Conceptualization of the International Students Sport Participation Scale

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Abstract 2009-171

May 30, 2009
3:00 PM (Poster)
Lexington/Carolina Prefunction

For many individuals, their sport participation is motivated by a desire to be a part of a cohesive group and internalize feelings of belonging. Some participants may only consider the health benefits when engaging in sport, however; the experience is often intrinsically connected to the participant’s identity and self-concept (Li & Anderson, 2008). Globalization has led large numbers of foreign nationals to seek educational opportunities in the United States. It is important that these students are provided opportunities for socialization, maintenance of cultural identity and assimilation through sport. Recreational sports on college campuses can serve a multi-dimensional role for international students. Some international students may utilize sport to retain a sense of their homeland by engaging in a familiar recreational activity. This also provides opportunities to socialize with other international students with the same or similar cultural background. Also, there may be some international students who view sport participation as an opportunity for assimilating into their new surroundings and new culture. Participating in public activities alongside individuals of the dominant culture facilitates assimilation for individuals of the subordinate culture (Gordon, 1964). The purpose of this study is to develop a scale that will measure international student’s sport behavior with regards to socialization, maintenance of cultural identity and assimilation.

Bachay (1998) studied the children of Haitian immigrants in South Florida and indicated that many have decided to reject their native culture in order to assimilate into the American mainstream. It is interesting that soccer clubs remain a popular activity for Haitian adult males, but the sport is losing appeal among Haitian youth. The rejection of Haitian culture by the mainstream and their minority peers compels Haitian adolescents to disown their heritage and sports they enjoy as well as religious and cultural expressions that could reveal evidence of their Haitian background (Bachay). Many Haitian-American youth have adopted American football as their primary sport in order to gain acceptance. A research study carried out by Lee (2005) at a large Midwestern university in a city with a growing Korean American population utilized interviews to shed light on this group’s experiences with sport in the United States. Some Korean Americans displayed an internalized understanding of their status as illegitimate members of US society, unable to attain full acceptance (Lee). A female lacrosse player explained that she selected her sport as a way of challenging traditional stereotypes while allowing her to construct her own Asian American identity.

Numerous research studies have shown that soccer, the world’s most popular sport, is particularly important for maintaining the cultural identity of individuals from European countries (Boyle, 2000; McMenemy & Poulter, 2005).

The theoretical framework for the hypothesized model incorporates Durkheim (1960) and Mead’s (1934) theories on social solidarity, Blumer’s (1969) theory of symbolic interactionism, Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory, and Gordon’s (1964) theory of assimilation and sub-processes. The scale contains a total of 24 items with four factors: 1) ‘participate with same cultural background’, 2) ‘maintain cultural identity’, 3) ‘participate with different cultural background’, and 4) ‘assimilate into new culture’. The ‘participate with same cultural background’ factor is supported by theories of social solidarity. Sport can serve as the point of attachment that binds members of the group together. Symbolic interactionism is helpful for explaining the link between cultural identity and sport and supports the ‘maintain cultural identity’ factor. Sport participation can impact identity development and symbolically represent the individual and their cultural group. The ‘participate with different cultural background’ factor is supported by social exchange theory. Social exchange theory explains how sport participation can build trust between groups of people and suggests that the activity signifies something beyond a mere game or contest. Gordon’s theory of assimilation and sub-processes supports the ‘assimilate into new culture’ factor. Immigrants often substitute some of their heritage and behavior patterns for another in order to conform to the dominant culture. The scale also contains a demographic section as well as a section that allows the participant to rank their top three sports based on frequency of participation and top-three sports based on frequency of spectatorship. It is the researchers’ stance that both active sport participation and passive spectatorship provide opportunities for maintenance of cultural identity.

This research provides several implications for researchers, practitioners in recreational sport, and sport marketers. Thus far, there is no scale for assessing the cultural identity and sport participation behavior of international students. This information will enable recreational sport departments on American campuses to more effectively deliver their product to international students. This will also allow sport marketers to develop more effective segmentation strategies. More importantly, the scale was developed based on a well-developed theoretical framework derived from previous studies and established sociological theories.