

“Learning the Hard Way”: An Examination of Acculturative Support for Latin-American Baseball Players in the South Atlantic League

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Abstract: Latin-Americans have become a major part of baseball, but face many challenges acculturating to living and playing in the United States. This research examines the acculturative support provided to Latin-American players by teams in the South Atlantic League of Minor League Baseball. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with front-office members and Latin-American former players. Data analysis reveal three main themes: language barrier, interaction between teammates, and youth of Latin-American prospects. In addition, some of the challenges associated with having Latin-American players on the team are identified. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the field of sport management, and provide suggestions for ways to improve the acculturation process of foreign players.

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1. Introduction

While many view sports as a separate entity from the cultural makeup of a society, the reality is that sports are social constructions, “parts of the social world that are created by people as they interact with one another under particular social, political, and economic conditions” (Coakley, 2009, p. 12). Sports function as a microcosm of our society and reflect the attitudes, values and challenges of the dominant culture. As the United States becomes more diverse, sport participants are becoming more diverse as well. A sport in which diversity has become a central issue is professional baseball, where on the opening day of the 2010 season, 28.3% of the players on major league rosters were classified as Latino (Lapchick, Kaiser, Caudy, & Wang, 2010).

An increase in diversity has many positive benefits, but can also provide challenges as two or more divergent groups of people must learn to interact and adjust to one another. Major League Baseball is not an exception and is dealing with the benefits and challenges of incorporating a diverse group of international players into its structure. The passion for baseball in Latin-America has led to an influx of Latino talent into the minor and major leagues, but along with the on-field skills of the players come challenges of adapting to life and work in an unfamiliar environment,

with different language, food, and social customs. These players face the additional test of having to adjust to an entirely new cultural environment while trying to prove their baseball skills on the field.

For many years, teams bringing Latin-American players to the United States did nothing to assist them in the challenges they faced of adapting to a new culture. This adaptation is better known as acculturation, defined as, “those phenomena, which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). Acculturation “requires unlearning many old cultural habits (deculturation) and learning new ways of responding from the host culture. Immigrants must simultaneously adapt their own native culture and adopt the host culture by learning new attitudes, language, values, and customs” (Amazon, Allen, & Holmes, 1999, p.312). However, having thorough and beneficial programs is becoming more of a priority for teams throughout professional baseball. These “acculturative support” programs can range from English instruction to guided trips and outings to ‘way-of-life’ classes about everyday living in the United States.

The purpose of this research is to examine acculturation issues and the support system baseball teams provide to Latin-American players to assist in successful acculturation. The focus of this study is on the lower levels of the minor leagues, which are often the first playing destination for Latin-American players upon coming to play in the United States. It is important to study acculturation programs and the issues that surround them as they could lead to more Latin-American superstars and All-Star level talents, who otherwise may fail to progress beyond the lowest levels of the minor-league system due to communication barriers, homesickness, or an inability to cope with stereotypes. Furthermore, this could benefit the team by having well adapted players and successful cultural diversity, which makes the organization more productive (Amazon et al., 1999; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). Successful incorporation of diversity within sport also creates the opportunity to “borrow and blend different sports, styles of play and game strategies...envision[ing] and create[ing] sports that fit a wide range of interests and abilities” (Coakley, 2009, p. 563).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Acculturation of Latin-American Players

The first Latin-American players entered professional baseball in the United States around the turn of the 20th century. Majority of these players came from Cuba and were often some of the most dominant players of their era, including Adolfo Luque, Rafael Almeida, and Armando Marsans (Wilson, 2005). However, these early players faced many challenges adapting to the culture in the United States, mainly due to the language barrier. Perhaps no one dealt with the adjustment to playing baseball in the United States in a more public way than Roberto Clemente in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Often seen as the first great Latin-American baseball superstar, Clemente was a fifteen-time All-Star selection in the outfield, a 12-time Gold Glove winner, and two-time World Series champion with the Pittsburgh Pirates (Maraniss, 2006). This status gave him not only media attention but also highlighted the difficulties of acculturation faced by foreign-born baseball players.

Baseball teams rarely provided support for Latin-American players in their cultural transition to the United States. Players had to rely on each other. For example, Bobby Avila, a Latin-American player who joined the Cleveland Indians in 1948, was told to get a Spanish-English dictionary and was roomed with Mike Garcia, a Mexican-American pitcher who was bilingual and assisted Avila greatly during his time with the team (Regalado, 2008). Some teams benefitted from having a large Latino presence in their area. For example, while with the Giants, Pompez was able

to place many of his players in homes of Latino families because “that exposed them to English, provided access to familiar cuisine and cultural life, and foster[ed] connections with Harlem’s Latino community” (Burgos Jr., 2007, p. 134). This type of assistance would continue on into the present with Clemente being a major proponent of this kind of support. Clemente often helped rookies, especially younger Latino players on the Pirates, adjust to life in the U.S. and within the clubhouse (Maraniss, 2006).

Outside of help from other players and the occasional staff member in an organization, Latin-American players were left on their own and given the responsibility to acculturate, with the organization likely to release them if they were unsuccessful at adapting to life in the United States. Things began to change, however, with the construction by major league teams of the first baseball academies in the Dominican Republic in the 1980’s (Klein, 1991). The Toronto Blue Jays and Los Angeles Dodgers were the first to open academies, which essentially served as camps to isolate young players and focus their attention on baseball. Gradually the academies also became sites at which Dominican players could be given help with the acculturation challenges they would face upon arriving to play in the U.S. (Klein, 1991). While the focus at the academies was clearly on baseball, as time progressed more and more teams began to include acculturation aspects into their academy training, whether it was English classes, financial advice, or “way-of-life” instruction to prepare players for the transition to professional baseball (Klein, 1991). For example, prospects at the Astros’ academy in 1990 had thrice-weekly English classes and bi-weekly cultural orientation sessions (Jamail, 2008). Many clubs now have psychologists on staff to assist players along with coaches and English teachers. Francisco Ruiz, a psychologist who worked at the Astros’ academy was responsible for educating on cultural issues, legal matters in the United States, and family issues (Jamail, 2008).

2.2 Language Barrier

The language barrier could provide significant challenges for Latin-American players, especially those who are rushed through the minor-league system or sign with a team that does not place a priority on language training. Many players may learn enough to be able to communicate during practice and games, but there are still challenges when it comes to communicating with the media and/or seeking endorsements (Jamail, 2008). Language barrier could affect play on the field. For example, Frank Robinson, who managed Vladimir Guerrero, shared “I can’t teach him anything this way. I can’t help him with the mental part of the game-slumps, approach, state of mind. It’s awkward, frustrating. He would feel better, and I would feel better, if I could reach him, but I can’t. He’s on his own.” (Wendel, 2003, p. 122). Many major league teams now carry one staff member or coach who is bilingual and can help facilitate communication between players and coaches on the field. However, most teams do not provide a translator for the specific purpose of translating for Latin-American players despite the fact that over 25% of the players in the major leagues are foreign born (Burgos Jr., 2007). Interestingly, while relatively few Japanese players play in the major leagues in the U.S., most of them have a personal translator (Burgos Jr., 2007).

The language barrier can affect the player’s relationship with the media. Latin-American players have often had a contentious relationship with the press when Spanish speaking players were described as ‘moody’ (Regalado, 2008). This tension makes players hesitant to open up to the media as Philadelphia Phillies’ Alex Arias explains, “They don’t want to be embarrassed...they don’t want to look foolish” (Gutierrez, 1999, p. 2). Another effect of the language barrier is in its possibility of affecting endorsements opportunities. As Burgos Jr. argues, “The financial stakes involved can be significant. The player who adroitly handles the media and his public image positions himself well for endorsement deals.” (Burgos Jr., 2007, p. 46).

2.3 Stereotyping Latin-American Players

Beyond the language barrier and other acculturation challenges such as food and living arrangements, many Latin-American players are still faced with stereotypes and embedded ideas about both their play and personality. While blatant racism has been greatly reduced since the days of Robinson and Clemente, more subtle prejudices and misunderstandings are still commonplace within the game. A lack of knowledge about players' individual backgrounds or a general lack of knowledge about Latin-American culture by coaches and executives in the United States can contribute greatly to cultural confusion and conflicts (Jamail, 2008). Cultural misunderstandings between Latin-American players and management can lead to players being labeled as "head cases" while players who acculturate quickly and easily are seen as the model of what organizations hope Latin-American players to become (Klein, 1991). This stereotyping could be damaging to a player's career, especially to a young and not well established player. Profiling players based on cultural misunderstandings could lead to talent loss for major league teams and the end of a career for a young player.

Another challenge facing Latin-American players is the stereotypes held about their style of play and the emotion they display during the game. Since the early 1900's, players have often been labeled as "showboats" or "hot-tempered Latinos" (Jamail, 2008). While the game itself is the same, cultural mores and expectations lead to differing ideas about style of play and interpretations of player attitudes, responsibilities, and expectations. Examples of this enculturation of the game are numerous, from press comments labeling players as "showboat" and "temperamental" to criticisms of the way Latin-American players conduct themselves on the field (Jamail, 2008).

2.4 Acculturation and Diversity in the Workplace

In many ways, the transition Latino players face upon signing with a baseball team is similar to the transition that many Latino workers face upon coming to the U.S. to work in other industries. For example, Mamman (1995) examined how minority employees could effectively acculturate and adjust to the work environment in a multicultural organization and how self-confidence is important. Similarly, Porter (1995) examined ways in which companies could best facilitate successful cultural diversity among their employees. His main argument was that while it was often left to the employee to acculturate him/her into the organization, it should not be the responsibility of the employee, but should instead fall to the organization and management to ensure an easy transition process. This leads to questions about the ways in which baseball teams assimilated Latin-American players in the past, by essentially letting them fend for themselves in a new country and new environment. When acculturation is viewed under the realm of management, it would seem that teams have a responsibility to the players as employees to assist them in their cultural and professional transition.

Amason, Allen, and Holmes (1999) studied how perceptions of support received in the workplace differed between Anglo-American and Hispanic employees and how the difference in support affected the process of acculturation. They concluded that a positive support system has been associated with increased job satisfaction and security, increased satisfaction with supervisors and individual self-worth, decreased job stress and burnout. Positive interactions with other players could give Latin-American players a sense of ownership and pride in the team, an important factor when, "a lack of ownership of the game is the essence of the Latin experience, and has its roots in how baseball was brought to Latin America and how Latin players were treated once they got here" (Breton & Villegas, 1999, p. 102).

Similarly, Ogbonna and Harris (2006) studied employees' dynamics in an ethnically diverse environment, discovering that language and communication differences could lead to tension and group dysfunction. Language barrier was the biggest contributor to negative workplace dynamics.

Other scholars have looked at the acculturation orientations within the workplace and how differing cultural orientations affected performance and work dynamics (Oerlemans & Peeters, 2010). Findings suggest that members of the host society tend to want immigrant workers to assimilate into the host culture, while immigrants prefer to have a dual-orientation that allows them to partially assimilate, but also maintain some aspects of their original culture. In baseball, this could mean that interaction between Latin-American and Anglo-American players is a key to a more positive team experience and better results on the field.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

Former players and front-office members from the South Atlantic League were chosen as participants for this study. The league is a Low-A league in the Minor League Baseball system and one of the first places where Latin American prospects play upon coming to the United States. For the purposes of this study, we define “front-office members” as the administrative personnel, which included General Managers, Clubhouse Managers, Minor-League Operations Assistants and Directors, and a Director of Player Personnel. A total of seven front-office members and two former players (now coaches with major league teams) were interviewed. Front-office participants were recruited by contacting all general managers of South Atlantic League teams. Additional front-office and player participants were selected by using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling consists of “subjects possessing the necessary trait or traits [who] are readily available” (Berg & Latin, 2008, p. 80). All participants were proficient in English, though both former players spoke Spanish as their first language. We would like to acknowledge the limited sample for this study and therefore advise the reader about generalizing the findings of this study. This is a qualitative study and the issue of small sample size is rather different than in a quantitative type of study. More specifically, in a qualitative, interview-based design, such as the one used in this study, it is more important to ensure that the people within the context studied had *cultural competence* in this area and the smaller sample size would provide insight into relationships, as determined by the purpose of the study, not necessarily saturation or a typology. The use of qualitative interviews allowed for complex textual descriptions based on personal experiences without privileging a particular paradigm or perspective over another.

3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone or in person and were recorded. Interviews generally lasted on average twenty-five minutes. A total of twelve interview questions were developed based on the review of literature. The purpose of the questions was to understand the process and the related efforts made by the teams to assist Latin-American players in their transition to life in the U.S. For example, some of the interview questions were framed as: Do you provide any support for Latin-American players to aid in their cultural transition and if so, what methods of support do you provide?; Do you specifically offer media training for Latin-American players?; and What do you feel could be done to improve the support system you have in place for those players?. During the interview process subject anonymity and confidentiality were maintained and IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval was sought and granted prior to the beginning of the study. Informed consent forms were signed by participants prior to conducting the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, the researchers transcribed the audio recordings. All participants were assigned a pseudonym letter to ensure anonymity.

3.3 Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Data were analyzed using Qualitative Data Analysis software (QDA Miner). The Constant Comparison method was used to aid in the coding of data. This method of coding is used to group answers to common questions.

4. Results

Data analysis revealed three main themes: 1) Language barrier, 2) Interaction with teammates, and 3) Youth of prospects. The results for each theme are presented below. In order to exemplify each theme, illustrative quotations are provided as well.

4.1 Language Barrier

A frequently referenced topic when discussing acculturation of the Latin-American players was the challenges associated with language. Participants identified a variety of different ways in which the language barrier could affect players. A recurring concern was how it affected on-field performance as one participant shared:

I don't believe a player will reach his full potential until he has a solid grasp of the English language, because we're in the United States, the instruction is in English...if you don't speak the same language as your teammates it's not going to be as easy to communicate and play together.

The difficulties of instructions getting lost in translation were especially noted when it came to coaching and instruction more than in-game situations, illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

They'll be in meetings on the field and off the field with our coaching staff and front office sometimes, and they'll be told...either instruction on the field or certain details of life off the field, and you ask them if they understood and they'll nod their head yes when in reality they've got no clue what was just said and what's going to happen...So overcoming that language barrier to the point where they're really receiving the instruction that they should be is sometimes difficult for them.

This leads to the need of translators as front-office members shared that most of the time they had a Spanish-speaking coach on staff. When no coaches were available, players tended to rely on bilingual staff members or other players with a better command of English to translate for them:

I came from Puerto Rico...the only help that I had during those times was if I had a chance to play with a Latin player who speaks English, he would translate everything for me...they were real nice to do it because not everybody is willing to share or help you out, but anything that was going on the field, in meetings, I had no clue what they were talking about.

When asked about English classes offered to the foreign players, front-office staff indicated that they provided some form of English-language instructions, although the regularity and quantity of it varied greatly. Some teams were less structured with classes often being canceled while others had very structured programs as one participant explained:

For the most part we try to have our classes daily when the team's at home...so at the most they're going to get 70 classes a year from April 5th until September 1st.

Another aspect of the language barrier was the media/endorsement relevance.

Language barriers could also hamper media communications and the endorsement value of the player as one participant shared:

You are in the United States and you don't see any TV commercials when the guys are speaking in Spanish...my point is, speaking English for them is way more than just the media aspect of it...They've got to understand that a guy like Albert Pujols, who's one of the best players in the big leagues, he doesn't have many endorsements because he's not a good speaker, whereas Ryan Howard who isn't as good as Pujols, has Subway, has Entourage, he's on all over the place.

It is evident that the language barrier has multiple consequences for the players and the team. The challenges are not only limited to on- and off-the field instructions, but also to the potential of losing endorsement deals and difficulties establishing a relationship with the media.

4.2 Interaction with Teammates

Most of our participants felt that interactions between players have a positive effect and is something that should be encouraged by the team. It was important for the teams to ensure that players had an understanding of each others' cultures and interacted with each other often. For example, one participant shared:

We'll show movies that show the history of Dominican baseball players to help give the Latin players a sense of pride and understanding of where they come from...and also give the American guys an understanding of what their journey is to baseball here in the United States.

Similarly, another participant shared his feelings on the importance of interactions for reducing the cultural divide between players:

I really think the team would play better because then when you're playing as one team instead of semi-divided, oh, you know, the Latin guys, the American guys, this and that, I think it'd be pretty cool to see that.

Interaction with teammates is important for the transition of the Latin-American players to the new culture and it seems like the team and American players are supportive and encouraging in facilitating interactions. However, the language barrier may hinder the desire to interact and discourage some players from seeking interactions.

4.3 Youth of Prospects

Latin-American players are not subject to the major league amateur draft and can be signed at a younger age than U.S. born players, which may give them somewhat of an advantage as one participant expressed:

They typically get a jump on American kids because they can start a little bit younger in the system where...American kids are still in high school some of these guys are in places in Latin America...where they're already getting some of that experience.

However, most participants shared their concern that the young age of the players could present an additional challenge in terms of acculturation:

They're young, they're very young...and then they have to face the best competition they've ever faced.

Homesickness and adjusting to life without the support of their families could be challenging. The young age of prospects could contribute to the difference in the attrition rate between Latin-American and Anglo-American prospects and present emotional and physical challenges:

The closer they are to full development physically and full development baseball-wise you're more likely to get the player right, but when you're looking at 16 year old kids who aren't even physically developed yet...or aren't emotionally developed, because there's a mental component to the game beyond the physical part, there's a makeup and a mental mindset that has to be developed also, and at 16 who's ready for that?

One participant touched on the fact that signing Latin-American players at a younger age means they are less likely to have a strong educational background, which could make it harder for them to acculturate to life in the United States, specifically referencing Dominican players:

The Dominican kids don't have too much education, not a lot of them today that can help them at all, because education[al access] is bad for them in the Dominican, but you sign a kid that's 17, 16 years old, what kind of education is he going to have, so the education, he's going to have to learn it from me as a coach, or a manager, or from the older players when he gets here.

Similarly, another participant shared:

The baseball time commitment is so great that they don't go to a traditional school, and when you find time you've got to get them the English classes, when do you find time to just educate them in other ways other than just the language? And that's the challenge...you always hope that there's ways to help them in other ways, and education would be one of them, but it's just hard to find the time to do it.

The issue of age, similarly to the issue of interactions with teammates, should be viewed as two-sided. On one hand, it is attractive to recruit young players with a great potential to grow and develop. On the other hand, there are concerns about the level of their physical and mental maturity, which could affect their acculturation process while playing in the U.S.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study concur with previous research in the area of cultural adaptation when addressing the issue of language barrier in particular. However, this study contributes in a unique way by identifying two more issues specific to the Minor Baseball League that play a role in the experience of Latin-American players: interaction with teammates and youth of prospects. Playing a sport without speaking the language of the country in which one plays, could present communication challenges and difficulties understanding coaches' instructions related to practice and game strategies, which in turn could significantly impact the outcome of the game. In addition, such communication challenges impact interactions with teammates. Adding to this the factor of the young age of some players has the potential to make the acculturation process even more complex and challenging.

English language instruction was an important component of the acculturation process for Latin-American players. This importance is supported by scholarly work emphasizing the need for a common language as the first step towards successful acculturation. Furthermore, overcoming the language barrier could prevent conflict at the work place and possibly other implications for the career progression. The aspect of media training and media communication is also important.

Research has indicated that some of the problems Latin-American players face is due to a lack of communication and stereotypes. Therefore, it is imperative for teams to provide the necessary media training to improve the level of understanding and communication between players and media.

The structure of scouting players and current lack of a worldwide draft seem to ensure that the signing of Latin-American prospects at a younger age will continue to take place. While signing players at a young age presents challenges, there are some positive aspects such as the flexibility in adaptation for young individuals, suggesting that with the right support system, young Latin-American players should be able to acculturate to a new environment. Another aspect to consider is differentiating support methods between players from different countries. Due to cultural, socioeconomic and other differences, players from Cuba may face different challenges than players from the Dominican Republic, Panama, or Venezuela.

The findings of this research are important to the field of sport management. With Latin-American players having a large representation in the U.S., understanding how to best help them achieve their on-field goals and perform at their best is paramount to the team's success. Furthermore, we encourage sport organizations to gain more cultural understanding of their employees, which could help lead to more diversity and greater intercultural understanding between management and other employees. Understanding what support to provide for international athletes may have implications at all levels of sport, as immigration will continue to be a part of the American landscape, and international athletes will continue to be a big part of it.

Different organizational philosophies lead to different priorities among their acculturation programs, and differing levels of importance being placed on the programs as a whole. While a league-wide mandate on the support system teams need to offer may not be feasible, teams should certainly consider steps to move towards the idea of becoming a multicultural organization, where diversity is supported and embraced. Organizations which value cultural diversity tend to see the benefits of that diversity within their workforce. Top management support is critical for effective long-term change and for implementing an organizational culture that supports a movement toward increased diversity practices.

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