'Active Integration': Sport clubs taking an active role in the integration of refugees

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‘Active Integration’: Sport clubs taking an active role in the integration of refugees

Introduction

The summer of 2015 witnessed an intense focus in Europe on refugees after the greatest mass migration of people since World War II (UNHCR 2016). A record 1.2 million refugees sought asylum in the EU during 2015, which was more than double the previous year’s numbers (Eurostat 2015). Within this difficult context, sport emerged as a significant social space where refugees can engage in community activity. Increasingly, sport is seen as a powerful development tool to promote peace and inclusion, combat anti-social behaviour, or for public health goals such as the range of physical and psychosocial benefits (Agergaard 2018; Nathan et al. 2013; Sherry, Schulendorf and Chalip, 2015; Hoye et al. 2015). Sport has no inherent power of its own and is ‘intrinsically value neutral’ (Sugden 2010). One must be careful of ‘overly romanticised, communitarian generalisations’ of sport (Coalter 2010, p.1386) as it may be ‘about fair play, team spirit, respect and discipline ... but for others it is associated with winning at any price, top-down domination, exclusion, sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia and so on’ (Spracklen et al. 2015, p.117). Sport is only one element of a very complicated geo-political context for refugees.

There is a lack of robust studies of sport programs that support inclusion for refugees (Nathan et al. 2010; Spaaij et al. 2019). Indeed, Spaaij et al. (2019, p.1) observe that ‘sport and physical activity have historically received scant attention within the field of refugee and forced migration studies’. The few studies that have been undertaken invariably focus on health and wellbeing benefits or settlement through social connections and integration (Amara et al. 2004; Block and Gibbs 2017; Nathan et al. 2010; 2013; Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012; 2015). As is often the case in policy research in this field, refugees become an essentialised group that become divorced from the broader context (Bakewell 2008). Sport operates in a social environment, of which refugees are one part. Focusing on one group misses the other factors that help sport clubs be vehicles of integration. Sport is a rare social phenomenon where there are active agents whose pre-existing roles are to intervene: referees and coaches. This article argues that while sport is an excellent opportunity for refugees to connect with each other people, they are part of a plurality of local communities, all of whom can meet within a sport context. The success of
these sport clubs rests on the hard work and dedication of volunteers and coaches. This article argues that coaches should take an active role in welcoming new members, introducing these members to different groups, and preventing cliques from forming. Many spaces of social interaction do not have individuals who feel able to arbitrate between social actors. In sport, coaches can help to balance out the power dynamics between existing members and new recruits, including refugees, and this can have a powerful effect on integration and belonging for all members.

This article contributes to the small but growing academic literature on refugees and sport, by shifting the focus from project outcomes on an essentialised group (refugees) to the practices of leaders within the programme or club. Developing the social skills of coaches and volunteers benefits all members, regardless of social background. This study is the first that focuses on table tennis with refugees and is based in the UK. It is the first research that addresses the inclusive narrative of sports clubs and how the volunteers and coaches operate effects social inclusion. In so doing it does not focus on results and outcomes but on the process of creating a supportive environment. The article demonstrates the importance of participant observation and qualitative analysis to provide holistic approaches to research. This study also demonstrates the importance of carefully managed approaches for all members of the community, rather than focusing (and essentialising) one particular group (i.e. refugees). Sport can breakdown these imposed identity categories and permits the individual to build a new identity as a table tennis player. After summarising the literature on refugees and sport, and the sport integration policy context, this article presents the methodological and ethical considerations. This is followed by the analysis with three key arguments that: 1) an active approach from coaches facilitates integration of all communities when done in 2) a welcoming environment with 3) a focus on fun and social interaction, rather than just sports skills.

The importance of sport for refugees

There is nascent academic research on the relationship between sport and refugees (Amara et al. 2004; Block and Gibbs 2017; Nathan et al. 2010; 2013; Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012; 2015; et al. 2019). Most of these have been undertaken in Australia, reflecting the centrality of sport in their policy approaches. Each one focuses on refugee
participants, rather than the whole programme or sport club, which effectively divorces refugees from the wider club context. The literature falls under two broad themes of health and wellbeing benefits or settlement through social networks and integration. The refugee experience can be traumatic and confusing: risk factors include residing in disadvantaged communities, disrupted education prior to arrival in the host country, poverty, discrimination, mental and physical trauma, living in families torn apart by war and violence and struggling with multiple settlement challenges (Block and Gibbs 2017). Whilst newly arrived refugees can exhibit higher levels of stress and trauma than other migrants (Berry 1988), care has to be taken not to pathologise their experiences (Marlowe 2010). Attention needs to be made to not over-research small populations of refugees (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012). The literature tends to focus on the positive benefits of sport. It can help relieve the symptoms of stress and trauma (Bergholz et al. 2016; Gschwend and Selvaranju 2007; Olliff 2008; Nathan et al. 2010; Stone 2013). Sport enables people to master their body, acquire skills and develop their self-esteem (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Bergholz 2013; Bergholz et al. 2016; Stone 2013). Sport programmes can provide a sense of structure and security in otherwise chaotic situations by re-establishing regular patterns of participation (Gschwend and Selvaranju 2007; Lawrence et al. 2010). Ultimately, sport provides a fun, enjoyable and social activity that can allow refugees to ‘switch off’ from the trauma and stress in their lives (Stone 2013).

Settlement of refugee requires awareness of the social benefits of sport. Whilst some research highlights the economic barriers to sport, such as transport, equipment and subscription costs (Agergaard et al. 2016; Olliff 2008; Spracklen et al. 2015), sport can be a focal point for refugees can meet new people and develop their social networks (Spaaij 2012; Spracklen et al. 2015). Language can be a significant barrier to integration (Ha and Lyras, 2013; Olliff 2008; Spaaij 2012, Werge-Olsen and Vik, 2012), but sport can provide opportunities for different linguistic groups to meet and practice their language skills. Refugees also develop relationships within each other and this is just as important for social support and wellbeing (Nathan et al. 2013). Promoting friendships and personal relationships can help overcome differences and develop prosocial behaviour. If carefully managed, sport can help to overcome cultural divisions within a refugee community (Spaaij 2015), otherwise tribal, religious or cultural divisions impacts on the ability of the
community to self-organise and access local resources, such as language classes, legal advice, or support for children at school (Khan 2013). Sport can be a positive experience where refugees can display proficiency and feel connected to their new communities (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Spaaij 2012; 2015). Most importantly, sport can provide continuity with their former lives (Olliff 2008; Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012).

Much of the literature focuses on integration of refugees (Adler Zwahlen et al. 2018; Agergaard et al. 2016; Amara et al. 2004; Doherty and Taylor 2007; Spaaij 2015; Stone 2013; Walseth and Fasting 2004; Walseth 2006; Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012). The term integration relates to a multidimensional process that sees new members of a community being able to fully participate in social, economic and political activities (Ager and Strang, 2004; Ha and Lyras 2013; Spaaij 2015). Castles et al. (2002) argue that successful integration requires adaptation on the part of both the migrant and the host society. This, like much of the literature, takes a dualistic approach where migrants and refugees integrate into a host community. In reality, there are many host communities, some of which are more integrated into the social, economic and political fabric of the nation than others. The 2018 Integrated Communities Green Paper, in the UK, takes a similar dualistic approach when it ‘60% of minority ethnic pupils were in schools where minority ethnic pupils were in the majority’ (HM Government 2018a, p.11). It ignores the fact that these minority ethnic pupils are integrating with each other and that the least integrated community is the white ‘host community’ (Runnymede Trust 2018). Like refugees, host communities are not homogenous with shared values, but have a variety of political, religious, and cultural differences. Integration is a continuous and multi-faceted process. Sport provides the continuity and familiarity that allows integration to be developed. It allows refugees to build on existing traditions from their home country (Werge-Olsen and Vik 2012), find acceptance in the new community and help rebuild social networks and relationships (Spaaij 2015).

Overall, much of the literature focuses on the outcomes of specific programmes. As one of the exceptionally well-designed studies identified, ‘most studies are process orientated, looking at outputs not impact, and insecure funding environments create pressure to demonstrate positive “outcomes”’ (Nathan et al. 2013, p.2). However, by focusing on outcomes, there is a danger that projects take a functional approach that focuses on results,
rather than take a holistic view that understands outcomes in the wider context. Furthermore, policy drives results based on research on specific categories, such as that of the refugee (Bakewell 2008; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). The category of ‘refugee’ is invariably imposed on others; as such it removes the agency of those labelled as refugees. The status of refugee is rarely the dominant identity of sport enthusiasts. Separating these participants from other aspects of sport clubs artificially reinforces a politically infused label. For example, Nathan et al. (2010, p.2) recognise that the ‘Football United program operates in partnership with migrant and refugee support organisations, football organisations, schools, corporate and community groups’, yet the research only focused on refugees. Consequently, an important gap in the literature is the club environment and club personnel.

Sport Policy, Community Development and Integration
Empowerment and community development, individually and in combination, have been mainstays in social welfare and economic development policies for governments globally (Lawson 2005, p.136), usually to address poverty. In the UK, sport has been an increasingly important element of community development since the late 1970s. For three years until 1985 the Action Sport initiative represented one of the first formerly evaluated projects regarding sport and community development. The project noted that

As long as there is large scale unemployment and deprivation, schemes such as Action Sport are here to stay; the primary argument for them has little to do with sport: given such problems, there is an important role to be fulfilled in providing a range of opportunities and services [original italics] for those who are disadvantaged (Rigg 1986, p3).

Since then, in the UK, concerns with low participation and the establishing of targets for increased participation and associated social benefits have received significant attention (Social Exclusion Unit 1998, HM Government 2018a; 2018b). The role of sport in tackling social exclusion stems from the PAT 10 report (DCMS 1999) which noted sport could contribute to improving four key social policy outcomes: health, crime, employment and education. The importance of the associated social and economic outcomes heavily influenced government policy (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), the development of the Framework for Sport in England (Sport England 2004). Successive governments over the
previous 30 years has seen sport being used to achieve other outcomes, especially strengthening community involvement, building community capacity and ownership engagement, as a focal point for community identity and civic pride (Sport England 2005).

Focus on outcomes misses the holistic dimensions of the activities. Sport derives from a secondary set of social practices dependent on and reflecting more fundamental structures, values and processes. In fact, Coalter (2013) reverses the current fashion for arguing that sport can contribute to increased ‘social inclusion’ and suggests that various aspects of social inclusion precede such participation. The fundamental challenge of a domestic sport policy is both difficult to achieve but even more salient for nations where community sport policies are considered as being well developed. The challenge is shaped by structural social inequalities whilst attempting to consider the issues of integration for those, particularly in the circumstances of refugees, who know little of the host society. Nevertheless, much of the justification for continued investment in community sport remains the associated social policy objectives and outcomes, rather than making sport an engaging activity. The publication of the latest UK government sports strategy, Sporting Future, (DCMS 2015) reaffirmed the social purpose of sport and community sports funding as one not just of achieving participation numbers, but more widely focusing on the social good that sport and physical activity can unlock. Sporting Future set out (another) new approach to investment in sport and physical activity, based around the contribution that they make to five outcomes: physical wellbeing; mental wellbeing; individual development; social and community development; and economic development. The second annual report on the progress of the strategy re-emphasised government’s commitment to deliver a step change in the numbers of people participating in sport and physical activity, with a specific focus on underrepresented groups and tackling inactivity. (DCMS 2018, p.9). This increasing belief of the potential of sport and other physical activities, such as walking, cycling and dancing, to contribute to a wide range of positive outcomes is reflected in the Sport England strategy for 2016–2021, Towards an Active Nation (Sport England 2016). Funding and investment decisions directly link to the Government strategy’s five outcomes and their related Key Performance Indicators. This shift towards a more holistic approach, considering the wider social benefits of sport and physical activity, is linked to the social impact that community organisations can potentially make (and demonstrate) for the five outcomes.
Social and community development is the hardest outcome to evidence, because the concepts involved – social capital, trust, networks – are notoriously hard to define and measure (Barnes et al. 2017). Sport can act as a conduit for people of different backgrounds to interact but there is often a ‘disconnect between what newcomers and sport providers in a (small) community perceive’ (Nadeau et al. 2016, p.130). Indeed, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, found that ‘sports seem to be recognized by new citizens as an integrator. It is not necessarily the primary reason new citizens choose to play or watch sports when they come to Canada. However, integration is often the result’ (Institute for Canadian Citizenship 2014, p.36). Likewise, empowerment of local communities entails building the resources, skills, and knowledge of local stakeholders (Vail 2007). All of these are separate from specific outcomes and focus on holistic practices. To help develop a sense of community, sport organisations can help by creating a value system that aligns with local cultures and beliefs (Shilbury et al. 2008).

Methodology
This article is based on the findings of the Refugee Integration Project at Brighton Table Tennis Club (BTTC) in partnership with the University of Brighton and Football 4 Peace¹, and funded by Sport England. This project is a physical activity and educational project which ran three core modules: table tennis skills; prosocial skills; and English lessons using table tennis. BTTC was founded in 2007 with the mission to use table tennis as a vehicle for community integration and wellbeing. It originally focussed on working with marginalised young people from the local community. It has grown to work with a variety of demographic groups, including refugees, people affected by mental health issues, cancer, players with Down’s Syndrome, Women-only sessions and older people. The club has nearly a thousand members registered members, with around 280 members playing once a week or more. BTTC is based in Brighton & Hove, a city with a population of 281,100, 18% of whom were born outside of the UK (Condon et al. 2018). In the city there are approximately 200 asylum seekers (receiving assistance from the Home Office), although many more may have arrived through alternate routes. The club is located in a ward ranked in the top 10% most deprived areas in England with the living environment being classified within the top 1% (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG 2015). Since 2015, the club has actively tried
to engage with the city’s refugee population, leading to the development of this project. While sport clubs may maintain their sporting focus to avoid becoming instruments of social engineering (Coalter 2007), clubs like BTTC have developed ‘innovative business model to address local social problems and enhance organisational sustainability’ (Reid 2017, p.598).

The project went through a full ethics approval through the University Ethics Committee. Ethically, the research team sought to go beyond the ethical requirements of the university and centralised the needs of the participants (Perry 2011). There are extant power dynamics that affect working with refugee populations (McKensie et al. 2007; Pittaway et al. 2010; Perry 2011; Marmo 2013). The research team met regularly to reflect on the ethical impact of the research. This continuous reflection refined the approach of the research assistant and reinforced the reliance on participant observation and ethnographic interviews. Many forced migrants are frequently interviewed as part of their asylum process. Formal interviews, especially around a club that has supported the participants can also lead to feelings that respondents should positive responses. For this reason, formal interviews were restricted to longstanding and trusted participants in order to minimise any ethical power imbalances. The popularity of BTTC has led to many journalists and academics taking an interested and the research team felt there was a danger of over-researching specific refugee groups (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012). Consequently, the team were careful to minimise the over-interviewing of participants.

The project took a mixed methods approach in order to meet the requirements of the funder, but also to provide multiple perspectives on the role of community sport as a means for actively integrating refugees as well as to provide a robust framework for data collection and analysis (Nathan et al. 2010; 2013). The study utilised a single case study of BTTC due to the practicality preferred in examining real-life and contemporary events where multiple sources of data can be collected to investigate a distinctive situation (Yin 2014). Accounting for the ethical issues, the research team recognised that integration of refugees should not focus on this potentially vulnerable group (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), but assess the broader club environment and actively involved participants who were not refugees.
Quantitative survey data was collected twice over twelve months (November n=114 and March n=120) to assess (using a Likert scale) both refugee and non-refugee players’ engagement with the club, their physical and mental well-being, and perceived sense of belonging to the community. Even though the research team designed the survey with a local charity that worked with young refugees, the BTTC coach who taught the English module, and trialled it with trusted young people, there were complications over language in the surveys that were exposed through the participant observation. Consequently, the quantitative data did not fully capture the complexity of the refugee players’ experiences, their level of integration in the community, nor their English language skills. For this reason, the quantitative findings are not presented in this article.

Participant observation was the dominant method as the research team wished to build trust and minimise power imbalances. Overt participant observation by the research assistant took place weekly at BTTC and the sixth form college, as well as a variety of social events organised by the club over nine months, which included trips to competitions and travelling on the club’s minibus. All observation notes were recorded in a field diary. Through these structured observations, it was possible to track language skills, behavioural changes of the individual players, as well as changes in the group dynamics. Over the course of a year, numerous ethnographic interviews (Spradley 2018) were conducted with participants of BTTC. The majority of these were with players of a refugee background, as well as other players at the club. These included refugee players from a variety of countries, including Afghanistan, Syria, Kurdistan, Sudan, Vietnam, Eritrea and Iraq. Ethnographic interviews took place during table tennis practise, lessons and social events. As ethnographic interviews take place throughout the fieldwork, and in the natural setting of the participants, it was felt that this gave more power to the participants, whilst minimising the likelihood of only positive answers being provided. Developing trust is vital in research with refugees (Hynes 2003). The research team were already known from other voluntary work in the sector and trust was built through continued and regular engagement throughout the year-long project. Language remained an issue in some cases, but the familiar surroundings, trust and support from the coach who taught the English component would help the researchers to engage in conversation, ask questions and derive meanings.
Observations and ethnographic interviews were triangulated with semi-structured interviews with key individuals. Interviewees were recruited with the support of BTTC, who played an important role in helping to identify participants. Players were approached by the researcher, together with the Club Director, after having created a list of possible suitable participants. Additional interviewees emerged from snowball techniques deriving from previous interviews. Eleven face-to-face interviews were conducted towards the end of the project with refugee players, the four coaches, including the one leading the English lessons, the Club Director, organisations from the wider networks, foster carers and social workers. Interview questions were carefully designed for each interviewee, considering their role in the project and their experiences at the club. All interviewees gave their verbal consent to be interviewed and recorded for the purposes of this project. Prior to interviews, participants were given the project information sheet to familiarise themselves with the research and the aims of the interviews. To guarantee confidentiality, the research team omitted the names of the refugee players and of their foster carers. Interviews were carried out at convenient locations suggested by the interviewee. Interviews were analysed using the principles of thematic analysis (Sparkes and Smith 2013). Coding frameworks were devised to reflect the theoretical focus of the project and the research questions as well as salient issues evident in the data to support the process of identifying, refining and interpreting key themes. The overriding themes that emerged related to the club as a positive welcoming space, that promoted social interaction, and this was facilitated by having community-focussed coaches.

Findings and Analysis: The Importance of Taking an Active Role in Integration

The success of integration projects resides on the hard work, dedication and skills of the coaches, managers and volunteers running them (Forde et al. 2015, Nadeau et al. 2016). These key individuals can actively encourage positive behaviours, organise tournaments and social events or manage ‘teachable moments’. In his study of a Chicago Boxing Club, Wacquant (2004) highlighted how the Club’s manager, Dee Dee, regularly imparted his vision for the Club through supervision of training and how members were socialised. In this way he conveyed his vision of pugilism more generally. At BTTC the director had a clear vision on the social role of table tennis, and this socialised coaches, members and
volunteers into a specific welcoming approach at the club. The director constantly reflected on the vision of the club, and the way members interacted. This helped overcome difficulties and personal differences as the director affirmed the collective ideal of table tennis which became a unifying narrative for members. It is not enough to coach sporting skills and hope that values, respect and wider integration just passively evolve through the sport. Sport is not a neutral space; it must be carefully managed (Sugden 2010; Coalter 2010). As one coach said, ‘The club is the most welcoming place I’ve known... But it’s not that the table tennis as a sport naturally does it, it’s the club that has tried to nurture this environment.’

Most importantly, the managers of the club recognised that integration is not simply a new individual fitting into the host society. Rather than the dualistic approach outlined earlier, they recognise that there are many different groups and identities where an individual belongs. As the Director of BTTC observed,

The BTTC and UK’s 'host' community is richly varied with Travellers, players with disability, intergenerational and lots more. As are the migrant and refugee communities. The focus should be on integrating communities across all these areas. That to me is what a strong community looks like.

This attitude is important as it does not essentialise the refugees and make them different to other players. What the club does well is to create a new identity, that of BTTC. Although there are sessions for different groups within the club, the over-arching identity of the club is that everyone is a table tennis player. As the Director states, ‘Here in the club you are not a refugee, or a person with a disability, you are a member of the club. Everybody is equal.’ This helps break down the differences between groups, and facilitates the mixing of different groups, be they refugees or players with Down’s Syndrome. For example, the Director states,

We had a competition which was community inclusion. And we had teams of three from ten different sessions. A team of people who had cancer, a team of people who were homeless, and the atmosphere was brilliant. The next time we ran it we just seeded them from 1-30 and then paired people up with the strongest with the weakest, and so on, so the teams were completely mixed. It was much more interesting. The people are table tennis players before anything else.
The club has understood the nuanced nature of communities and used this to take an active approach to integration. In this way, the club has provided a space where sport and community activities coexist, which greatly impacts how new players, including refugees, are integrated. This does not mean that treating players as equals means that differences are not recognised. The club has celebrated members’ diversity through a variety of small, but powerful actions, such as hanging flags and maps on the walls of the club. Understanding and recognising different cultural norms is crucial for social integration (Ager and Strang 2004; Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019).

Active Coaching: the importance of community focused coaches

The community focus of the club requires coaches that align with the club’s ethos. This is achieved through recruiting community-focused coaches, and continuous training and mentoring. This requires an active and explicit reflection of what the club is trying to achieve. BTTC coach job descriptions clearly state that they should ‘strike a balance between fun and seriousness’; the coaching style depends on whether the player is there for fun or for elite competition. At BTTC, the community focused coaches help create the right setting and atmosphere for transformational opportunities in the club. Negative coaching may work for some players who aspire to be elite competitors, but for community clubs, positive and welcoming behaviours, combined with fun sessions, help create the social environment where participants will return, socialise and integrate. Too often the focus of coaches, and the coaching framework, is to focus on the elite model (Vella et al. 2013). The vast majority of sport coaching is based in the community and requires a distinct set of skills, such as positivity, proactivity, reflection, and awareness that not all players want to be Olympic champions.

The inter-personal skills and outlook of coaches at BTTC is vital in creating the right atmosphere. It’s not the sport that brings people together, but the people organising and running it. The Head Coach observed that ‘people are people, we’re here just to have fun and use table tennis to forget problems outside. We make people feel welcome, all our staff is friendly and not judgemental. I’ve been in four different clubs in my life, and I’ve never
seen anything like it!’ Yet the club does not simply assert that this is the way to do things and leave the coaches and volunteers, they actively train and mentor them to help them develop the right inter-personal and community-facing skills. BTTC run staff and volunteer workshops on how to build positive relationships, managing behaviour, and most importantly, how to make new players feel welcome and foster a sense of belonging. This is the key to getting hard to reach players back to the club and engaging them for the long term.

This community-focused approach requires active interventions from managers and head coaches. Encouraging community-focussed and fun coaching becomes important when trying to nurture welcoming environments for new members, from whatever background. Integration does not simply emerge, but is developed along networks of teachers and mentors. The active approach is more clearly observed when tensions emerge between coaching styles. During one session, two young refugee players were upset after an interaction that suggested they should not be having fun. The director actively intervened to rebuild the trust with the young players as well as explain to the coaches that their approach was not conducive to building relationships. Whilst Wagstaff et al. (2017) highlight the importance of recruitment for positive coaches, ongoing training ensures that these skills remain explicit and up-to-date. Often sporting skills are seen as the explicit and active role of coaches, whilst team building, values and relationships are implicitly and passively developed. Flipping the focus to making inter-personal skills and values-based teaching the explicit dimension of coaching can help produce positive environments for community integration.

**Actively creating a positive welcoming environment**

Creating a positive welcoming environment is important to help new players, from any background, feel safe, included and comfortable. Echoing Forde et al.’s findings (2015, p.134), which pointed to multiple staff champions who worked directly with newcomers and were aware of the positive role that community sport and recreation could play in their lives, the inter-personal skills and demeanour of the coaches and staff at BTTC help create a positive environment with their approach to both old and new players. Joining a club can be intimidating, especially if one has never played that sport before or is new to the
numerous observations demonstrated how initial interactions actively created this welcoming environment. A friendly ‘hello’ helped break down newcomer’s anxiety. Showing newcomers around the space and letting them have a quick game of table tennis can help new players settle quickly and feel at ease. As one of Brighton and Hove Council’s Social Workers states,

The club has given them a sense of identity and connection here, and that’s really important. They have connection to their birth heritage but also to here, they belong to something, and that’s huge when you’ve been travelling and you feel not welcomed here and had so many doors shut in your face. Having someone who opens the door and invites you in, it’s really important.

BTTC’s positive welcome is more important to refugees who may feel that they have had many doors metaphorically shut in their faces. Having someone at the club actively greet you as a valued member of society can have a powerful psychosocial effect and give them a sense of belonging. Providing a sense of belonging is important for refugees (Spaaij 2015). The experience of fleeing leads to a loss of ties in the home country and a loss of identity. As one Foster Carer observes,

Sense of belonging is so important especially for a young asylum seeker who has lost his home and family. The club contributes to forging a new identity, they can proudly say ‘I am a member of the BTTC’. He feels he is a part of something.

Refugee players at the BTTC have been made to feel welcome and accepted, and this is important when they don’t have ties to the UK on arrival and struggle to forge relationships in the community. This is outlined by one of the young refugee players,

Now I see the club as my second home after I left my country.. when I came, I knew nobody in Brighton, I just knew my brother.. and now when I joined the club I made friends, I have gone on holidays, I have gone swimming with them.

Creating a welcoming environment helps refugees feel like they belong. This can help enormously with their integration in the UK. BTTC helps create a welcoming environment through the physical space of the club. This can be seen through the words of the founder of a local refugee charity that refers young people to the club,
There’s a general welcoming environment and the club make it clear that refugees are welcome too. The fact that there’s signs in the club that say ‘refugees are welcome here’ opens a dialogue about refugees being part of the club.

A large graffiti wall with ‘Refugees Welcome’ makes a very clear statement about the intention of the club and this helps create the welcoming atmosphere. All new players are asked to put a pin in a world map where they are from and also in a map of Brighton and Hove to show where they live now. There are more and more pins across all over the world and this is celebrated as a positive thing at the BTTC. The diverse and global feel to the club is reinforced with a variety of flags displayed along all the walls. This has a dual effect. It communicates that the club is a diverse and welcoming place for all members. It also makes individuals feel included in the club, as the foster carer of one of the refugee boys outlines,

At the BTTC he was made to feel special, there was a lot of emphasis on him at the beginning in terms of his flag being put up, he was really made part of it and he realised that he was good at table tennis which made him feel good about himself.

The combination of these active positive behaviours and welcoming physical space helps players build a sense of belonging to the club. It makes the individual feel special, at the same time as the club makes everyone feel equal as table tennis players.

**Actively Creating a Social Space**

Successful integration rests on social relationships. Sport can provide a space where these social relationships can form, develop and continue. For refugees, as for many younger and older people, forming social relationships can be difficult, especially if they are new to a country. BTTC highlighted the social side of sport beyond the physical activity, skills-acquisition and mental concentration. By creating a welcoming environment at BTTC through the active involvement of coaches, many people, including refugees, felt safe and relaxed in the environs of the club.

Refugee players often sit and chat in the club’s social space, mixing with other players from all over the world. This time, around the table, there are refugees from Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Chad, other young players from the local community in Kemptown [an area of Brighton], older players, and coaches. They are chatting about table tennis, the next competitions, school and homework. The atmosphere is
relaxed and pleasant, and everyone seems to be comfortable in the space. Refugee players laugh, joke and are involved in the conversation. Some of them have already spent a few hours here, playing table tennis, socialising and coaching other players. (From the research assistant’s field notes)

Alongside the active socio-personal skills of coaches and volunteers, the physical space of the club facilitates these interactions. There is a small social area in the club with a sofa and a table. There is a small kitchen area where tea and coffee can be made, and sometimes there are snacks and fruit. Players can come early and sit and chat to friends, or stay after their session. Often members of the club, including staff, stay and socialise in the club beyond the hours of their sessions. For many, BTTC is a place where they chat, eat, have coffee, play chess and so on. This social space provides opportunities for individuals to socialise and make friends before, during and after their sessions.

The coaches provided fun activities in a positive environment significantly helped refugees to find a place in the community, socialise and make friends. The positive atmosphere at BTTC helps contribute to positive emotions, and to shape a sense of belonging. The impact of this socialisation should not be underestimated. The founder of a local charity praises the club as,

“It’s been a game changer for a couple of the young people we work with. There’s a couple that hadn’t had fun for such a long time and then they went to the BTTC and they really had a great time. That’s what they get from it.”

Block and Gibbs (2017) noted that participation in enjoyable group activities - even short-term or one-off events were seen as strengthening connections between community sports organisations and young people from a refugee background. The director and coaches of BTTC made socialising and fun a priority. Many of the activities they organise are not explicitly linked to table tennis. They have organised other sports activities such as volleyball and football, as well as trips to watch cricket. It was observed that these spaces away from the club were important sites of sociality as the young people chatted, made jokes, shared music, and sang songs. The coaches actively invite different players to come to showcase table tennis events and tournaments elsewhere in the country, like Cardiff and Liverpool. The minibus also becomes a social space where the players can get to know each other and make friends. Having the opportunity to socialise with people from the same age group, and
who may have gone through similar experiences, helps refugee players form meaningful relationships with others. Young unaccompanied refugees, particularly when they first arrive in the UK, often face loneliness and isolation, as they do not have any relationship in the new country, as two different players highlight,

“After I arrived, I made a friend at the club, then life became easier for me. It’s really hard when you arrive and you don’t know anyone and you’re alone.” Refugee player

“At the club, I made a lot of friends from different countries and from the UK. I don’t have friends from college or anywhere else, only at the club. I see them outside of the club too.” Refugee player

Refugee and non-refugee players regularly interact at the club and outside the club. Sport may be a space of socialisation and integration, but integration is only a success when those bonds extend beyond the club’s activities. Sports clubs can be focal points of activity, but it’s only through actively fostering and nurturing social relationships that wider social integration can occur. The development of social relationships at the club does not occur overnight. They have developed over time and thanks to the hard work and dedication of coaches and volunteers who actively try to support and nurture this approach. As argued earlier, sport has no intrinsic power. It can provide a space where social relationships can develop organically. But social benefits can come quicker and more meaningfully when staff take an active role in encouraging the fun and social elements of sport and create spaces where social interaction can take place.

Conclusion

The main contention of this article is that successful integration of refugees in sport projects comes from an active approach from managers, coaches and volunteers. Sport can be a positive experience for refugees arriving in a new community. There are various aspects of BTTC which have helped facilitate the integration of refugees: the active approach taken by staff, the positive welcoming atmosphere and inclusive narrative, and establishing the club as a safe space, fun activities and sociability. It is important to reiterate that there are many other factors that impact on an individual’s integration in their community, namely education, employment, language, racism, and others (Ager and Strang 2004; Ndofor-Tah et al. 2019). Integration does not have to be the motivation, nor the outcome. Actively making
the club a fun, welcoming environment helps everyone, regardless of background, to feel included. **Ultimately, this approach is sustainable as it does not cost much financially, but resides in the social skills of the coaches. This extends beyond one specific group, like refugees, to all members as there is not one host community, but many communities.**

‘Sport’ does not passively encourage positive behaviours. The success and failure of these projects resides on the hard work, dedication and skills of the individuals running the project. These managers, coaches and volunteers can actively encourage positive behaviours, organise events and programmes, and build on ‘teachable moments’. Or they can simply coach skills and hope that values, respect and wider integration just passively evolves through the shared activity. This is not to say that this does not happen. Our findings suggest that a more active approach where the coaches, volunteers and managers consciously manage the situation is more beneficial and will have more positive integration outcomes. In summarising the importance of the role of the coach it’s important to note that the types of roles and nature of coaching (i.e. for enjoyment rather than as a sport specific activity) are essential to encouraging people to feel a sense of belonging. Equally, it’s important for coaches to be sensitive to participant needs and the individual nature of activity and programmes as is sensitivity to life stage and demographic differences. The sessions at BTTC have been successful because the coaches have helped to build confidence and self-efficacy amongst **all** participants, not just one target group. The sessions have also been successful in inducing a sense of belonging, community and inculcating the social relationships that have been formed.

Furthermore, the role of community sports organisations - and in this example, a specific sports club – and their values are important to creating a safe and welcoming environment where policy outcomes might be achieved. Producing a fun environment, that explicitly treats all participants as valued members of the club helps promote integration for all members. BTTC have looked at integration holistically. Refugee integration is not the focus, but fostering a welcoming environment and an inclusive narrative helps make all players, regardless of background, legal status or age group feel that they belong in the club. Fun does not come at the expense of competition. Many players openly stated that they had not played table tennis, and some did not like the sport. Yet the environment created at BTTC
produced a safe social space where players could go to enjoy themselves. Playing sport, as well as other social activities, produced solidarity amongst players. Regular tournaments and opportunities to play in leagues also encouraged some to practise their skills and improve their performances. It is testament to the active inclusive approach at BTTC that one of their young people (from a refugee background) helped found a similar table tennis club in Worthing a year after this project finished.

There were some study limitations and methodological challenges throughout the study. Despite an extensive amount of time spent developing a quantitative survey, that included a full collaborative approach involving this club, refugee organisations, and participants, the survey was of limited use. This was due to suspicions of the reliability of the data. Observations made by the researchers suggested that participants were not reflecting on their answers. In particular, providing the survey in English did not provide optimum quantitative data. Limited resources of the project meant that there were no funds to translate the survey into the wide range of languages of participants. The trust and rapport between the coaches, researchers, and the participants, built over the year-long program, enhanced communication of the participants’ experiences that could not be articulated in the surveys. For this reason, the authors identify the importance of participant observation and qualitative analysis in order to understand the holistic aspects of social inclusion in a sports club. There were also a limited number of formal interviews with refugee participants due to ethical concerns about over-interviewing, as well as difficulties arranging and scheduling interviews around their school timetable. As many of the young people had endured several interviews, particularly from The Home Office and Social Services, and also likely to want to provide positive feedback of program, it was felt that conversational ethnographic interviews were a more robust approach. The research is also limited by the time period of the study, which meant that it is not possible to determine any other positive or negative practices all impacts over a longer period of time.

Like sport, integration is a regular, iterative practise that develops over time. The regular, mundane interactions at a sport club like the BTTC build up into a new set of skills, outlooks and behaviours. The everyday, mundane but repetitive practises are really important at fostering friendships and trusting relationships. Sport clubs like BTTC provide the space and
the opportunities to put these regular, repetitive exchanges into action. Following Robinson (2015, p.904), ‘the everyday is seen here as constituting the normal routines and the relationships and the transformative aspects of existence’. Consequently, the everyday and mundane can have transformative potential. This transformation can occur simply through the everyday relationships built at BTTC. Integration developed thanks to the active involvement of the various people associated with the club. This can come from the managers, volunteers, coaches or other players. By associating with the club, players developed a sense of belonging to the club and recreate the positive, welcoming identity BTTC seeks to cultivate. Actively developing a core image of their community club is a central feature of their integration activities and this helps build a sense of belonging for members. Community sports organisations in the UK - and specifically sports clubs - continually face challenges to devote resources to social policy outcomes beyond increasing sport participation. This article has illustrated one club that has taken on the challenge through the active approach of coaches, volunteers and managers to consciously manage inclusive sport activities is central for the integration of refugees. The study found three significant areas of impact: first, an active approach from coaches can facilitate integration; second, such an approach has greater potential if conducted in a safe, enjoyable and welcoming environment; and that sport is a positive social activity for refugee background youth if the focus of the activity centres on fun and social interaction, rather than just sporting skills.

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1 Football 4 Peace is the in-house NGO of the University of Brighton. It seeks to use sport to
build bridges between divided communities. It uses a values-based methodology to teach
participants how to work together. For more details see Sugden 2008.
Active Integration – response to editor

The authors thank the editors for the opportunity to redraft and resubmit the article. In particular, we thank Reviewer 1 for their constructive comments. As a result, we feel that the article is stronger. All edits have been highlighted in yellow on the resubmission. Below we outline the feedback of the reviewer and how we addressed this:

The introduction: We take on board the reviewer’s suggestion to shorten the introduction and focus on the context of the study, a brief overview, and aim of the paper. We have reduced and redrafted this section into three clear paragraphs: context, overview and outline of the paper.

Literature Review: We have tightened the section on refugees and sport, in line with the Introduction (p3). Reviewer 1 suggests that we argue for a gap on holistic views of clubs not being included. We agree and have added this explicitly. We have reworded some of the section around outcomes. However, we stand by the assertion that focussing on the experiences of one group (particularly refugees) can essentialise and fetishise their experiences (and have added the literature to support this assertion). This is supported with a stronger ethical paragraph in the methodology section.

Methodology: To emphasise the ethical considerations of the project, and to reinforce the argument made in the earlier literature review, we have separated and tightened the paragraph on ethics, with stronger links to literature. The reviewer recommended shortening the quants section, which we have done substantially (we shortened and removed about 2 paragraphs).

The reviewer also specifically requested us to address two points. We have added a sentence (p9) to address the language issues during the fieldwork. They also asked about interview recruitment. We have made this clearer and elaborated (p10).

Findings and Analysis: We thank the reviewer for their comment that this had been improved. We acknowledge their comments and have signposted and emphasised where the findings are grounded in research, including specifically address the table tennis club in the project, rather than making more general points (on p10, 12,13, 14, 15, and 16). There are two reflections on issues (p11 and 13).

Conclusion: We have added a line regarding sustainability (p17) to take note of the reviewer’s comment on sustainability of this approach.

We trust that this satisfies the editors’ concerns and we look forward to any further feedback.

Kind regards,
Mark, Marc and Elisa.