

# SPORT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES

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## Context

It is indicated that some current social developments are connected with the decline of social cohesion (e.g., Komter et al, 2000). In this context there is also reference to the ethnic and cultural diversity of modern society (Gowricharn, 2003). Recently, also in Flanders, sport is considered to be valuable for improving social cohesion. It is assumed that sport participation can contribute to the development of social capital, which is often used as a synonym of social cohesion. Although no explicit definition of social capital exists, the emphasis is often on the structure (social networks) as well as on the quality of social relations (reciprocity and trust – see Putnam, 2000; van Deth, 2003). According to Putnam, sport involvement ‘constrains’ people to cooperate and (mainly) team sports can result in more face-to-face interactions. Moreover, it is presumed that sport can contribute to ‘bridging’ social groups (like ethnic minorities and native citizens) and that social capital, developed through sport, can be generated outside the sport context as well (Putnam, 2000). In particular, sport involvement in sport associations is regarded as meaningful for developing social capital, due to, among others, the permanence of social relations among members, reciprocity by volunteering. Breedveld and van der Meulen (2002) indicated that people involved in sport associations have more (general) trust than those involved in unorganized sport and sport inactive people.

However, research on the supposed relation between participation in sport associations and the development of social capital is ambiguous and, particularly in Flanders, restricted. Moreover, despite the fact that sport has become accessible to people of all social backgrounds and ethnic origins, not all citizens in Flanders have the same opportunities to participate in sport, in particular in organised sport. Recent sport participation studies point to the lower participation of certain groups, according to ethnicity, race, social class, age. Many immigrants, in particular female immigrants, (still) cannot participate in organised sport due to many (financial, cultural) thresholds, and as a result, they are often involved in other contexts (commercialised sport) and informal initiatives (‘street experiences’), as well as in sport activities organised by the youth welfare and/or educational sectors. Thus, it is crucial to study whether and under what conditions sport involvement in different contexts (organised, informal sport) can contribute to developing social capital, and what this means for social cohesion in multicultural society.

## Methods

In the pilot study, participation observation (during approximately 6 months) was used to analyse the development of social capital among athletes of ethnic minority origin. Next, in-depth interviews (N=39) were taken, from which 39 personal histories were constructed, involving 15 men and 24 women with Turkish or Moroccan nationality, aged between 18 and 30 years. The participations took place in 7 sport initiatives in Flanders and the Brussels Capital Region including different contexts (organised, commercialised and unorganised sport). Also, written semi-structured questionnaires were taken at 20 sport initiatives, involving immigrant men (N=200) and women (N=120). Putnam’s theory of social capital (2000) and critical reflection on it, is used as a conceptual framework for the empirical study.

## Results

Results indicated that, among other things, immigrant women changed their membership in a sport initiative less often than men. Moreover, women seemed to have more social (and cultural) motives for participating in a particular initiative. A number of participants, especially women, explicitly preferred 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 regarded such a separate context as less essential for their cultural identity. With regard to social networks, results have indicated that immigrant women and men mentioned having personal contacts with other members on a regular basis. Sometimes, mainly among immigrant women, these contacts also took place outside a sport context. According to most of the subjects in this study, social skills

that were acquired through their sport involvement can be transferred to other contexts outside sport. Often, reference here was made to the educational value of sport participation.

### **Discussion/implications**

Results of the pilot study have shown that sport participation and involvement can provide opportunities to develop and maintain social capital. Despite differences between individuals, sport appears to contribute to the development of networks and creates opportunities for the exchange of (communicative, social) skills. It is indicated that the relationship between sport participation and the development of social capital is connected with certain characteristics of the particular sport initiative where immigrants were involved. Hereby can be referred to, among others, the presence of a meeting place, the frequency and regularity of presence of members. Thus, it can be assumed that more (meaningful) interaction between people can lead to more social capital (see also Coleman, 1990).

The next phase of this research will consist of determining under what conditions sport participation can contribute to the development and maintenance of social capital. Participation observation, case studies as well as in-depth interviews will be used as data collection techniques.

### **References**

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