

Ethnic Immigrants and Elite Sports Participation. The Education System and the Present Situation in Greece and its Neighbors Countries

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ABSTRACT

Although research in the area of immigrants and their physical activity patterns has been steadily growing, there is still much to learn. The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers, facilitators and motivators facing recent ethnic immigrants as they relate to involvement in coaching youth sport. The quantitative information presented in the first article of this series served as a framework for conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with 28 immigrant youth-sport coaches. Results of these interviews support the notion that there are two distinct groups of immigrant coaches - the 'leisure-oriented coach' (those without coaching occupational aspirations) and the 'career-oriented coach' (those with coaching occupational pursuits). Despite sharing several of the same barriers, facilitators and motivators, each group showed marked divergence from the other on a number of aspects in each of these three categories. Sport participation is one way in which immigrants interact with established and long-term community residents. This involvement has the potential for facilitating immigrants' sense of inclusion and belonging in their new communities, and for long-term residents to learn the traditional cultural practices of immigrants, which may differ from those of the dominant groups. This study also explores the involvement of immigrants in sports in two ways: first, how immigrants experience the sport delivery system and, second, how volunteer and paid coaches and sport officials address the needs of immigrants who want to participate in sports. The education system in Greece today, provides or not recommendations for how sport, recreation and leisure policies may play a significant role in facilitating the social inclusion of all ethnic minority immigrants in local communities across the country.

Keywords: *immigrants, education, elite sports, recreation and leisure policies*

INTRODUCTION

1. IMMIGRANTS PRESENT SITUATION IN EU COUNTRIES

Throughout the 20th century, immigration has become a mainstay in population growth and renewal for many Western nations (Europe, USA and Canada). For example, immigrants now account for over 12 % of the entire population in many European countries and have dramatically changed the composition of their culture and society. Post-arrival, immigrants often create distinct communities in terms of their cultural and social norms, family structure, as well as recreational and sport participation patterns. It is well documented that ethnic and racial background

influences a variety of issues related to sport, leisure and recreational behavior. Considerable differences from the mainstream population have been observed in terms of preference for and participation in recreational sport among ethnic minority groups. For example, Verma and Darby found significant differences between Anglo-Americans and seven immigrant groups in terms of their participation rates in sporting activities. Stodolska suggested that even when observable changes in leisure participation are evident following arrival, the recreational behavior of immigrants is still influenced by the values and customs of their native country. This may be due to the fact that traditional leisure activities can provide comfort and a sense of security in helping immigrants to cope with the often traumatic adaptation process.

Many theories have been put forth to account for the observed cultural differences in leisure behavior. According to marginality theory, unequal access to and distribution of resources, poverty, and discrimination account for differences in leisure participation. Using qualitative interview techniques, Juniu found support for this socio-economic hypothesis. Ethnicity theory, on the other hand, claims that it is primarily the values and belief systems of immigrants themselves that account for differences in participation rates.

Adherence to certain cultural practices and religious beliefs may significantly affect people's leisure participation. For example, the Islamic faith places certain restrictions on crossgender interactions as well as dress for female participants, which may hinder involvement in co-ed recreational activities that are common in many Western countries. The South Asian culture also maintains different expectations and societal roles for men and women, placing considerable limitations on women's ability to partake in leisure activities, thereby contributing to higher inactivity rates. Yu and Berryman also found that Chinese immigrant youth were more likely to participate in indoor activities such as reading or watching television than in sports or other outdoor activities. Finally, acculturation/assimilation theory refers to the acquisition of the dominant group's social norms. It provides a conceptual framework for understanding how well immigrants are 'fitting in' to their new country and is purported to correlate with physical activity participation rates among various ethnic groups. Stodolska showed that immigrants' perception of various constraints on leisure changes with respect to their level of assimilation. The economic standing of immigrants will ultimately influence their participation in recreation-based and sport-related activities. Since immigrants often come to a new country for economic opportunities, they tend to work long hours, forgoing recreation as a pastime. Since newly arrived immigrants are more likely to be employed in occupations with irregular work schedules, their time for organized/structured recreation activities is limited. Russel and Stage showed that many recently arrived immigrants perceive leisure as an unnecessary luxury, because high unemployment rates and financial instability are of primary concern. The reported absence of old friends and extended family severely hampered both the quantity and quality of immigrants' leisure participation. These over-arching barriers resonate among most immigrants and have been noted in many studies across a variety of ethnic and cultural groups. However, it is also important to recognize that constraints are often symbolically constructed within an environment that defines which activities are socially acceptable. Thus, factors that appear to constrain individuals may not actually be perceived as barriers by the individuals themselves. It is clear, however, that when economic, social, or informational constraints to participation are removed, the participation of immigrants in leisure and recreation activities increases correspondingly. While some investigations show that recreation serves as an important factor in the acculturation process, other studies have shown that members of minority groups participate in recreational sporting activities to maintain or revive their ethnic identity. Positive leisure experiences have been linked to identity formation and social inclusion. However, immigrants who experience discrimination during the acculturation process (in public areas like pools, parks and restaurants) are less likely to engage in subsequent public recreation. Further research is needed to better understand the complexity of immigrant sport participation. It is not only important to understand whether immigrants acclimate to a new mainstream culture, and how they acclimate, but also to understand the specific activities that they undertake and the social contexts in which they immerse themselves to connect with the new mainstream community.

1.1 THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION OF MIGRANTS AND ETHNIC MINORITIES IN 15 EU MEMBER STATES

The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), recently published results on the following questions:

1. Are there equal chances for all ethnic groups in the EU Member States' educational institutions or do migrants and ethnic minorities experience inequality and discrimination?
2. What do we know about minorities' educational achievements and is it feasible to make comparisons between different countries on this issue?

The study highlights dissimilarities between the EU Member States regarding their ethnic composition and their different methods of data collection and illustrates that there is a lack of significant current data, which limits the

development of objective, reliable, and comparable information on these topics. The main difficulties regarding comparability across countries evolve from the fact that in the EU Member States there are:

Different types of ethnic minority groups;

Different terms and categories that are used for collecting data on migrants and ethnic minorities in the field of education;

Differences regarding the availability of data; Different educational systems.

Minority groups in the Member States vary in ethnicity, size, and status. While the absolute increase of school enrolment of migrants and minorities depends on immigration, some countries with little new immigration still show a relative increase of these groups among the school population, which in part is caused by lower birth rates among the majority populations. Depending on each country's specific situation, there are also indigenous groups or different national, autochthonous or linguistic minorities that have lived in the respective countries or specific territories for centuries.

Thus, among the different types of ethnic minority groups in the EU Member States are:

Indigenous groups

National, autochthonous or linguistic minorities (e.g. Roma, who live in many countries);

Ethnic minorities from former colonies (e.g. minority groups from North African countries in France or from Asian countries in the UK and the Netherlands);

Labour migrants and descendants (e.g. from Turkey, and former Yugoslavia);

Refugees and asylum-seekers (from various countries depending on regional conflicts and political turmoil);

Repatriated groups or returned migrants (e.g. in Greece or Portugal).

All the countries of the EU use different terms and categories for collecting data on migrants and ethnic minorities in the field of education. These criteria effect how data is collected for educational enrolment or achievement and determine who receives what kind of services. Most countries distinguish students according to citizenship or nationality. These countries are Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, and Spain. Collecting data according to these categories has the result that naturalized citizens or members of the second or third generation with a foreign background, who were granted citizenship at birth, no longer are recorded separately from the countries' majority group. As a consequence, depending on each country's situation, a smaller or larger group of students with a foreign background "disappears" from the statistics

1.2 EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Another circumstance is the fact that education systems in the EU Member States vary considerably. There are countries where schooling starts at age four and others where it starts at age seven. In some countries, students transfer to different school types after four years of primary school, while in others basic comprehensive schooling lasts nine years. Depending on each country's school system, aggregate data on migrants and ethnic minorities exists for a different number of years of consecutive schooling. They found that this was the best way to teach these young students.

2. INCLUDING IMMIGRANTS IN ELITE AND RECREATIONAL SPORTS: THE EXPERIENCES OF ATHLETES, SPORT PROVIDERS AND IMMIGRANTS

The problem is compounded by the fact that many immigrants choose host communities in which to settle based on the availability of friends and family members who can support them (Evernden, 2008). Sport participation may be one way for immigrants to establish connections with people in the place where they settle, by developing friendships and a sense of inclusion in their new community. The recruitment, settlement and integration processes associated with immigration impact social policies, including those associated with the delivery of sport and leisure activities. Multiculturalism is relatively well understood and accepted as a philosophical and policy framework, but it provides little if any direct guidance for service providers to follow to ensure it is operationalized (Li, 2008; Reitz & Banerjee, 2006).

2.1 MULTICULTURALISM AND SPORTS

Multiculturalism is a policy framework, described as an appreciation and tolerance of differences

and acceptance of diversity and the language, customs and identities of ethnic groups (Graham & Phillips, 2006). As greater numbers of ethnic minorities arrive in Greece, mainly across the Turkish borders, the sport preferences and traditions they bring with them from diverse countries will impact how sports and other recreational activities are delivered. As a result, there is a need to develop and enforce policies that encourage immigrants to partake in sports and coaching (Paraschak & Tirone, 2008). Limiting and attributing newcomers' settlement struggles to such personal characteristics as language barriers and lower levels of education and/or work experience is insufficient. This fails to acknowledge the societal factors that impact immigrants' settlement opportunities (Reitz & Banerjee, 2006). In the near past (Athens Olympic Games 2004), newcomers tended to recover economically approximately one decade after migrating, and by that point in their lives, they had similar incomes to Greek born citizens. However, since the 1990s, immigrants have fared very poorly in this regard and are significantly more likely to live in poverty compared with immigrants of previous generations even though they are more highly educated than those who arrived before the 1990s.

2.2 SPORT PARTICIPATION, IMMIGRANT AND POLICY

Many municipal recreation departments have subsidy policies intended to facilitate the involvement of people in low-income families. Also, provincial and municipal policies often promote the inclusion of girls and women, people with disabilities, etc. However, some members of these groups remain underrepresented in sports because they have little or no discretionary income and they continue to experience difficulties overcoming barriers related to transportation, skill acquisition, body image, mental and physical health and child care (Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997). As well, discrimination, cultural differences, lack of familiarity with the Western countries sport system and language barriers are known to pose challenges for newcomers who may want to engage in sport (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Paraschak & Tirone, 2008). We recognize that sport, recreation and leisure opportunities are uniquely positioned to provide minority ethnic immigrants with rich experiences that could potentially contribute to enhancing their sense of belonging in a new community. This study provided us with an opportunity to explore how immigrants experienced the EU sport system and mainly in Greece from several viewpoints. These ranged from the perspectives of the immigrants, to the people who provide support to immigrants, to those who volunteer or work in the sport delivery system. Our theoretical framework draws upon cultural pluralism, a notion that is at the centre of Hellenic multiculturalism policy. Within this policy framework, Greece formally recognizes and supports citizens and immigrants in sustaining their traditional cultural practices when that is something they wish to do. We also recognized that immigrants and people who identify with diverse ethnic groups are motivated to participate in sports for many reasons and in many different contexts. They may see sport as an opportunity to meet neighbors, develop friendships and for fun. Some immigrants pursue sports as a way to connect with their ethnic community, or as a family recreational activity. We consider that, in these situations, their sport participation is often leisure, defined here as experience that enhances well-being and involves a degree of choice and freedom. The developmental nature of this activity has an obligatory component in that participation in family and ethnic community activity is essential for solidifying group ties. We also recognize that some immigrants participate in sports at the elite level as athletes and as coaches, or as administrators in the sport and recreation system. For some of these immigrants, sport participation may be their main paid job, and as such, they are providers of sport and leisure experiences for the participants they serve and for spectators.

3. FINDINGS

Three patterns or major themes relevant to this discussion were evident in the data: levels of involvement; benefits of, and barriers to, inclusion; and responsibility for inclusion. Within each of these themes, we explain the range of ideas and thoughts that pertain to each one.

3.1 LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

Our findings indicate that immigrants had a variety of interests in sports when they arrived in Greece, ranging from wanting to participate at the recreational level to expectations around wanting to participate at the elite level. However, sport organizers did not seem to have a clear understanding of the breadth of their interests.

Some immigrants explained that when they arrived in Greece, they thought their experience and expertise gained in their home countries would be recognized and that they would be able to participate at the same level as they had participated before immigration. However, some were disappointed because this was not the case and they were unable to enter the local system with relative ease or at a level that satisfied their interests:

The frustration experienced by some immigrants as they began to investigate ways to become involved in sports in Greece (and then in the rest EU countries) was evident in our findings.

In contrast, some participants in our study felt that the sport system was flexible enough to make special accommodations for new immigrants when the newcomers were recognized as elite coaches and athletes. For example, when those who compete at international and Olympic levels arrive in Greece, sport officials and leagues facilitate their entry into specific sports. However, athletes who are not known as elites have more difficulty accessing our sport system:

Unless you're good; and if you're good then the grapevine is like that; he's from so and so and he's really, really good, the next thing you know he's in a club and he's in a provincial program.

One way in which new immigrants were able to engage in sports was within their ethnic communities. These opportunities were often easier for them to find upon arrival in a new community where chain migration had already occurred and where newcomers had an ethnic group or association to welcome them. Sometimes ethnic sport clubs provided opportunities to recreate with individuals who shared the same values and traditional cultural practices as well as sport cultures

3.2 BENEFITS OF, AND BARRIERS TO, INCLUSION

Our findings support the notion that sport administrators and organizations recognize how sport benefits new immigrants. However, the people in our study who had experienced the sport system as immigrants told us of many problems they encountered when they were seeking ways to participate. In this section, we discuss the benefit of sport participation for immigrants, the barriers faced by immigrants as they attempt to access sport and the different perceptions people have about sport participation based on cultural beliefs. We also focus on the experiences of newcomers who participated in sports and those who are in positions to facilitate that involvement because of their roles as organizers and administrators. Our findings illustrated the multilayered benefits of this involvement and the complexity of issues associated with the inclusion of newcomers in organized sport.

As well, the participants readily recognized the benefits of such endeavors and how inclusion builds community understanding and draws upon strengths and talents of people who have different skills and different backgrounds.

However, we recognized that participants within our study did not have a unified approach or common understanding of how newcomers' needs may be met, nor did they have a clear idea of where the responsibility lies for ensuring inclusion.

Although Greece has embraced the ideals of multiculturalism, this study demonstrated that the tenets of this philosophical framework have not been operationalized in ways that extend into the front ranks of this part of the sport delivery system leaving providers with no clear understanding of how it can ensure inclusion. As well, newcomers and minority groups understand that multiculturalism ensures their inclusion, but it provides them with no direction for how they may claim a place in the sport system.

4. CASE STUDY

The purpose of the present investigation was to derive a profile of immigrant youth sport coaches. We recognize that engagement in sport and, more specifically, coaching are ways in which immigrants can potentially connect with their community. Given the well-documented effects of ethnicity and immigration on leisure and recreational participation, the absence of information on how to successfully engage immigrant coaches, and the relative underrepresentation of immigrants in youth-sport coaching ranks, this area is in need of investigation. In order to better understand the immigrant youth-sport coaching experience, this investigation utilized a quantitative retrospective interview measure to examine the coaching activities and sport/recreational experiences of immigrant youth-sport coaches. Despite several common characteristics, it appears that immigrant youth-sport coaches are represented by two distinct profiles: those with coaching experience prior to immigration and those without. These distinct profiles were evidenced by group differences on a number of demographic and sport experience-related characteristics.

Coaches in our sample who did not begin coaching until after immigration were very similar to the general profile of naturalized Western youth-sport coaches. Like naturalized Western coaches, these immigrant coaches reported some past experience of playing the sport they now coach, though not necessarily at the elite level. As well, a slightly greater proportion of these immigrant coaches reported having a post-secondary degree (in any discipline) than naturalized Western coaches. Given the high prevalence of coaching their own children, shared with naturalized Western coaches who report their own children's participation as a main reason for their involvement in coaching, immigrant coaches in this group might be considered leisure-oriented coaches. Of immigrants without coaching experience prior to immigration, perhaps it is only those who eventually become comfortable within mainstream society who becomes involved in coaching youth sport. Such a conclusion is supported by the fact that coaches in our sample most often reported working in a white-collar occupation and were commonly involved in at least one other volunteer activity beyond coaching.

Those in our sample who had coached prior to immigration represented a very different profile. In general, these coaches were highly qualified. Most had been elite-level athletes and commonly reported a sport-related, post-secondary degree. In a sense, they were overqualified for their current positions coaching youth sport in comparison to the qualifications of naturalized Western coaches at the same level, as they often served in a volunteer capacity at the recreational level.

5. RESULTS

The findings of the current study shed preliminary light on the nature of coaching involvement for immigrants, which has received little previous empirical attention. More generally, it addresses a gap in our knowledge of the larger field of youth-sport coaching as well as the leisure and recreational practices of immigrants. Two distinct profiles of immigrant coaches emerged: leisure-oriented coaches and career-oriented coaches. The recognition of these two profiles has potential implications for both research and applied practice.

Based on the findings of the present study, future research would do well to expand investigation of immigrant coaching practices and experiences beyond the realm of youth sport. Given the different profiles for leisure-oriented and career-oriented coaches, separate recruitment strategies targeted specifically at each group may be warranted. Based on the profile for leisure-oriented coaches, the greatest room for increasing the numbers involved in coaching lies in targeting less acculturated immigrants, and helping them to feel comfortable and valued within youth sport systems in their adopted country. For career-oriented coaches, their inability to obtain coaching positions at the level for which they are qualified is perhaps the most pressing concern. Thus, some form of recognition of foreign coaching credentials or a readily accessible process to determine certification equivalency might address the downgrading issue and subsequent frustration experienced by many of these coaches.

This quantitative study aimed to provide a profile of immigrant coaches by outlining a number of characteristics and sport experiences typical of this group.

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