

Are Sports A Panacea For Integration? An Exploratory Study Of Refugees Joining Traditional German Soccer Clubs And Their Integration

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In the past few years hundreds of thousands of refugees have come to Germany in order to flee from conflict and war. The countries of origin of many of these people, such as Syria or Afghanistan, have a rather large cultural distance between their and German values, beliefs and norms. Hence, their integration into German society caused major controversies in politics and the media.

In the meantime, many of these refugees have joined over 3,000 rather traditional German sports clubs to play soccer (Egidius-Braun-Stiftung, 2016). As research has shown, sports have a huge potential to support integration, if necessary (pre)conditions are met (Stura & Johnston, 2014). However, it remains unknown if and how it actually works out in the current situation. Hence, this study aimed to investigate if and how these refugees get integrated into the club community and, eventually, into German society. The study focused especially on the potential supporting factors as well as those that hinder their integration.

Methods

This exploratory study used semi-structured interviews with 35 refugees as well as 32 professional as well as voluntary staff members in 15 clubs. The clubs were chosen based on club size (diverse numbers of memberships), numbers of refugees as well as the geographic location (urban as well as rural). To analyze the data, a mixed methods approach was used with a deductive and inductive approach.

Results (excerpt)

The majority of club members and refugees stated that their engagement supported the refugees' integration into club life and society. The biggest challenge was the language difficulties, even though their German proficiency level was very diverse. Some mentioned that they communicate in English, French or by using hands. In addition, this study has shown that including the refugees in teams that had at least one player from similar cultural background supported their integration. It helped the refugees getting to know their team members better and, eventually, supported a smooth integration into the team. This finding seems to support previous studies (Cunningham, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Stura & Johnston, 2014). As they have shown, getting to know each other on a personal basis helps to remove bias and prejudice and supports integration. However, most club members claimed that it is only possible with a small number of refugees.

One of the main challenges club members reported referred to cultural differences, usually religious ones that are reflected in the clubs daily life. Most clubs respect these differences on the one hand; on the other hand they implied the danger for potential tensions. Hence, once reserved feelings on both sides get reduced, people should address how to handle those differences in order to avoid misunderstandings, conflicts and cultural separation.

Another main challenge referred to difficulties during competitions — especially in rural areas. Some of the refugee players were confronted with racist comments by several rival clubs or their fans. However, while most referees did not respond, the clubs where the refugees' were members, made efforts to protect their players and reported these instances to the Bavarian soccer confederation.

Finally, even though refugees and club members reported several challenges, the majority stressed that refugees should be integrated into sports clubs as soon as they arrive in Germany since it provides a tremendous support in terms of their integration into society.

References

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