
Integration Process of Elite Football Players

Charles Spiteri^{*1,2,3}, Jean-Philippe Heuzé³, Manon Eluère³, and Grégoire Bosselut¹

¹EuroMov - Digital Health in Motion – IMT - MINES ALES, Université de Montpellier, Université de Montpellier : *URUMIT102, IMTMinesAlès – France*

²Olympique Lyonnais – Olympique Lyonnais – France

³Sport et Environnement Social – Université Grenoble Alpes, Université Grenoble Alpes : EA3742 – France

Résumé

Introduction: In the context of elite European football, players regularly undergo an integration process that is essential for them to understand their new environment, make sense of their role, and become fully embedded members of the organization (Gupta & Prashar, 2024). Although such transitions have been extensively examined in organizational and work psychology, the few studies conducted in sport contexts provide only a partial and fragmented view of the integration process (e.g., Benson et al., 2016; Leo et al., 2020). This study aims to comprehensively examine the integration process of male and female elite football players using a qualitative approach grounded in sport and organizational psychology and based on an updated version of the model of newcomer organizational socialization constructs (Bauer et al., 2024). This model synthesizes organizational socialization into three stages (i.e., pre-entry, accommodation, and adaptation) highlighting the main antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes that shape employee integration in work psychology.

Method: Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted (M = 51 min and 12 sec) with participants from elite football contexts (i.e., professional academies and elite teams). This included 17 participants with coaching experience (M = 37.69 years; SD = 9.01), 19 with elite playing experience (M = 30.63 years; SD = 8.60), and 12 with organizational role experience (M = 37.75 years; SD = 10.11). The interview guide was structured according to Bauer et al.'s (2024) model in three integration stages (i.e., pre-entry, accommodation and adaptation stages). Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2022), in line with Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) recommendations.

Results: These results are consistent with the work and organizational literature, which organizes the integration process into three stages: (1) the pre-entry stage, which includes distal antecedents influencing integration (i.e., individual, collective, and environmental characteristics); (2) the accommodation stage, which involves proximal antecedents (i.e., socialization tactics, newcomer proactivity, and social support) as well as newcomer adjustment (i.e., learning, assimilation, stress reduction) during the initial phase of integration; and (3) the adaptation stage, which encompasses the outcomes of the integration process at different levels (i.e., individual, team, and organizational).

Discussion: This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the integration process in elite football, capturing its dynamics from the pre-entry stage through to the adaptation phase. The structure and processes identified within this sport-specific context mirror

*Intervenant

findings from organizational settings (e.g., Bauer et al., 2024; Saks & Gruman, 2012), while also introducing important contextual nuances. The proposed model provides a robust theoretical foundation for future research aimed at empirically testing the validity of the identified constructs and their interrelationships.

References:

Bauer, T. N., Erdogan, B., Ellis, A. M., Truxillo, D. M., Brady, G. M., & Bodner, T. (2024). New horizons for newcomer organizational socialization: A review, meta-analysis, and future research directions. *Journal of Management*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920632412771>

Benson, A. J., Evans, M. B., & Eys, M. A. (2016). Organizational socialization in team sport environments. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 26(4), 463–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12460>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Gupta, P., & Prashar, A. (2024). Meta-analytic review of role of career stage in newcomers' socialization: Beyond stages model of organizational socialization. *SSRN*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4872039>

Leo, F. M., López Gajardo, M. A., González Ponce, I., García Calvo, T., Benson, A. J., & Eys, M. A. (2020). How socialization tactics relate to role clarity, cohesion, and intentions to return in soccer teams. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 50, 101735. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101735>

Saks, A. M., & Gruman, J. A. (2012). Getting newcomers on board: A review of socialization practices and introduction to socialization resources theory. In C. R. Wanberg (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Socialization* (pp. 27–55). Oxford University Press.

Wiltshire, G., & Ronkainen, N. (2021). A realist approach to thematic analysis: Making sense of qualitative data through experiential, inferential and dispositional themes. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 20(1), 159–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2021.1894909>