Inter-Group Interaction of Immigrants in Informal Sport

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Sport participation is used as a hook for developmental purposes to create inter-group contacts and interactions because sport can attract like-minded people to engage and exchange through sport activities (Spaaij, 2012). Such contacts and interactions are essential for out-group populations, especially immigrants, to build a sense of trust and belonging to a community (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1995). Intergroup contact theory supports that contacts and interactions between the ethnic minority and majority are necessary to improve ethnic relationships as people become familiar with one another and reduce stereotypes and prejudices (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This theory was used as a theoretical framework to analyze the inter-ethnic relationships in sport settings (e.g. Chu & Griffey, 1985; Theeboom, Schaillee & Nols, 2012) and is used as a heuristic theoretical guideline for this study.

The variation of sport contexts creates different sport experiences and outcomes for participants (Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). Many of the sport-for-development practices are embedded in organized sport programs in order to systematically recruit participants and offer them anticipated benefits. However, self-ruled and less-structured informal sport provides a context where inter-group contacts are similar to the ethnic relationships that typically occur in society. Thus, this study explored the interaction experiences of immigrants in informal sport and what contributed to the interaction among participants with the contact theory as a heuristic guideline; it also explored how sport participation and interactions in informal sport impact immigrants’ social relationships and integration in the new country.

Participant observation and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from twelve informal volleyball players in a municipal recreation center and eight informal basketball players at a corporate campus. The volleyball setting was selected because of its popularity and accessibility. The municipal recreation center is conveniently located and well-known in the local volleyball community for the free informal session every Sunday. The other research site, the corporate lunchtime basketball group, was introduced to the researcher through the personal network. The corporate is in the IT industry which regularly employs immigrants. Fourteen participants were first-generation immigrants, and the other six participants (two from the volleyball group) were self-defined non-immigrants. Non-immigrants were recruited to share their own interaction experiences with immigrants on and off the courts. As integration is a mutually adapted process, the researcher considered that the understanding of the non-immigrants’ perspectives was critical to this study. The researcher participated and observed the plays for two months then approached the players for interview invitations.

Fourteen immigrants originally came from China, Dominica Republic, Iran, South Korea, Taiwan, The Philippines, and Vietnam. Three of the non-immigrants were Caucasians, two of them were African Americans, and one was Mexican Americans. Three of twelve participants from the informal volleyball were female, and all of the participants from the lunchtime basketball group were male. The average age of the participants was 39.4 years old with a range from 24 to 59. The average length of time that participants lived in the U.S. was 16.6 years with a range from 2 to 33. The averages of age and years lived in the U.S. of the volleyball and basketball group were almost identical.

Five topics were discussed in the interview: participants’ past and current organized sport experience, participants’ past and current informal sport experiences. Skill and competition level in informal sport, participants’ interactions with other players on and off the court, and playing sport with a diverse population and its impact.

The conventional approach of qualitative content analysis served as the guideline of this analysis process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding process created four main themes, Optimal Conditions, Interaction Experiences, Moderating Mechanisms, and Relationship Extension, and twelve sub-themes corresponding to the concepts of the contact theory and integration through sport. Nineteen codes emerged from the texts of the informal volleyball group, and seventeen codes were developed from the texts of the informal basketball group.
The results proposed a conceptual model that contained two pathways for immigrants’ socialization. In Pathway 1, immigrants socialized in informal sport settings through adapting to the unwritten rules of the sport group and built sport acquaintance relationships with other participants. Moderators (skill, proactivity, empathy, openness, and social identity) were identified to impact the likelihood that inter-group contact would happen and affect the strength of the contact effects on relationship building. In Pathway 2, off-court social activities in multiple behavioral settings contributed to immigrants’ integration because they successfully extended the acquaintance relationships to personal friendships. In the socializing opportunities in different off-court settings, the participants exhibited various roles they play in their daily lives, which expanded their understandings of one another beyond sport settings.

The results contributed to social relationship building in informal sport and immigrants’ integration through sport. Informal sport settings emerged as a socializing context for skilled and proactive immigrants to build their network with other players. The off-court activities then strengthened the relationships which expanded in non-sport settings. The implications generated critical discussions regarding the complementary effects of sport-for-development programs in organized sport and informal sport. Both settings have demonstrated the capacity for creating interaction effects that engender a variety of integrational experiences and benefits to sport participants, a joint design composed of purposefully organized activities and the characteristics of informal sport (e.g., openness and flexibility) may provide a wider range of experiences than activities in one of these sport settings. Future research can further explore the mutual perspective and integration of non-immigrants in informal sport settings as the theoretical framework, inter-group contact theory, argues for mutual understanding.