet in Room 344 in the HPER building until after the data have been analyzed, at which point the audiotape will be destroyed. The interview transcript will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years and then destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the interview is completed the data will be returned to you or destroyed. By signing this form you acknowledge that the procedures of this study have been fully explained to you and that all of your questions have been answered. However, you may ask the researcher any additional questions at any time.

If you have any questions about the institutional review process at the University of Tennessee you may contact the UT Office of Research (865-974-3466).

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| (Printed Name of Participant) | (Signature of Participant) | (Date) |

Rainer J. Meisterjahn, M.S.
(865) 974-8768
rmeiste1@utk.edu

Craig A. Wrisberg, Ph.D.
(865) 974-1283
caw@utk.edu

*Appendix D*

Transcriber Confidentiality Statement

By signing below, I agree to keep any information pertaining to the interview transcripts of the study *"Everything Was Different": An Existential Phenomenological Investigation of US Professional Basketball Players' Experiences*, conducted by Rainer J. Meisterjahn, confidential.

Name of Transcriber:

_____

Signature of Transcriber:

_____

Date:

_____

*Appendix E*

Confidentiality Statement: Research Group

As a member of the University of Tennessee Interdisciplinary Phenomenology Colloquy, by signing below, I agree to keep any information discussed regarding interview transcripts of the study *"Everything Was Different": An Existential Phenomenological Investigation of US Professional Basketball Players' Experiences*, conducted by Rainer J. Meisterjahn, confidential.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Name: _____ Date: _____

*Appendix F*

Letter to Co-Participants

Dear Participant,

Thanks for participating in an interview for my study entitled *"Everything Was Different": An Existential Phenomenological Investigation of US Professional Basketball Players' Experiences*.

Below is an explanation of the Thematic Structure shown in the attached PowerPoint file. The Thematic Structure is intended to capture the experiences of all the players that participated in this study. **I am interested in your feedback** and would like to know whether this structure accurately describes your experience of being a professional basketball player overseas. Please let me know if anything is missing or needs to be changed!

- The outer globe represents the ***Overseas World*** you are/were living and playing basketball in, which serves as the context where you experience(d) each of the specific themes displayed in the basketball.

- The center circle ***Self-Actualization*** refers to the sense of personal growth you experienced as a result of (1) contrasting some of the things you encountered overseas (e.g., the lifestyle, the people, the game of basketball) with comparable things in the US and (2) discovering new things you might not have been able to compare to previous experiences (e.g., the way the business of basketball works overseas…particularly if you had not played professionally in the US before).

- The 4 themes in the top of the basketball refer to specific aspects of your personal growth experience pertaining to your ***Personal*** life (outside of basketball):

    - ***Learning Local Mentality*** refers to experiencing the local lifestyle and people's values and beliefs (e.g., with regard to family, work, health).
    - ***Experiencing Isolation*** refers to the sense of loneliness you might have experienced, particularly at first, as a result of not speaking the local language, being away from your family and friends, and being unfamiliar with the local culture.
    - ***Connecting with Others*** refers to maintaining contact with family/friends in the US (e.g., through the internet, by phone) and to building connections and friendship overseas (e.g., with teammates, people in the community).
    - ***Exploring Physical Environment*** refers to traveling to different cities and countries, sight-seeing, experiencing local restaurants, going out to clubs, etc.

- The 4 themes in the bottom of the basketball refer to specific aspects of your personal growth experience pertaining to your ***Professional*** life as a basketball player:

    - ***Dealing with "The Business"*** refers to contractual issues you might have encountered, pressure and expectations your club(s) placed on you, and accommodations you were (not) provided with (e.g., housing, car)
    - ***Adjusting to Team Resources*** refers to anything your club(s) did (not) provide you related to basketball (e.g., availability of trainers/doctors, quality of facilities, means of traveling to road games)
    - ***Managing Club Dynamics*** refers to how you went about relating to and interacting with coaches, teammates, fans, and management and any challenges associated with this process.
    - ***Playing "The Game"*** refers to adjusting to the level and style of play you encountered overseas (including international rules) as well as to your own and your local teammates' preparation for a professional career and for individual games.

# VITA

Rainer J. Meisterjahn was born on February 13, 1981 to parents Walter and Ilse Meisterjahn in Lennestadt-Altenhundem, Germany. He has one younger brother, Peter. Rainer attended the University of Maine at Machias for his undergraduate studies, graduating in the summer of 2004 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Behavioral Sciences with a Concentration in Psychology. He completed his Master of Science degree in Counseling Psychology at Frostburg State University in Maryland in the spring of 2008. Rainer came to the University of Tennessee the following fall and completed a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Kinesiology and Sport Studies with a Concentration in Kinesiology and a Specialization in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior in the spring of 2011.