Cultural diversity in community sport: An ethnographic inquiry of Somali Australians' experiences

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ABSTRACT

Sport organisations aim to grow the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including newly arrived people from refugee backgrounds. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted by the author at community sport organisations in the multicultural city of Melbourne, this paper examines the key factors that affect the sport participation experiences of Somali Australians. It is shown that interpersonal and structural barriers to sport participation predominate, and that the significance of these barriers varies according to age, gender and time in Australia. The paper concludes that in order to foster inclusive sporting environments in which people from refugee backgrounds can participate in a safe, comfortable and culturally appropriate way, refugee settlement needs to be understood as a two-way process of mutual accommodation requiring adaptation on the part of both the migrant and the host society.

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1. Introduction

Managing cultural diversity is a central theme in academic and political debate on the future of multicultural societies. In several liberal democracies, multicultural discourses have come under attack amidst a growing preoccupation with the possible dangers to social cohesion posed by nations becoming too culturally diverse, such as the erosion of western democratic values, residential and educational segregation, and the marginalisation of minority groups (Boese & Phillips, 2011; Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007; Harris, 2010; Kesten, Cochrane, Mohan, & Neal, 2011). Discourses about cultural diversity have generally become more exclusionary and nationalistic, while social cohesion is often being redefined to equate with homogeneity and assimilation (Vasta, 2010). The issue of cultural and ethnic diversity clearly remains politicised in many liberal democracies (Hasmath, 2010).

Sport is not immune to these broader issues. Following Bourdieu (1978), sport can be considered a field (*champ*) which has its own dynamics, logic, rule-making and history. This sporting field is relatively autonomous from the society of which it is a part (Bourdieu, 1978). However, although sport is a relatively autonomous field, it cannot be understood in isolation from other social spheres such as the economy, politics and education. Cultural diversity is a case in point. It has been argued that diversity represents one of the most significant issues confronting sport organisations today (Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham & Fink, 2006), both as a social reality and as a normative principle. Diversity management in sport has received

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growing attention from academics, policy makers and practitioners in the past eighteen years (Adair, Taylor, & Darcy, 2010; Cunningham, 2009, 2011; Cunningham & Fink, 2006; DeSensi, 1994; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Doherty, Fink, Inglis, & Pastore, 2010; Gasparini & Cometti, 2010; Hanlon & Coleman, 2006; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2006; Taylor, 2003; Taylor & Toohey, 1998, 1999).

The literature on cultural diversity in sport recognises the importance of equity and cultural maintenance (Taylor & Toohey, 1998) and emphasises the need to create safe, welcoming and culturally appropriate sporting environments in order to engender the involvement of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This recognition is also captured in sport policy rhetoric of cultural diversity. Most sport organisations have introduced equal opportunity and/or affirmative action policies to foster cultural diversity (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2006). However, it is questionable whether policy-level initiatives have been effective in promoting a genuine consideration of cultural diversity issues in practice. Adair et al. (2010) argue that "the policy rhetoric of cultural diversity has often not translated into sport management practice", with some groups and individuals "remaining marginalised or subordinated despite institutional goals of affirmative action and other equity-based reforms in sport" (p. 307).

One such group, it is argued, comprised of persons from refugee backgrounds living in liberal democracies. The *Sport and Multiculturalism* report prepared for the European Commission notes the demand for sport in established refugee communities that recognise its use as a vehicle for integration and a means of dealing with some of the stresses of everyday life (Amara, Aquilina, Henry, & PMP Consultants, 2004). The report recommends that the European Commission "promote the benefits of provision of sport opportunities for refugee and asylum seeker groups", and that "consideration be given to the means for disseminating good practice and policy lessons" (Amara, Aquilina, Henry, et al., 2004, p. 90).

Similar calls to action have been issued at a national level. In Australia, the Commonwealth Government has recently established a Multicultural Youth Sports Partnership Program which aims to engage young people from CALD backgrounds, including newly arrived refugees (Australian Government, 2011). Organisations such as the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA, 2010a, 2010b) and the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY, 2007) identify sport as a priority for young people from refugee backgrounds and recommend that more resources be devoted to it. RCOA recommends that sport organisations and other relevant agencies tailor programmes and activities to the specific needs of refugees, which is seen as more effective than incorporating refugee participants into a mainstream programme or activity. Among its many recommendations, CMY (2007) stresses that "much more comprehensive research is necessary" (p. 29) in order to inform good practice and understanding of how sport impacts on refugee settlement. This call for further research echoes a UK report which found that the role of sport in the settlement of refugees is an under-researched theme (Amara, Aquilina, Argent, et al., 2004). The report concludes that more research needs to be done in a number of areas, such as the social interaction of refugees with the "host community" in and through sport, and the impact of a host society's sporting culture on the sporting needs and practices of refugees.

This study is designed both to respond to recent calls for further research into these issues and to advance understanding of the ways in which people from refugee backgrounds perceive and negotiate sport participation in Australia. The objective of the paper is to explore the key factors that affect resettled refugees' sport participation experiences. The paper draws on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted by the author at community sport organisations in the multicultural city of Melbourne to examine Somali Australians' experiences of participation in organised team sport. As will be seen, this paper is the first to apply multi-sited ethnography to the study of sport participation of refugees and immigrants.

Somalis constitute one of the largest refugee populations from Africa currently living in Australia. Somali refugees began to arrive in Australia in significant numbers from the late 1980s, especially following the outbreak of the civil war in 1991. The 2006 Census recorded 6430 of Somali ancestry in Australia. This figure included 4310 Somalia-born persons, 95.2% of whom self-identified as being Muslim (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The majority of Somalis with refugee backgrounds have suffered repeated trauma due to war-related experiences such as physical injury, forced separation from family members, and unnatural death of family or friend (Bentley & Wilson Owens, 2008; McGraw Schuchman & McDonald, 2004). Post-migration experiences such as immigration difficulties, socioeconomic disadvantage and lack of social support can compound the adverse effects of previous experiences (Herrman, Kaplan, & Szwarc, 2010). To date, no reliable figures are available on the level of sport participation among Somalis in Australia. While their participation rates in organised sport appear to be low compared to the total population, a number of young Somalis participate in sport in a social capacity through schools and ad hoc sporting events such as the annual Australian Somali Football Championships, whose 2011 edition involved 220 players. This paper, then, seeks to explore the factors that affect Somali Australians' participation in sport. These factors include both barriers and facilitators, yet the primary focus of the present analysis is on barriers, as discussed below.

2. Literature review

Barriers (or constraints) to participation in sport for people from CALD backgrounds are multi-faceted (Cortis, Sawrikar, & Muir, 2007; Stodolska & Shinew, 2010; Stodolska, 1998; Taylor & Toohey, 1999). Conceptually, the most systematic analyses of barriers to sport participation have been informed by an ecological perspective which proposes that individuals exist in environments that can hinder or enable participation. Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) argue that participation is heavily dependent on a process of negotiating through an alignment of multiple factors: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural. Intrapersonal barriers are those individual characteristics, traits and beliefs that impede or discourage