A Grounded Theory of International Student Sport Participation Experience

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Introduction

The aim of the study is to explore sport participation experience of international students and develop a substantive theory by understanding the process of sport participation within their living and studying experiences in the United States. The number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States has increased to a record high of 623,805 in the 2007/08 academic year (Open Doors, 2008). Not only bring cultural enrichment, global understanding into university classroom (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004) international students also contribute over $15.5 billion to the U.S. economy in tuition and expenditure for living expense (Open Doors, 2008).

When international students enter the U.S. to start their collegiate life they will encounter a life transition and culture difference (Zhai, 2002) along with the challenges of adjustment to a different education system and host culture. The uprooting and acculturation stress put international students at a higher risk of developing mental health problems associate with the student role (Brown, 2008). As a result, over the past few decades a considerable number of studies have focused on identifying the challenges international students face and analyzing cause of these challenges (Zhai 2002; Hayden, 2003; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009) and focusing on how to facilitate and improve positive adjustment and learning experience for international students (Shigaki & Simth, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Olivas & Li, 2006).

"Culture shock" is commonly used by researchers to describe the time when an individual encounters a culture difference from their own. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as the "anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse". In order to ease the impact of culture shock, many research studies about immigrants have indicated that leisure activities like sports may provide an opportunity to help bridge the transition between the new country and the country of origin while also promoting health and well-being, retaining cultural identity, and adapting to new environment (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Heinonen, 1996; Juniu, 2000; Heinonen, 2005). In other word, immigrants often want to experience continuity with their past lives, use leisure to recreate ethno-cultural identity and, at the same time, facilitate "accommodation to the host culture" (Kim et al., 2001, p. 114). However, a majority of relative research has been made on the relationship between leisure behavior and immigrants, and little attention has been paid to the sport participation experience of international students and how this experience might influence their acculturation process. Although these two groups might have similar characteristics as new comers, the social-economic background and the purpose of coming to U.S. of are quite different. For example, immigrants come to U.S. for long-term living, but most international students come to U.S. just for short-term studying. Furthermore, different context like the “real life” setting for immigrants and the “school” setting for international students might generate a different impact on the transition shock for each group. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap by employing grounded theory methods to explore international students’ experience in sport participation and investigate the process of sport participation within their sojourn of studying and living in the U.S.

Methodology

Grounded theory is a method to discover a particular social process when little is known about the process or the explanation or support of current theory is not sufficient or satisfied. The primary objective of grounded theory, then, is to expand upon an explanation of a phenomenon by identifying the key elements of that phenomenon, and then categorizing the relationships of those elements to the context and process of the experiment (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, grounded theory allows us to explore the process of sport participation within international students’ sojourn of studying and living in the U.S.

Data sources and collection
In grounded theory, the initial source of data is determined by their contribution to the emerging theory and data collection is proceeded simultaneously with data analysis. Using theoretical sampling, data source are selected based on investigator’s judgment of the best source of knowledge from formal or informal interview, observation or documentation for the domain of study. Furthermore, the goal of data selection in grounded theory is for specific analytic purpose rather than the representativeness for generalization (Glaser, 1978; Sandelowski, 1995). Instead of generalization, grounded theory is characterized by its modifiability and as new data are generated and transferability through constant comparison (Glaser, 1978).

The study is conducted at a public university in the southwestern U.S. The participants of this study are focused on Taiwanese international students who participate in sport clubs (including badminton, tennis, baseball and basketball) organized and sponsored by Taiwanese Student Organization within a University. The reasons for selecting Taiwanese international students as informants, due to the author relationship with the organization; the author of this study actively participates in these sport clubs and currently serves as a coordinator of two sport clubs, which provides the advantage of access to field observation and recruitment of participants. The initial source of data for this study are the information about Taiwanese international students’ experience in sport participation, collected through interviews and observation of new participants of sports clubs of Taiwanese Student Association who might be exposed to a higher level of culture shock and their experiences are more recent compared with those who have stayed in U.S. for a long time. The data collection process stops when theoretical saturation is achieved.

The investigator distributes or sends an email explaining the purpose of the study and the details of procedure of the study. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants could terminate their participation at any time. Interviews are audio-recorded and conducted in Chinese or English, whichever is preferred by the participants. The semi-structured interviews ask participants to describe their experience of living and studying in the U.S. and their experience of sport participation in sports clubs. Participants are asked to give specific context or examples of their sport participation experience.

Data analysis

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously. The transcripts is translated into English and code for context, people, meaning, and process, noting themes, patterns, differences, and exceptions. As concepts and themes are identified in data analysis, the information to illuminate the theoretical properties of emerging concepts and themes is sought by theoretical sampling from new interviews about sport participation experience.

Implication and application

The findings of this study will help us to understand how sport participation influences the acculturation process of international students and provide recommendations for universities to facilitate and improve positive adjustment and learning experiences for international students through sport participation. Furthermore, the findings could also be used to enhance faculty members’ awareness and understanding of the academic, social, and psychological challenges faced by international students.