

Being Part of a Club Community – Sport and Belonging? A Study of Refugees' Integration in Austrian Sports Clubs

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Introduction and Aim

Between 2014 and 2016, hundreds of thousands of refugees have come to Austria in order to flee from conflict or due to economic reasons. The countries of origin of many of these refugees, such as Syria or Afghanistan, tend to have a rather large cultural distance between their and Austrian values, beliefs and norms. In addition, many refugees experienced traumas in their home country or during their flights. Both factors were found to lead to rather poor integration (Berry, 2016). However, in the meantime, many of these refugees have joined sports clubs. As research has shown, sports have a huge potential to support integration, if necessary (pre)conditions are met (Stura & Johnston, 2014). While the German club system has a formal program funded by the federal government, assisting the clubs in integration activities and evaluating their impact, the Austrian sport system does not. Since it remains unknown if and how sports currently contributes to immigration in Austria, this study explores which factors significantly contribute which factors are significant barriers to their integration into the club community and, eventually, into society.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In this study, integration is conceptualized in accordance to Berry (2016), emphasizing that integration is a dynamic two-way process for both: the immigrants and the citizens of the host culture learn from each other and take on aspects of each other's' culture. An individual is perceived as integrated when he/she embraces interethnic relations and when he/she enjoys acceptance by the larger host society.

While a larger cultural distance as well as trauma or conflict tend to lead to poor integration (Berry, 2016), sport activities have been found to reduce social and cultural barriers, to support interethnic contact and integration (Stura & Johnston, 2014). As such, sport activities may be primary sites for immigrants and local citizens to connect (Vancouver Foundation, 2012). However, Krouwel et al. (2006) reported that sport participation, especially in soccer with its competitive and physical nature, may sharpen ethnic controversy.

Main criteria leading to integration refer to team cohesion, spending time with teammates both inside and outside of the sports environment or the *frequency* of participation or conflicts in and outside sports (Morela et al., 2013).

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study used a quantitative, deductive approach. An online survey was designed based on previous studies on sport and immigration, such as the findings of a qualitative, exploratory study with soccer clubs that used interviews with refugees and host culture club members. In this study, the research question was operationalized by assessing identification and personal identity perceptions, personal social networks and the degree to which they are involved in activities with members of the host culture. The survey is still open for host country national amateur sport club members and refugees actively engaged in sports, aiming for a sample of 400 participants involved in all kinds of sports, comparing the perspective of refugees and

Austrian club members. Data analysis will be conducted with SPSS; methods include regression analysis.

Expected Results

Based on previous studies, the author expects to find a significant relationship between the refugees' engagement in the club and their integration into Austrian club life and society. Encountered barriers may mainly relate to communication difficulties. In dealing with these, other already integrated members from a similar cultural background may be crucial (Cunningham, 2010).

In addition to social ramifications, the team as a primary group may potentially have a powerful influence on an individual's identity negotiation during the integration process. Since adapting to a different culture is very complex, primary groups play an important role throughout this process, helping the refugee to negotiate the social and physical environment (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). Consequently, the team's influence on the foreign athlete's successful socialization into the new culture may be crucial.

For those refugees who came to Austria without family, this study may reveal that their sports teams can become their primary group, a role that is mostly ascribed to the individual's family (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). The teammates and leadership may substitute for the role of the family by serving friendship and emotional support. And finally, the study may reveal needs for training in order to further facilitate the integration process.

Conclusion and Implications

As no systematic structures of how sports may support integration seem to be currently available in the current situation in Austria, this study's findings benefit the refugees and the larger society. Since the Austrian sport system does not have a formal program assisting clubs in integration activities and evaluating their impact, this study may be of crucial importance in identifying difficulties and the factors necessary for a successful integration through sports. Ultimately, understanding this process will help to facilitate a smooth integration experience by tailoring sports activities accordingly.

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