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Managing Cultural Diversity in Commercial Fitness Centers: Analysing Integrative and Disintegrative Practices

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Aim

There is evidence that participation in sport and physical activity can make a significant contribution to the integration of broad sections of the population by promoting intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. A field of sport, which enjoys huge recognition in German society in recent years are commercial fitness centers. Nowadays they have become attractive to a broad and diverse group of people (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). Yet, commercial fitness centers got little attention in research on social integration, although integrative effects certainly exist (e.g., Bakken-Ulseth, 2004; Kleindienst-Cachay et al., 2012). On the sport political agenda fitness centers are considered as less important (in contrast to sport clubs) in regard to desirable integrative benefits within a community, region, or society to increase public welfare. Reasons are seen in the nature of fitness centers mostly as profit oriented organisations, in which social integration and management of diversity becomes only of practical relevance as it can be instrumentalised for achieving profit targets. This study aims to make a conceptual as well as an empirical contribution in the research field of commercial fitness sport by analysing top-down and self-reinforced integrative and disintegrative practices when dealing with cultural diversity.

Theoretical Background

The overall assumed integrative function of sport across social borders is challenged by commercialization trends in sports and health, which bring a market logic into a social field of life. As a frame of reference, multiple logics enable and determine agency in organisations by shaping the focus of attention as well as the perception of actors and in result determine developing organisational practices (Thornton et al., 2012). For understanding the dominant logics in the institutional field of commercial fitness centers and how they shape the practices in handling cultural diversity, the institutional logics perspective is used as theoretical approach (Thornton et al., 2012). In order to get a deeper look into the dynamics of evolving interaction and practices of different involved people (migrants and non-migrants) in an intercultural setting, elements of figuration sociology (Elias & Scotson, 1993) are considered as well. Figurations as interdependent networks of relationships create characteristic attributes through categorization processes, which can unfold integrating as well as disintegrating effects, which will be explored in the context of commercial fitness centers within this study.

Method

The present study is designed as an ethnographic field study, conducted in a low-cost fitness center with the aim, to accompany gym members and staff in their everyday lives/practices. Qualitative data was collected from December 2017 to June 2018 by participatory

observations and problem-centered interviews with management, staff and member representatives of one single fitness center to investigate the field of research more deeply and from inside out. The interview sample consists of 10 male and 10 female interview partners from different countries of origin, spread over Europe, Asia and Africa. Additionally data was collected in 50 observations in three time phases. Main criteria for choosing the fitness center were the low cost politic, along with an integrative strategy for attracting a wide range of cultural diversity of the members. For data interpretation, the method of objective hermeneutics is used to capture action-generating sense structures.

Findings

Data collection and analysis is still work in progress. First findings, considering field notes of observations and interviews, reveal that intercultural figurations in commercial fitness centers are characterised by processes of inclusion as well as exclusion depending on the operating institutional logics, which are carried into the social field by the actors. It can be emphasised that organisational practices in commercial fitness centers develop according to this reference frame top-down from a management controlled perspective and bottom-up (organic) from self-reinforcing tendencies. However, integration in commercial fitness centers runs unconsciously, neither the management nor the members themselves have the primary goal of developing social contacts. Interaction between members is voluntary and not necessary for the purpose of the training. Nevertheless, there are integrative effects in the context of memberships in commercial fitness centers. The informal atmosphere and the identification of members with common sport goals and habits, along with an inclusive environment supported by management activities, promote social exchange across cultural borders. It should be mentioned here that cross-border interaction does not exclusively concern the category of ethnicity. Integrative and disintegrative practices, taking into account the findings of intersectionality research, also run along other differentiating social categories, such as gender and age, which are also relevant in the context of commercial fitness studios (Gieß-Stüber et al., 2015; Rulofs & Dahmen, 2010).

Conclusion

The present study provides valuable and more deeply insights in the specific organisational practices that represent in- and exclusion of members with different cultural background in commercial fitness centers in the context of different institutional logics. The findings contribute to gain relevant knowledge for managing cultural diversity in fitness centers.

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