Integrating a New Culture: Does Sport Participation Affect Korean Immigrants' Acculturation into the US Culture?

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Poster

Immigration is a phenomenon that affects most nations around the globe. The volume of international migrations appears to be growing, for instance, the number of immigrants who live in the United States has tripled during the last twenty years and is now approaching thirty million or ten percent of the American population (U.S. Census, 2000). Various fields such as anthropology, demography, economics, political science, sociology have studied immigrants (Berry, 2001), yet there have been few studies of immigrants in the areas of sport and leisure. The salience and ubiquity of sport in American culture suggests its potential importance to the acculturation process of immigrant groups. Among the various domains of immigration, acculturation is important to immigrants' adaptation to the new culture. Participation in the host culture's traditional sport and recreation opportunities can provide a useful new vector of acculturation, beyond that of work, family, and religious community. Yet we know little about the components of sport programs that might facilitate or impede participants' ability to acculturate. This study is an initial qualitative exploration of the place of sport in Korean immigrants' lives and the relationship of sport participation to their integration into American society. Specifically, this study 1) identified factors affecting immigrants' participation in sport, 2) identified the sport-related factors (from step 1) that affect immigrants' integration into the US culture, 3) and developed a conceptual framework to explain the potential of sport participation to facilitate and/or impede immigrants' acculturation processes.

A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to develop a conceptual framework to help explain the immigrants' sport participation and acculturation. Korean immigrants who periodically participated in sports for the last three years formed the sampling frame. Based on the selection criteria, 15 immigrants participated via in-depth interviews. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times after transcription to extract phrases, words, concepts, and meanings that were pertinent to the lived experience of participating in sport in U.S. as a Korean immigrant. Interviews were coded via open and axial coding procedures, and theoretical memos were used to record ideas about emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

Thirty-four themes conditions facilitating sport participation were identified in Step 1. Eight were related to physical and mental health: stress/anxiety release, fitness, health, sense of well-being, refreshment, aging, weight control, and low alcohol consumption. Six structural factors were identified: accessibility, tournament opportunities, facility, time, commitment to the organization, and cost. Four themes related to mastery/skill: physical ability, goal achievement, sense of competition, and skill development. Five themes related directly to immigrant life: confidence in daily life, no language problem, information for belongingness, significant others, friends, social interaction. Two related to family: escape from family problems and spend time with family. Other themes included: past sport experience in Korea, fun, sport media influences, and business networking. In addition, 12 themes describing impediments to participation were identified: time constraints, domestic issues, family event, child care, money, work, stress due to competition, frustration with motor skill, slow skill improvement, absence of partner, leaving of key members, and over-participation.

Step 2 we identified the sport-related factors which they felt affected cultural integration. Nine facilitators and two impediments were identified. Sport participation was described as facilitating cultural integration via benefits provided through the sport experience such as: creation of a place to obtain and share information, reduction of pressure and obsession, increased self confidence at the workplace, reduced fear of Americans, understanding of host society's culture, stress release and refreshment for work, friendships with colleagues, psychological stability, and enhanced social networking. Intervening conditions identified were less concentration at work and more stress due to pressure to improve skills.

A conceptual model was developed in Step 3. The model attempts to link the concepts facilitating and impeding immigrants' sport participation to those facilitating and impeding acculturation. These findings suggest that sport's impact on immigrants' acculturation, at least in this instance, is more complex than first thought. Theories of acculturation have suggested that
interactions between immigrants and members of the host culture through shared participation in sport would be a key element in effective acculturation through sport. Yet, this study shows that sport participation with fellow immigrants can also facilitate acculturation. Not, as one would expect, through interactions with the host culture, but by providing a safe outlet for the stress inherent in being a foreigner at work - particularly given the language barriers faced by many Korean immigrants. The information, support, and confidence built via participation in sport with other Koreans was repeatedly described as enhancing respondents' confidence, and mental stability to make their lives feel more enjoyable and create a more positive outlook. Thus, interactions with the host culture occur more easily and more readily for sport participants.