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INTEGRATION AND SPORTS PARTICIPATION: CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS AND FEELINGS OF BELONGING

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SUMMARY

Sports policy makers often assume that sport may act as an arena for integration, citizenship, democracy, exchange of intercultural knowledge, and formation and consolidation of social networks. However, sports research has seldom confirmed this view; rather, the research often challenges these assumptions. This text aims to provide a better understanding of participation in sport among girls and young women with a minority background. Specifically, we investigate the factors behind their participation (or lack thereof), their feelings about participating, and the ways in which participation in sport can lead to positive or negative life changes, not only in the sports context, but also in a wider societal sense.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES:

- Feelings of belonging do not automatically arise from participation in the sports practice alone.
- Feeling like a fully worthy participant and being accepted for who you are is crucial to creating feelings of belonging.
- Team sports can potentially create strong feelings of belonging in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.
- Sport may offer a place to build self-identity and embodied capacities.
- Sport may either erase (or diminish) or evoke (or intensify) feelings of difference or belonging.



INTRODUCTION

Research has revealed that sport as a social and cultural practice rests upon Westernised ideals, a Western-centric lifestyle, a mode of 'whiteness' in the racial sense, and national identity. This narrow focus has led to, and still evokes, discrimination and racism on both collective (group) and subjective (as experienced by the individual) levels. On the one hand, official rules have been framed to regulate and control the way that different sports are played. On the other, a body of opinion states that such rules should be negotiable for women (and men) to compete in sports competitions across the boundaries of nations, religions and cultures. Some athletes have reported feeling that they were not considered fully worthy participants in their chosen sports, even in the societies in which they were living. In addition, the media are often seen as a social influence that contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the sources and influences that create within a person a sense of belonging to the society in which they live. Then, through sport, we can foster in people from ethnic minorities a stronger sense of belonging to the wider community.

To better understand the sense of belonging reported by young women and girls from ethnic minorities, we will examine the results of studies recording and analysing their subjective experiences. The chosen point of departure for our discussion is that sport as a social practice is a milieu for cultural negotiation and conflict that incorporates (often unequal) power relationships on a personal (individual), organisational and societal level. The way these negotiations are conducted affects not only involvement in sports but also the formation of identity. For girls and young women with a minority background, this identity formation may involve what is called double, or multiple, identity formation, which is related to cultural origin, intergenerational conflicts and the majority culture.

SPORTS INVOLVEMENT AMONG GIRLS WITH ETHNIC MINORITY BACKGROUND

The involvement in sport of women 'sports migrants', and of female athletes with ethnic minority background, has been reported in the research literature only to a limited extent. Early research on male athletes with minority background revealed that certain stereotypes, often with racial undertones, have been used to include, exclude and shape the participation of certain groups of male (black) athletes. These examples are often taken from global sports such as football (soccer) and basketball.

Today, the research knowledge base is wider and includes studies on women and less popular sports, although more knowledge is needed of how the processes of exclusion and discrimination are maintained within sport. Attention has lately been turned towards the sports federations' own antidiscrimination actions (or non-actions) and the basis for these actions. Questions have been raised about the disproportionately low representation of minority groups on organisational and structural levels in sports management and coaching, as well as the low representation of students and scholars from minority groups in higher education in the field of sport and in other areas of study.

Some explanations commonly offered to explain the low numbers of sports participants among females from minority groups include: lack of (sports) club experience; cultural traditions; religion; and low levels of parental support. The assumed negative influence of religion and culture on the involvement of women from minority groups in sport has been questioned. In considering the available data from the perspective of widening participation

and addressing the unequal power relationships, we need to take account of several factors and their interrelationships – the organisation of sport as a part of society, and the intersection of social class, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.

According to quantitative studies from Europe, young women with minority background, either born abroad or having parents born abroad in countries outside Europe, are less involved in organised sports than are girls from the majority culture. Participation levels in sport, expressed as membership in sports organisations, among females from non-Westernised countries are low: around 20% in Norway and 30% in Sweden. Notably, in Sweden, the percentage of girls (and boys) with an ethnic minority background who continue in their chosen sport after adolescence is lower than the percentage of girls (and boys) from the majority group. In Sweden, 20% of the boys and girls with minority background who did not continue with sport claimed the reason was that they felt they were treated differently from others by their coaches or leaders. The most common reason for quitting sport offered by members of minority groups that differed from those offered by members of the majority group was the wish to devote more time to their studies. Minority groups also cited the cost of training and difficulties associated with transport to sporting venues as barriers to their continuing participation in sport. Female respondents from both majority and minority groups in the Swedish study claimed they wished to become coaches, but proportionally fewer girls with ethnic minority background felt that they had been asked or encouraged to join a coaching course.

Differences in levels of participation in sports among minority and majority groups become even more striking if we look at the representation of participants in national junior and senior teams at the elite sports level. At this level, there is a marked lack of representation of male and female athletes from minority groups. This even occurs in sports such as football and basketball, which do have a relatively high proportion of athletes from minority groups playing below the elite level. In Sweden, where upper secondary school students can choose sport as a subject, less than 4% of the adolescents taking sport come from minority groups. On a more institutional level in the field of sport, the same difference in proportional representation is apparent in numbers of managers, board members and coaches. These patterns of differential participation as athletes, coaches and leaders illustrate a lack of integration and, at least to some extent, a lack of belonging of members of ethnic minorities in the field of sport.

Let us leave the overview of participation in sports here and turn to the personal, individual level and the subjective experience of belonging. Drawing on the findings in Walseth's (2006a) and Lee's (2005) studies, we discuss two different sources from which these sportswomen derived a sense of belonging: social support and identity confirmation.

Sport – a source of social support

Several studies based on life history interviews or focus group interviews have found that participation in team sports is an activity that can promote a strong feeling of community and close relationships among players. When Zelam and Jess, two young Muslim sportswomen, were asked to explain the source of their feeling of belonging, they stated:

It's very social; I think that is the most important part for me. We support each other ... Last year, when I had a birthday, they arranged a surprise party for me and they invited the whole team, the boys' team and some of the players from the younger team. (Zelam)

Basketball has been, in a way, the place where I could relax. I think it is because of the feeling of belonging to a team ... we were a team of friends who played together. (Jess)

Jess emphasised that being part of a team led to feelings of reciprocity; they were a team focused on collective play, a team that did not consist of individual stars. Being part of a team led to a deeply-felt comradeship for Jess. This belonging and way of thinking is based on a desire to take part in a socially defined practice, for example team sport, where the people involved identify with the collectively defined practice, and accept its rules and norms. This group identification leads to authentic feelings of belonging and reciprocity.

To become a good player, and especially a good 'immigrant' player, can produce a strong feeling of belonging that can also extend beyond the team environment. As an example, Noora felt that her success as a player gave her recognition from other coaches, players and leaders who had powerful positions within handball. Noora said, 'We surprised people with the fact that we were good players – that immigrant girls could play!' By their skill, Noora's team contributed to a re-evaluation of other people's ideas of who could become a good performer, which had previously been limited to members of the majority group. One might also argue that being a good player gave Noora a feeling of belonging to a wider (imagined) community of handball players.

Sport as a means of confirming identity and building a self-image

In Walseth's (2006a) study, the participants reported experiences characterised by the feeling of being 'special'. The source of this particular feeling was the aspects of sport that promote a positive self-image. It was also often related to sports linked to facets of various lifestyles, such music and clothing. In Walseth's study, and in Lee's study of Asian-American women, the feelings of belonging and other subjective experiences were connected to identity confirmation, and extended outside the sports arena.

When Kleo was asked why she quit football and started playing basketball, she replied:

It fitted better with my personality, to put it that way ... football is different from basketball ... I think it is different kind of people who play football than basketball. It depends on your personality, what you prefer, your taste of music, clothes ... people like me play basketball ... It's more *r'n'b* people who play basketball; people who play basketball dress differently to football players. It's not so easy to see this in Norway, but if you look at the USA then you will see that there are differences. (Walseth, 2006a)

In Walseth's study, identity confirmation through participation in sport did not contribute to the formation of strong feelings of belonging, nor did the respondents report developing feelings of reciprocity. But participation in sport did act as a positive force in terms of contributing to confirmation of (and building) self-identity and self-image, as well as providing vigorous bodily exercise. In Lee's study, Asian-American women reported similar experiences gained from participating in, not Western lifestyle sports, but martial arts such as taekwondo.

These results illustrate two different sources from which participants in these studies drew feelings of belonging. However, other studies demonstrate that participation in sport can also lead to feelings of exclusion.

When sport produces feelings of social exclusion

Participation in sport can produce feelings of exclusion, of not being invited into the community of sport. Feelings of not belonging can manifest as feelings of not being a part of the team, of not being invited – or even seen – by the coach or other teammates. The illustrations below are taken from two different studies.

Sahar and Lea express these feelings in the following way:

Sahar: When you wear a headscarf and go to training with Swedish teenagers, you feel that they [the Swedish team members] see you as different, and that you aren't met on the same conditions. (Lundvall & Safizadeh, 2011)

Lea: It has been difficult to take first step ... perhaps it is due to that I did not trust ... Perhaps nobody has given you any encouragement ... like shown you what to do ... Sometimes you want to be with someone who cares about you. It's difficult to fit in ... it's mainly about ... feeling welcome. (Lundvall, 2007)

A problem also identified in the first study arose when involvement in sport required travelling to a sports club some distance from where the female players lived. In addition, the feelings of exclusion or non-acceptance were not related only to ethnicity, problems with transport, or concerns about safety; they were also related to other factors such as perceived differences in social class, perceptions that created even stronger feelings of not belonging.

In the second example, another form of exclusion was revealed: the growth of feelings of not belonging, linked mainly to the feeling of not being accepted, but also to the perception that others were making judgments about the individual's readiness to accept the norms and rules crucial for involvement in the activity.

These examples of subjective experiences of belonging (or not belonging), and the reasons for these feelings, are also linked to the basic self-image and family background of the person concerned. However, analysing what these feelings represent in terms of the social theories about belonging to communities can be very valuable. Enjolras (2003) gives two criteria for belonging: a will to become a part of a social practice, with its collective norms, rules and direct personal contact among members; and a feeling of identity confirmation produced by participating. From this analytical point of departure, playing sport contributes, under certain circumstances, to developing feelings of belonging that lead to a sense of meaningful participation.

We have shown here various reasons for developing or not developing feelings of belonging. The studies cited demonstrate that involvement in traditional sports communities, such as those that develop around team sports, is more likely to lead to stronger feelings of belonging than does participation in newer, more individualistic sports like streetball (street basketball) or aerobics. This distinction may be explained by the greater need to negotiate reciprocity in a team environment: having the feelings towards someone that they have for you, and doing for someone what they do for you. Individuals in team sports feel linked to the community and to the team by their willingness to take part in a set of collectively defined practices and to observe the norms and rules. 'Image building' was the most important reason for developing feelings of belonging, and was based on communities characterised by the identity that the team sport created, rather than being based on traditional values of social support and friendship. In contrast, lifestyle sports such as snowboarding, street basketball, skateboarding, dance and aerobics are individualised and often associated with a 'package' to be used outside the sports arena. These lifestyle sports are also frequently youth driven.

We have also given examples of how the feeling of belonging can be absent, or diminished, by being involved in sport. Thus, no automatic link exists between participation in sport and feelings of belonging; social class differences may present a barrier, while lack of ready acceptance and accessibility of the social practice may create others.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this text was to provide a better understanding of participation in sport among girls and young women with a minority background by investigating both the factors affecting their participation and the positive and negative life changes that sport can evoke. We have described sports participation by this group at both the societal and organisational levels (through quantitative studies on participation rates), and at a more individual level through excerpts from studies of the subjective experiences of young girls and women with ethnic minority background.

In light of the research data presented, it appears that sport can both evoke (or intensify) and erase (or diminish) experiences of integration and feelings of belonging for these women and girls. The brief statistical overview gives reason for politicians and sports organisations to seriously examine how mechanisms of discrimination and racism on the organisational level work to exclude, not integrate, members of minorities within our society. Most adolescents with a minority background are missing from those who continue participation in sport through and beyond adolescence. This fact, combined with the low numbers of athletes from minority groups who play at elite level and in national teams, supports calls for sports organisations to implement strategies to better integrate and retain members of minorities. This effort also needs to include 'missing' students in the sports profiles of schools. Combining knowledge from qualitative studies of subjective experiences with statistical, quantitative findings adds significantly to our understanding of possible actions and strategies to promote and increase integration. For young women from minority groups and cultures, such as Muslim or Asian women, being involved in sport may gain them recognition within and outside the home, independent of sport. Remember, however, that the driving force for developing feelings of belonging does not arise automatically from the sport alone. The context around building – or, indeed, destroying – these feelings is important. To feel as though one is a full and worthy participant in the defined practice is crucial for participants; the developing sense of belonging is strengthened through feelings of social support.

For some, sport may offer a place in which to find new ways of self-actualisation and embodied capacities. For others, the importance of a shared identity becomes vital, shared through participation in a specific sport or physical culture (dance, aerobics) – but always, the most important requirement is to be accepted as an individual, for who you are.

We have also given examples of young women whose subjective experiences of participation in sport were negative – they did not feel included or that they belonged; instead, they experienced feelings of isolation and exclusion. These examples illustrate the dilemma of double identities, when conflicts between social classes are intertwined with ties to cultural origins and membership of minority groups. Here, the cultural 'gender structure' of the family, with its collective and shared nature, creates challenges that mean the young women must integrate family identity and day-to-day experiences in their struggle to form their own individual identity.

We have illustrated the different ways in which feelings of belonging can develop through participation in sport, either in terms of sharing and supporting, or as a place of refuge, or as a confirmation of identity. Becoming part of a team with a coach who creates feelings of esteem and community, to find a space and an activity to be shared, or to have role models and like-minded companions can be life changing and affirming. Although these outcomes are not automatic, participation in sport can be fertile ground to nurture their growth. Girls and young women with diverse backgrounds may expect to gain different things from participating in sports, which may lead to different forms and feelings of belonging – and to different strategies for participation.

For some, the question ‘What am I allowed to do?’ is crucial for participation (Kay, 2006, p. 368). This question could also, in the context of this text, be understood as ‘What am I allowed to become?’ Therefore, there is good reason to address the family context on a micro level when looking for strategies to improve levels of sports participation and practice in young women with minority background. That said, remember that the family’s opinion of, or relationship with, an individual’s involvement in a particular activity is an important consideration in all cultural contexts, not least with regard to sport. Family involvement is now promoted in the educational field, but perhaps needs to improve in sporting organisations and clubs.

A final note: state-financed sports organisations in the Nordic countries need to clarify their aims in terms of integration and participation in sports, in order to articulate concrete strategies to increase membership drawn from minority groups, especially women. With regard to equity and sport, the goal is not to change society, but, through promoting sport based on equity, to contribute to social change in this direction. Similarly, fully integrated sport could contribute to the wider development of increased feelings of belonging on structural and relational levels by modelling this behaviour within the field of sports.

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