

Sport and multiculturalism. Social integration of ethnic minorities in Flanders through sport

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Introduction

The multicultural society is of current interest. Many are concerned about the social cohesion of society (as a result of, among others, a lower participation degree in social activities and organised contexts) and refer in particular to the integration of ethnic minorities (Komter et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000; Duyvendak & Veldboer, 2001; Jarvie, 2003).

In literature, sport is regarded as a valuable contribution to the social cohesion and integration of a multicultural society (Putnam, 2000; Elling et al., 2001; Jarvie, 2003). Many authors agree that sport, apart from being a meaningful leisure activity, can be considered as a useful means of integration of immigrants as well (e.g., Breedveld & van der Meulen, 2003; Brown et al., 2003). De Knop and Hoyng (1996) have indicated that this assumption is based on the fact that sport has been attributed a number of specific functions. It is indicated that sport has become accessible to people of all social backgrounds and ethnic origins. However, in Flanders – the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium – not all citizens appear to have the same opportunities to participate in sport. For example, reference can be made to the lower participation degree among ethnic minorities, in particular among female immigrants (De Knop et al., 2001).

Duyvendak and Veldboer (2001) mentioned that ethnic segregation or separation can hinder the social cohesion of a society. In an earlier study, Duyvendak et al. (1998) indicated that both immigrants and native citizens agreed about the fact that sport participation in mixed groups can contribute (more) to social integration. Others have made similar statements regarding sport, such as Putnam (2000), who have indicated that sport can facilitate the interaction between different populations. Or for example, Breedveld and van der Meulen (2003) who argued that sport can contribute to the social cohesion in a group ('bonding social capital'³⁷) as well as between groups ('bridging social capital'³⁸). However, the study of Elling (2002) showed that sport involvement often results in friendships within the same group. Research has also indicated that these 'sport friendships' are characterised by less intimacy and trust in comparison with 'close' friendships (Elling & De Knop, 2001).

Since the beginning of the nineties, sport has increasingly been used as a means of social integration for ethnic minorities in Flanders. Since 15 years now, especially the King Baudouin Foundation has been actively involved in the promotion of sport as a means of social integration for socially deprived and immigrant youth (De Knop & Theeboom, 1999). Through its 'youth and sport' programme, several projects have been set up in cooperation with a variety of structures and organisations such as schools, sport clubs, youth welfare work and local authorities. As a result, there is an increased awareness within the youth and educational sector as well as, to some extent, in the sport sector with regard to the possibilities sport can offer for this youth group. Also, (local) sport policy makers have begun to consider immigrant youth as a specific target group (De Knop et al., 1996) and in an increasingly number of Flemish communities specific 'neighbourhood sport' initiatives are being organised to promote youth sport participation in socially deprived urban areas (Theeboom, 2003).

³⁷ This refers to the connection within a group (i.e., group identification, loyalty and homogeneity) (Putnam, 2000).

³⁸ This refers to social relations with other groups. Within the social capital-approach, sport is considered to be a multicultural arena of co-operation and rivalry between people. This arena gives the opportunity to have meaningful encounters, which can be transformed into social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Method

Despite of the variety of initiatives that has been set up by various organisations in Flanders, only a limited amount of empirical data are available regarding the relationship between ethnic minorities and sport. For example, data are scarce with regard to the compatibility of western organised sport practice for Islamic immigrant youth in general and females in particular (e.g., there is a lower organised sport participation degree of ethnic minority youth in general in comparison with Flemish youth) (De Knop et al., 1996). According to De Knop (1999), often in practice the emphasis is on the 'structural' dimension of integration, which focuses on participation, while other dimensions of integration stressing the 'socio-cultural' and 'socio-affective' aspects receive little attention (e.g., 'mixed' friendships and reciprocal respect) (Bröskamp, 1994 in De Knop, 1999). However, according to Putnam (2000), these other dimensions are considered to be important for the development of social capital.

A study was set up to determine whether and to what extent ethnic minorities establish social contacts and relations in and through sport involvement and what value they attach to this in and outside the context of sport. Through the use of participation observation, athletes of ethnic minority origin involved in mixed or separate sport organisations were questioned and observed. In total, 39 personal histories were collected, involving 15 males and 24 females with Turkish or Moroccan nationality between the age of 18 and 30 years. The participations took place in 7 sport initiatives in Flanders and the Brussels Capital Region including different context such as organised sport (e.g., sport club; N= 5), commercialised sport (e.g., fitness centre; N= 1) and unorganised sport (e.g., street experiences; N= 1).

Results and discussion

Data have shown that, among other things, a number of participants explicitly prefer to be involved in separate ('segregated') sport initiatives, thereby stressing the importance of a distinct association with elements of their own ethnic culture (e.g., language, religion), while others regard such a separate context as less essential for their cultural identity. Also, according to most of the subjects of this study, social skills that are acquired through their sports involvement can be transferred to other context outside sport. Often, reference here is made to the educational value of sports participation. This study also appears to provide some evidence for the fact that organised sport is perceived by participants as an important means for the development of relationships and for social integration (Seippel, 2002 and Zeijl, 2002 in Breedveld & van der Meulen, 2003). Data also appear to provide support for the assumption that more trust (and consequently, social capital) is generated from formal rather than informal social contacts (Uslaner, 1999 and Coffé & Vandeweyer, 2002 in Breedveld & van der Meulen, 2003).

This study, using a qualitative methodology, can be regarded as the first phase of a larger project which examines whether and to what extent ethnic minorities generate social capital for the development of bonding and bridging social capital by sport participation in different contexts, namely organised, commercialised and unorganised sport, and what this means for the social integration and social cohesion of a multicultural society. Further research consists of in-depth interviews, case-studies, surveys and questionnaires, as data collection techniques.

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