

From the professionals' perspective – the role of sport in fostering occupational mobility among refugees in the Netherlands

SABIEN FABER

MSc Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology, University of East London



**University of
East London**

Abstract

The aim of this paper was to understand the potential role of sport in fostering occupational mobility for refugees in the Netherlands. The connection between participation in sport and the development of workplace skills and social networks that transcend sport clubs was examined. This research study utilised the Thematic Analysis approach to explore the views of seven professionals who organise sporting activities for refugees and work closely with them. The findings of this study suggest that sport is a key way for refugees to expand their social networks, engage in voluntary opportunities and develop skills that can be transferable to other contexts, such as the workplace. The research suggests that participation in physical activity programmes provides ethnic minorities with a wide range of physical, social and mental health benefits. This study provides useful recommendations for organisations aiming to develop and deliver sport interventions for refugees that facilitate integration and occupational mobility. Once the positive aspects of sport interventions are maximised, it is a powerful and cost-effective way of supporting a range of development objectives for refugees.

Key words: Sport Participation, Refugees, Integration, Ethnic Minorities, Interventions

Introduction

The Netherlands in particular is becoming increasingly diverse due to immigration and the policies of the Dutch government towards ethnic minorities being focused on integration (Hollands 2001; Van Thijn 1994). Ethnic minorities encounter several challenges around adjustment in their host countries. Occupational mobility is one of these challenges and there is a need to better understand how refugees access, negotiate and enact social relationships in their new environments (Spaij 2015). In recent years, sport interventions have become increasingly common in Europe in the context of the integration of ethnic minorities (Walseth and Fasting 2004). The impact of sport on the integration of refugees has been acknowledged by the Council of Europe; the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) has implemented an interactive platform for different parties who are interested in this topic and who want to cooperate in projects and exchange insights (Council of Europe 2019).

Sport interventions have been found to facilitate settlement and support the integration process to build social inclusion and social networks (Andersson 2002; SCP 2003; Sherril and Williams 1996; Walseth 2006; Xu *et al.* 2018; Zacheus 2010). However, others have stated that sport participation may cause constraints, including discrimination, language barriers, lack of resources and social support (Doherty and Taylor 2007; Olliff 2008).

As these are issues that are commonly faced by refugees after migration, understanding the role of sport in the lives of refugees when living in the host country is therefore key to understanding the wider challenges of social integration and thus, occupational mobility as well. At the same time, recent research has demonstrated that there is an association between participation in sport and the development of employability skills (Gould and Carson 2007; Super *et al.* 2014). However, a specific focus on refugees has largely been overlooked.

Against this background, the aim of this qualitative research is to understand what role, if any, sport has in fostering occupational mobility for refugees in the Netherlands. Refugees in this study were defined as “asylum seekers, people with a refugee status, status on humanitarian grounds, temporary permit status, or, in some cases, people whose application for asylum has been denied” (Hollands 2001, p. 313). Rather than using the formal juridical definition of the UN General Assembly (1951), the broader definition of Hollands (2001) better reflects the aims of this paper, as the organisations that will be interviewed often adopt similarly broad definitions themselves. *The aim of this paper was to explore the role of sport in fostering occupational mobility among refugees in the Netherlands.* The views of seven professionals who work closely with refugees through organising sporting activities for them, were examined. Participants shared their views on the role of sport in the integration process, particularly on the development of employability skills.

Based on the fact that the unemployment rate of refugees in the Netherlands is relatively high at the time of writing, there is merit in exploring solutions which could reduce the rate of unemployment (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2018). Moreover, it is recognised that there is a lack of research on specific best practices and case studies on the role of sport in the integration of ethnic minorities (Nadeau *et al.* 2016). Further work on this topic is needed to examine the connection between participation in sport and the development of workplace skills and social networks that transcend sport clubs (Coakley 1993). Additionally, more research is needed for greater understanding of how organisations should design and deliver sport programs that contribute to the development of refugees' skills (Anderson *et al.* 2019).

This paper will first review basic concepts and theories of integration to contextualise the participation of refugees in sport. It will then move onto examining the benefits of sport participation for integration. Values and professional skills that could potentially be obtained through physical activity will also be presented, in addition to discussion of constraints of sport interventions.

The methods section will discuss the process of this study utilising thematic analysis. The paper will conclude with a discussion around the findings, exploring further research directions and offering practical implications of the study.

Basic concepts

An integral element of Dutch sport policies is the idea of “sport for all”, i.e. sport interventions which are accessible to all participants, regardless their social status or background (Elling and Knoppers 2001). However, there is research suggesting that sport interventions may be less accessible for some participant pools, such as female refugees (Schwenzer 2007; Walseth and Fasting 2004). Thus, more research is required to better understand the potential and limitations of sport interventions.

Throughout this paper the terms ‘sport’ and ‘participation in sport’ refer to “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, forming social relationships, or obtaining results in competition at all levels” (The Council of Europe 2001, p. 1). The term ‘sport interventions’ is used to describe ways to achieve participation in sport. In the context of positive psychology, sport interventions could be seen as a specific positive psychology intervention (PPI), which refers to “a treatment method or intentional activity that aims to cultivate positive feelings, behaviours, or cognitions” (Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009, p. 467). For the purpose of this paper, it is also important to make the distinction between immigrants and refugees. The two groups have characteristics in common; however, a primary difference is the reason for emigrating from their home country (Ha and Lyras 2013). Refugees move to a new society involuntarily due to causes such as violent or traumatic environments (Lusting *et al.* 2004). General immigrants often emigrate for voluntary motives, such as in search of better economic opportunities. This paper will the focus on refugees, and this term will be used interchangeably with the term ‘ethnic minority’.

The indicators of refugee integration: an indicator framework

The indicators of integration framework is discussed in this paper to generally understand how sport could potentially facilitate integration and occupational mobility (Ager and Strang 2008). The indicators of integration framework (Figure 1, below) categorises ten core domains, each of which identifies one aspect of integration.

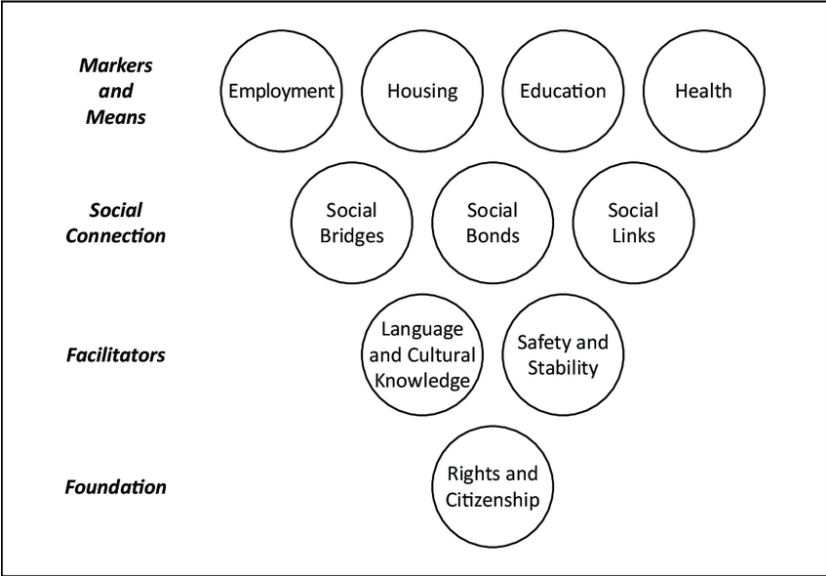


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration.

Ager and Strang (2008) suggest in their framework that after foundational aspects of integration, the facilitations of integration are *language and cultural knowledge* as well as *safety and stability*. There are a number of ways sport could potentially aid these processes. For example, sport has been found to be effective for developing social, cognitive and language competencies in host societies (Breuer and Rittner 2004; Doherty and Taylor 2007; Ha and Lyras 2013). Moreover, ethnic minorities learn transferable life skills through sport, such as tolerance and respect for others, which could make them socially, morally, emotionally and behaviourally more competent (Bailey 2005; Damon 2004; Larson 2000). These skills are essential when considering occupational mobility. It could therefore be argued that sport has the potential to increase the occupational mobility of refugees through the cultivation of social and language skills.

Theeboom *et al.* (2012) found that skills that were developed through sport could also be applied in (non-sport) setting, such as the workplace. Moreover, previous research studies have demonstrated that sport interventions could contribute to the psychosocial growth and character development of refugee youth (Parker *et al.* 2019; Damon 2004). Additionally, Vroome and Van Tubergen (2010) found that work experience, language skills, and relationships with natives were positively correlated with the employment rates for refugees. In this study, it was also found that insecurity around whether asylum would be granted affected the upcoming labour market integration.

Spaaij (2012) found that sport participation in community clubs can play an important role in fostering a sense of community belonging. Sport can also increase refugees' self-respect in a strange culture and help them to become accustomed to their new situation more quickly (Zacheus 2010). Based on this evidence, it could be argued that sport allows refugees to exercise in a safe and relaxed environment in which they can socialise with others and develop several skills (Spaaij 2012).

Furthermore, Ager and Stranger's framework (2018) describe *health* as a critical marker in the integration process. After stressful journeys to new countries, refugees are experiencing several problems and needs associated with their health, safety, wellbeing and social welfare (Anderson *et al.*, 2019). Physical activity (PA) could reduce these health issues as PA has been found to be beneficial to both physical and psychological wellbeing (Penedo and Dahn 2005). Smyth, Stewart and Da Lomba (2010) argue that further research is needed to examine various elements of Ager and Stranger's (2008) framework and connect them with migration paths and long-term experiences of refugees. However, this discussion falls outside the scope of this paper.

Potential constraints of sport interventions

It is important to acknowledge the potential constraints of sport interventions when working with refugees. These include language differences, time constraints, and discrimination (Goodkind and Foster-Fishman 2002). A research study in the Netherlands found that ethnically mixed football teams led to mixed results; friendships were fostered, but so too was aggression, violence, hostile attitudes and polarity (Krouwel *et al.* 2006). Competitive and physical elements of the game itself could partially explain these negative social behaviours. Another key challenge is that sport initiatives encounter more difficulties to reach female refugees (Schwenzer 2007; Walseth and Fasting 2004), which may be partially due to male-dominated structures. However, another cause for this inequality could be that refugee women and girls have limited role models in sports in their home country, as some cultures do not encourage female participation in sport.

Considering the potential limitations of sport interventions on the integration process and acknowledging not just the benefits, it is essential to understand what sport interventions can contribute to integration and in which social context their full potential can be achieved. Furthermore, it is important to analyse the differences in patterns of intrinsic motivation between ethnic groups.

For example, a 'sense of belonging' and 'reinforcement of identity' are strong intrinsic motivations in the context of sport for Turkish minorities (Krouwel *et al.* 2006, p. 172). On the other hand, Dutch minorities are primarily motivated to participate in sport because they want to meet people, including those from outside their own culture. Due to the gaps identified above and the tremendous potential of sport in facilitating occupational mobility, this study aimed to explore the role of sport in fostering employment opportunities for refugees.

Methodology

Research design

This study utilised the Thematic Analysis (TA) to explore the perspectives of seven professionals, who organise sporting activities for refugees and work closely with them. These professionals were chosen to participate in the study based on their expertise working with refugees, and because their organisations are impactful sport providers for refugees. The reason for choosing TA was because of its accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix III) were conducted via Skype to elicit understanding of the phenomenon. This method of interviewing created an interesting dialogue between the researcher and participant, as initial questions were amended to the participants' responses (Terry *et al.* 2017). The epistemological framework of this study takes a critical relativist position, i.e. that there are numerous interpretations of reality, none of which can either be untrue or correct (Guba 1990). The main themes of the interviews were: a) background information participant and organisation; b) occupational outcomes of sport interventions; c) skills developed through sport; and d) future directions.

Participants

Participants were over 18 years of age and currently working to provide refugees with sporting opportunities. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a group of participants for whom the research questions of this study were most significant was selected (Braun and Clarke 2006). Several organisations, charities, and governments in the Netherlands were approached. Documents obtained from the staff of these parties were used to provide general background information on the sport programmes, as well as conceptualizing the focus group(s) and aim(s) of the aforementioned parties.

Only after the organisations had agreed for the researcher to approach the employees to be part of the study, the researcher started recruiting participants.

Ethical considerations

The study has achieved an ethical approval from the University of East London (UEL) ethics board. The research study has been guided by the Code of Ethics and Conduct, written by the Ethics Committee of the British Psychological Society. The risk Code of Practice for Research, written by the UEL, was used as additional guidance for the consideration of ethical questions. Participants were allocated pseudonyms and these were used throughout this study to protect anonymity.

Procedure

Professionals who were interested in participating in the research were given a letter of information and were formally invited to participate in the research study. The participants also received a debrief letter with information around their safety and data protection. The interviewer is the leading researcher of this paper; she is a female academic with Dutch as her first language. The interviews were held in Dutch, via Skype, and approximately took between twenty minutes and one hour. The interview was recorded; consent from participants to do so was obtained in advance. All participants were required to read and sign the consent form prior to the interview. Two copies were signed, one of which stayed with the participant and the other was sent to the researcher via email.

Data collection

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, using a constant comparative method to review the data and identify themes and supporting quotes (Patton 2002). The interviews were transcribed in Dutch; however, the data was analysed in English to discuss information with the researchers' supervisor. The data was transcribed in detail; the transcripts have been checked against the recordings to guarantee accuracy (Braun and Clarke 2006). After transcription, the data was collected on seven separate mindmaps (one for each participant). These mindmaps ensured a logical, traceable and clearly documentation of the data (Lorelli *et al.* 2017). The data collection was conducted in a systematic approach; quotes were transparently discussed with the researchers' supervisor to guarantee the quality of the research (Lorelli *et al.* 2017).

Moreover, a reflexive journal was used by the researcher to keep a self-critical account of the research process (Yardley 2000).

Data analysis

The six-phase analytic process suggested by Terry *et al.* (2017) was used to analyse the data underlying this study. The initial stage, becoming familiar with the data, involved reading the transcripts of the interviews a number of times. The interpretations of both participants' and researchers' phenomena were considered. This analytical process is often referred to as a dual interpretation process; firstly, participants made sense of their world and, then, the researcher tried to make meaning of the participants' experience (Braun and Clarke 2006). The second phase involved a basic descriptive level of coding (Langridge 2004). Gradually, the researcher worked towards a more interpretative level of coding and started to construct themes in the third phase, which were reviewed in the fourth phase of the process. An inductive 'bottom up' approach was used to identify themes within the data. This flexible approach allowed themes to emerge that were strongly data driven. In the fifth phase, the reviewed themes were defined and named in a code book, which included labels, definitions, instructions on identifying codes and themes, exclusions, and examples (Terry *et al.* 2017). In the sixth phase, the researcher produced the final report, in which she communicated the findings of the data analysis.

Findings

The overarching finding was that sport is an instrument for refugees to expand their social networks. Another significant finding was that several skills can be developed through sport interventions, which can be transferable to the workplace. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the process are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Main themes and sub-themes.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Prevalence*
1. Professional outcomes	1.1 Building up network	6/7
	1.2 Voluntary work	6/7
	1.3 Education	5/7
2. Main skills developed and benefits	2.1 Language	6/7
	2.2 Collaborating	6/7
	2.2.1 Social Skills	3/7
	2.3 Improving wellbeing	5/7
3. Future directions	3.1 Integrating role models	4/7
	3.1.1 Buddy systems	3/7
	3.2 Reaching female refugees	6/7
	3.3 Reaching target groups	3/7

* Proportion of participants that contributed to each theme.

1. Professional outcomes

According to participants, sport interventions can support refugees to increase their occupational mobility. Analysis of the data showed that by participating in sport interventions, refugees learn skills that are transferable to the workplace. Carmen described it as:

'Collaborating, concentrating and time management are skills refugees learn through sport activities. They can definitely apply these skills in their social lives and careers too.' (Carmen, p.2, line 69-70)

1.1 Building up network

Eighty-five percent of those interviewed indicated that refugees expand their social networks and meet people who are experiencing similar challenges through sport interventions. Participants explained that organisations should link social activities to sport interventions, for example by organising a social event after a football match. Creating opportunities to meet other people is key for expanding the social networks of refugees. Frederik described it as:

'Building up a new network is one of the most important things for refugees when they arrive in a new country. Sport is an accessible way to do this. It would also be good if organisations give refugees the opportunity to socialise after a sport activity.' (Frederik, p.5, 184-186)

Participation in sport activities leads to friendships and prevents feelings of loneliness and isolation.

'I see that people become friends through sport. They meet each other after the sport activities and do fun things together.' (Heleen, p.3, line 99-101)

'Sport activities make refugees feel less lonely and it gives their lives more meaning.' (Sarah, p.2, line 43-44)

1.2 Voluntary work

The data showed that voluntary work is an important step to improve the occupational mobility of refugees, as they can learn new skills and gain work experience. Eighty-five percent of participants came up with examples of refugees who did voluntary work and eventually found work through this opportunity. Participants mentioned that sport clubs should be more accessible – offering voluntary work to refugees would support their integration process greatly, thus expanding the benefits of sport outside the clubs as Frederik describes:

'A Syrian man who joined our program to work voluntary behind the bar in a football club. Everybody liked him there. I knew somebody that needed help at a party, so I introduced him to my friend. He met somebody at this party who eventually offered him a job in a restaurant.' (Frederik, p.7, line 275-279)

1.3 Education

A small number of those interviewed indicated that there was higher sport participation among high skilled refugees compared to ethnic minorities with lower educational backgrounds. Those with higher educational backgrounds were perceived as mastering the Dutch language easily and used their advanced social skills to take on important opportunities, such as voluntary work, as Anna describes:

'I think it's easier to understand the language and interact with others for refugees with higher educational backgrounds. They also understand that they should take on opportunities to develop themselves, such as internships or voluntary work.' (Anna, p.6, line 230-232)

Even though some high skilled refugees seemed to flourish, there were also examples of high skilled refugees that were struggling to find their career path in the Netherlands.

According to the professionals, the challenges of high skilled refugees could partly be explained because of their wish to attain the same occupational status as they had in their home country:

'Highly educated refugees are often frustrated about starting in an entry-level position in the Netherlands. Perhaps they were a doctor in their own country, but here they are a 'nobody'.' (Andrea, p.4, line 150-151)

In contrast to the results described above, there were few participants who clearly stated there is no link between education and the development of skills. In their opinion the refugees' character and their willingness to succeed was key to their personal and professional growth:

'I cannot say whether people with higher education backgrounds tend to participate more in sport activities.' (Carmen, p.2, line 77-78)

Anna also expanded her original conclusions around higher education and mastering certain skills. She wondered if other factors could also play a part in skill development:

'An important factor to success is how eager people are to become successful. It depends on their personal characteristics and feelings.' (Anna, p.6, line 235-237)

2. Main skills developed through sport and benefits

According to the data, several skills are developed through sport interventions. The main skills that were listed by most participants, were language skills, collaborating and social skills. Evidence for these findings will be presented below. One participant explained that in their program developing skills is mostly an individual process, as everybody develops their own personal goals.

'We offer a 20-week exercise program for refugees. Prior to this program, we write a personal development plan with each participant to discuss their goals.' (Anna, p.5, line 208)

2.1 Language

Eighty-five percent of those interviewed suggested that refugees improve their Dutch language skills through sports. Participants reported that playing sport games with refugees is extremely useful for learning new vocabulary words. Making refugees think on their feet is a great way to engage them with a new language.

'Sport plays an important role in learning the language in a new country. Why? Because it happens informally through sport. They try to understand the language, speak it themselves and are surrounded by people who already speak the language.' (Samuel, p.1, line 16-17)

2.2 Collaborating

Collaborating was another skill that was mentioned by the majority of participants. In most sport activities, participants have to work in a team. Teamwork in sports makes the communication skills of participants stronger, as they have to be aware of each other and collaborate to be successful as a team. Andrea described it as:

'Collaborating is an important skill that refugees develop through our sport activities. They have to collaborate with others to understand the activity and be successful as a team.' (Andrea, p.4, line 136-137)

2.2.1 Social skills

Social skills was the third most common skill that was reported. Through sport activities, refugees must communicate with other participants and interact with trainers at the event. In some sport activities such as football, refugees have to adjust to new rules that are not always applicable in their own culture. Additionally, they have to be aware of other people's feelings and behaviours, and define boundaries in situations they may not feel confident in.

'I believe sport activities are a great tool for refugees to develop their social skills. It is amazing to see how strongly committed they are to each other and help others where they can.' (Anna, p.2, line 84-85)

2.3 Improving wellbeing

Sport programmes serve as a positive and productive activity for refugees easing many of the problems they face. Most participants felt that sport activities give refugees more energy, it reduces negative feelings and increases their confidence. Heleen talked about:

'Activities such as swimming and cycling can be scary for refugees, because they have never done it before. After trying they are so happy and amazed to see they can float or balance on a bicycle. It builds up their confidence and they feel more independent.' (Heleen, p.4, line 140-142)

Andrea added that sport improves the physical and psychological wellbeing of refugees:

'I believe sport gives refugees the opportunity to worry less and focus on feeling healthier and happier.' (Andrea, p.3, line 109-111)

3. Future directions

The participants talked about the importance of understanding the challenges faced by refugees, pacing their journey and not being overly demanding from these individuals initially.

'Sometimes we ask too much from refugees. They are in a new country and have to think about many things. Taking it step by step would be good I think. We shouldn't overwhelm people, this will only lead to stress.' (Sarah, p.3, line 93-95)

3.1 Integrating role models

A significant result that came out the interviews was almost all participants (eighty-five percent) suggest working with role models. Role models are people who came to the Netherlands as refugees themselves and are now fully integrated into the Dutch society. Role models often support organisations on a voluntary basis.

'Role models could help newcomers who also have an interest in sport. They could be an inspiration for others to follow the same route and do voluntary work, start a language course or join a football club.' (Samuel, p.2, line 132-134)

Role models truly understand newcomers, as they have been through similar traumas and challenges. They also often speak the same language as newcomers, which makes it easier to support them with their needs.

3.1.1 Buddy systems

Forty-three percent of the professionals mentioned that integrating buddy systems could be useful to stimulate refugees in making the first steps towards sport participation. Sport buddies could be students from universities, or people who want to do something extra for their community. One of the professionals mentioned that their organisation organises speed dates with their sport buddies (who are students), in which refugees can ask them about their studies. This concept worked as it was an accessible way for refugees to find out more about universities and different types of courses in the Netherlands.

'Sport buddies are an effective way for refugees to learn more about the education system in the Netherlands. Sport buddies can help refugees to get in contact with sport clubs. Sport buddies make participating in sport less scary.' (Frederik, p.2, line 73-75)

3.2 Reaching female refugees

Nearly all participants (eighty-five percent) said that female refugees tend to participate less than men in sport activities due to cultural challenges. Women are not used to participating in sport activities and they are often more reserved, or were reluctant to exercise with men. The participants emphasised the importance of talking about the boundaries of women and showing respect and understanding.

'With female refugees, we find it important to talk about cultural differences. We respect that they find it difficult to participate in sport activities with men. However, we try to talk about these topics as they might have to deal with similar issues in their future careers.' (Anna, p.4, line 60-64)

Samuel, who refers refugees in asylum seekers' centres to football clubs, mentioned that the communication with supervisors at these centres is often challenging. He described it as:

'Support workers in asylum centres often claim that female refugees aren't interested in sport or that they need to take care of their children. I would like to speak with these women myself to find out what they want and how we can help them overcome potential barriers to sport participation.' (Samuel, p.2, line 41-43)

3.3 Reaching target groups

One of the recurring themes of the interviews was difficulties related to recruitment. It was apparent that a significant challenge for some organisations was being able to reach refugees, and adequately incentivise them to come to sport events. A number of professionals mentioned difficulties in finding the right mediums to communicate sport initiatives. The professionals identified personal contact as an important factor in motivating refugees to participate.

'It is challenging to get people to participate and to use the correct communication channel to reach them. Hanging up a few posters and leaflets is not going to work, you need to try and motivate people to come.' (Andrea, p.5, line 187-188)

Finally, one of the professionals mentioned that it would be beneficial for refugees to learn to organise their own sport activities. This could be something simple, e.g. setting up a walking group with a number of ladies. By giving them freedom to organise their own activity and choose the people they want to socialise with, refugees will hopefully be keener on participating.

'It would be useful if refugees learn to organise sport activities themselves. They could talk about their values and beliefs and how the Dutch culture is different than their own cultures.' (Sarah, p.2, line 66-67)

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the role of sport in facilitating occupational mobility for refugees in the Netherlands, through interviewing professionals who provide refugees with sporting opportunities. Our study found evidence that sport is a facilitator of integration. The main findings of the study were that sport gives refugees the opportunity to expand their social networks, engage in voluntary opportunities and develop skills that can be transferable to other contexts, such as the workplace. This aligns with previous empirical research (SCP 2003; Theeboom, Schaillée and Nols 2012; Xu *et al.* 2018; Zacheus 2010), which has emphasised the significance of sport in developing social relationships and skills that could be applied in wider settings. Therefore, the integration of ethnic minorities into society is advanced. Theeboom *et al.* (2012) added that sporting outcomes such as skills development might lead to pro-social development and broader social integration. Furthermore, our study found that female refugees tend to participate less in sport activities for cultural reasons. Moreover, the professionals in our study highlighted the challenges faced by organisations in reaching refugees and adequately incentivising them to participate in sport. These findings will be discussed in detail below.

The data of this study suggests that refugees learn several skills through sport interventions, including those of language, social and collaboration, which are key elements of Ager and Stranger's (2008) integration framework (Figure 1). The role of language in future employment opportunities for refugees cannot be overemphasised according to the professionals in this study. They mentioned that if refugees are unable to communicate effectively in Dutch society, this imposes severe limitations in nearly all aspects of their lives. According to the professionals in our study, participating in sport activities is a creative and playful way of learning the Dutch language. Previous studies found that sport clubs should offer additional language courses in combination with sports programs, to speed up the process of learning a new language (Anderson *et al.* 2019). Our study added to this that sporting games which are specifically designed with the intention of broadening the vocabulary of participants can be an even more powerful tool for learning the Dutch language. However, there is a lack of research on how organisations should organise these educational games.

The findings in our study demonstrated that sport is a key way to encourage volunteerism within ethnic minorities and achieve the resulting benefits, such as skill acquisition, increased work experience and social integration. As suggested by Theeboom *et al.* (2012), engaging in voluntary opportunities is an important marker of integration, as it can promote a sense of belonging and solidarity within communities. Despite the many positive elements of volunteering, there is evidence which suggests that most ethnic minorities do not participate in voluntary work (Walseth 2006a). Moreover, the professionals in our study highlighted that sport clubs should offer more voluntary work to refugees to support their integration process. This evidence highlights a gap which could be filled by governments and sport clubs to leverage the potential of voluntary work. For example, sport clubs could implement a system whereby voluntary work is rewarded with complementary membership.

Our results share a number of similarities with the findings of Elling and De Knop, (2001). They found that the major reason for females to not participate in sport interventions is due to 'the Islamic rules of life', which they are obligated to follow. However, Elling and De Knop (2001) also found that female refugees do have an interest in sport. Taken together, these findings suggest that female refugees could be included in sport activities, hence they learn that in other cultures it is acceptable for them to participate. As women may experience similar challenges with men in their future careers, it is important to address their obstacles. Taylor (2003) indicated there is a conflict between the sport providers' perceptions of the needs of women and the views of female refugees themselves. As described in the result section, this was also found in the present study. To maximise sport participation and social integration amongst female refugees, organisations should approach women and talk about their interpersonal and structural barriers to their participation. Moreover, it is crucial to understand the differences between cultural backgrounds as they can lead to ethnical issues (Walseth and Fasting 2004).

As previously mentioned, those that were interviewed believed that refugees with a higher level of education participated more frequently in sporting activities compared to those with lower educational attainment. However, the professionals in our study also found that high-skilled refugees often experience more challenges during their integration process than low-skilled refugees. Ager and Strang (2008) found that major barriers to securing employment are restrictions and country-specific education requirements.

Hartog and Zorlu (2009) found that higher education (e.g., a university degree) acquired in the home country of refugees did not increase employment chances, possibly due to language proficiency that is needed in host countries, which is also described in Ager and Stranger's framework (Figure 1). It could be beneficial to take greater account of the education attainment of refugees and strive to find them roles suited for their skills.

Furthermore, participants in our study claimed that sport interventions have the important role of improving refugees' physical and psychological wellbeing. This was also found in Ager and Stranger's (2018) framework (Figure 1); they described *health* as a critical marker in the integration process. Ethnic minorities have been found to suffer from mental health issues, feelings of isolation, a lack of familiar routines, and feeling loss of identify (Andersona *et al.*, 2019; Zacheus 2010). Physical activity (PA) on the other hand enhances one's self-esteem and reduces stress and anxiety (Department of Health PA, Health Improvement and Protection 2011). The findings around the benefits of PA suggest that ethnic minorities would benefit greatly from regular exercise, as it promotes physical and mental health and reduces health inequalities, antisocial behaviour, whilst improving safety and cohesion (Block and Gibbs 2017). Through sport interventions, refugees could improve their wellbeing, and gain an appreciation of the positive influence physical activity can have on other aspects of their lives.

Finally, our research study highlights the need for new creative approaches to ensure consistent refugee participation in sporting activities. When designing sport initiatives, programme objectives and the mediums to communicate must be clearly defined. Additionally, Andersona *et al.* (2019) found that key individuals influence the continued existence of sport programs. As most of the sport activities are designed and delivered by a few individuals, organisations must ensure that the program will be delivered consistently.

In practice, it is important to be mindful of the complexity around sporting participation for refugees as it does not automatically lead to intercultural interaction and tolerance (Zacheus 2010). The professionals in our study mentioned that organisations should encourage refugees to undertake additional social activities to expand their networks and meet citizens in their host countries. This confirms previous findings of Zacheus (2010), whose study suggests that refugees should practice sport with citizens of the host country to become acquainted with the new culture. However, several studies have demonstrated that ethnic minorities prefer to participate in sporting activities within their own ethnic groups (Duyvendak 1998; Elling and De Knop 2001; Janssens 2003).

This may partly be because they tend to spend their time with people who come from a similar sociocultural background and have the same interests and social status. Moreover, refugees who emigrate to another country may presume that sport is a luxury or is only accessible to citizens (Richmond 2002). Thus, sport also needs to be accessible and affordable as well as readily available to ethnic minorities early on in their adjustment process. Sport interventions that reflect common characteristics of both the native and host country of the newcomer (e.g. football) are most effective (Ha and Lyras 2013). Our study did not confirm any significant differences between the sport interventions; the majority of the professionals in our study could not identify an intervention that was more effective than the others. Therefore, further research is needed to evaluate several sport interventions, in both an individual and group context.

Study limitations and recommendations for future research

There are a number of limitations to this current study which should be considered when interpreting the findings. As the participants may have been inclined to talk about their organisation in a positive manner, further research will be needed to validate the outcomes of this research in a larger sample. Due to time constraints, the researcher made the decision to end the recruitment process after completing seven interviews. This was enough data for the analysis.

The second limitation concerns the chosen research method of this study. As our study only examined the experiences of professionals, it would be beneficial to conduct interviews with ethnic minorities themselves, to find out what their needs are. Additionally, future research would also benefit from using a variety of methods, to explore the variables around participation in sport and employability as thoroughly as possible. It may also be interesting to conduct 'embodied' qualitative research, which focuses on the body and aims to make sense of the participants' inner world through embodied experiences (Chadwick 2017). Vacchelli (2018) used this research method in her study on the bodily engagement of collage-making with ethnic minorities.

Finally, whilst the Netherlands might be considered as a country that represent best practices in this area, it is valuable to point out that this is relative as the understanding of how to develop refugee sport programs is still limited. Future research studies should continue to add both depth and breadth to the literature concerning sport programmes for ethnic minorities.

As discussed in this paper, developing language skills is immensely important for refugees in a new host country. However, more research is required to understand how organisations should design and deliver interactive educational games to stimulate the language development of refugees.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the role of sport in fostering occupational mobility amongst refugees in the Netherlands. The evidence from this study suggests that sport is an inexpensive and effective way of improving employability amongst ethnic minorities. By developing core skills essential for the workplace such as teamwork, confidence and social skills, sport activities provide refugees with a constructive activity that helps reduce anti-social behaviour and provides a meaningful substitute to work. This study has also demonstrated that sport is a key way for refugees to learn the Dutch language; the professionals highlighted that sports in which refugees expand their vocabulary are a novel way of developing their language skills. Moreover, by participating in sport activities refugees get the opportunity to expand their social network and engage in voluntary work. However, governments and sport clubs should encourage volunteerism more by offering volunteering opportunities. Results in this study demonstrated that participation in physical activity programmes provides ethnic minorities with a wide range of physical, social and mental health benefits. This study also found that female refugees tend to participate less in sport activities due to cultural challenges. Additionally, we found that it is difficult for organisations to reach refugees and inform them about sport opportunities. Together, the benefits from sport programs provide a powerful means to tackle social exclusion and integrate ethnic minorities into their communities. The study provides useful recommendations for organisations aiming to develop and deliver sport interventions for refugees. When the positive aspects of sport interventions are maximised and challenges are tackled, it is a powerful and cost-effective way of supporting a range of development objectives.

- AGER, A. AND STRANG, A.** (2008) 'Understanding integration: A conceptual framework'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2): 166–191.
- ANDERSSON, M.** (2002) 'Identity work in sports. Ethnic minority youth, Norwegian macro debates and the role Model aspect'. *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 3: 83-106.
- ANDERSON, A., DIXON, M. A., OSHIRO, K., WICKER, P., CUNNINGHAM, G. B. AND HEERE, B.** (2019) 'Managerial perceptions of factors affecting the design and delivery of sport for health programs for refugee populations'. *Sport Management Review* 22: 80-95.
- BAILEY, R.** (2005) 'Evaluating the relationship between physical education, sport and inclusion'. *Educational Review* 57(1): 71-90.
- BERRY, J. W.** (1986) 'The acculturation process and refugee behaviour'. In Westermeyer C. L. and J. (eds.) *Refugee mental health in resettlement countries*. Washington: Hemisphere Publishing, pp. 22-37.
- BLOCK, K. AND GIBBS, L.** (2017) 'Promoting Social Inclusion through Sport for Refugee-Background Youth In Australia: Analysing Different Participation Models'. *Social Inclusion* 5(2): 91-100.
- BRAUN, V. AND CLARKE, V.** (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*' 3(2): 77-101.
- BREUER, C. AND RITTNER, V.** (2004) *Gemeinwohlorientierung und soziale Bedeutung des Sports*. Köln: Strauß.
- CENTRAAL BUREAU VOOR DE STATISTIEK.** (2018) *Uit de startblokken: Cohortstudie naar recente asielmigratie*. Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.
- CHADWINK, R.** (2017) 'Embodied methodologies: challenges, reflections and strategies'. *Qualitative Research* 17(1): 54-74.
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE.** (2019) *Migrants and their integration through sport*. Retrieved February 28, 2019, From <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/migrants-and-their-integration-through-sport>
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE.** (2001) *The European sports charter* (revised). Brussels: Council of Europe.
- COAKLEY, J.** (1993) 'Sport and Socialization'. *Exercise and Sport Sciences* 21(1): 169-200.
- DAMON, W.** (2004) 'What is Positive Youth Development?' *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591(1): 13-24.
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH PA, HEALTH IMPROVEMENT AND PROTECTION.** (2011) *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*. London: Department of Health.
- DE VROOME, T. AND VAN TUBERGEN, F.** (2010) 'The employment experience of refugees in the Netherlands'. *International Migration Review* 44(2): 376-403.
- DOHERTY, A. AND TAYLOR, T.** (2007) 'Sport and physical recreation in the settlement of immigrant youth'. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies* 31(1): 27-55.
- DUYVENDAK, J.W., KROUWEL, A., BOONSTRA, N. AND KRAAIJKAMP, R.** (1998) *Integratie door sport? Een onderzoek naar gemengde en ongemengde sportbeoefening van allochtonen en autochtonen*. Rotterdam: Bestuursdienst.

- ELLING, A. AND DE KNOP, P.** (2001) 'Sport en sociale integratie: ervaringen en meningen uit het veld'. *Vrijetijdstudies* 19: 35-52.
- ELLING, A. AND KNOPPERS, A.** (2001) 'The social meaning of sport: A critical and comparative analysis of policy and practice in the Netherlands'. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18: 414-434.
- GOODKIND, J. R. AND FOSTER-FISHMAN, P. G.** (2002) 'Integrating diversity and fostering interdependence: Ecological Lessons learned about refugee participation in multi-ethnic communities'. *Journal of Community Psychology* 30(4): 389-409.
- GOULD, D. AND CARSON, S.** (2007) 'Life skills development through sport: current status and future directions'. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 1(1): 58-78.
- GUBA, E.** (1990) *The Paradigm Dialog*. London: Sage.
- HA, J. AND LYRAS, A.** (2013) 'Sport for Refugee Youth in a New Society: The Role of Acculturation in SFDP Programming'. *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation* 35(2): 121-140.
- HARTOG, J. AND ZORLU, A.** (2009) 'How important is homeland education for refugees' economic position in the Netherlands?' *Journal of Population Economics* 22(1): 219-246.
- HOLLANDS, M.** (2001) 'Upon Closer Acquaintance: The Impact of Direct Contact with Refugees on Dutch Hosts'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(3): 295-314.
- JANSSENS, J.** (1999) *Etnische tweedeling in de sport*. Den Bosch: Diopter.
- KROUWEL, A., BOONSTRA, N., DUUVENDAK, J. W. AND VELDBOER, L.** (2006) 'A good sport? Research into the capacity of recreational sport to integrate Dutch minorities'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41: 165-180.
- LANGRIDGE, D.** (2004) *Introduction to research methods and data analysis in psychology*. Harlow: Pearson.
- LARSON, R. W.** (2000) 'Toward a psychology of positive youth development'. *American Psychologist* 55: 170-183.
- LUSTING, S. L., KIA-KEATING, M., KNIGHT, W. G., GELTMAN, P., ELLIS, H., KINZIE, J. D., KEANE, T. AND SAXE, G. N.** (2004) 'Review of child and adolescent refugee mental health'. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 43(1): 24-36.
- NADEAU, J., O'REILLY, N. AND SCOTT, A.** (2016) 'Community sport and the newcomer experience in small cities'. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal* 6(2): 110-136.
- NOWELL, L. S., NORRIS, J. M., WHITE, D. E. AND MOULES, N. J.** (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16: 1-13.
- OLLIFF, L.** (2008) 'Playing for the future: The role of sport and recreation in supporting refugee young people To 'settle well' in Australia'. *Youth Studies Australia* 27: 52-60.
- PARKER, A., MORGAN, H., FAROOQ, S., MORELAND, B. AND PITCHFORD, A.** (2019) 'Sport intervention and social change: football, marginalised youth and citizenship development'. *Sport, Education and Society* 24(3): 298-310.
- PATTON, M. Q.** (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

- PENEDO, F. J. AND DAHN, J. R.** (2005) 'Exercise and well-being: A review of mental and physical health benefits associated with physical activity'. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 2(18): 189-193.
- RICHMOND, A.** (2002) 'Globalization: Implications for immigrants and refugees'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25(5): 707-727.
- SCP.** (2003) *De sociale staat van Nederland 2003*. Den Haag: SDU.
- SHERRIL, C. AND WILLIAMS, T.** (1996) 'Disability and sport: psychosocial perspectives on inclusion, integration and participation'. *Sport Science Review* 5(1): 42-64.
- SCHWENZER, V.** (2017) *Sports for refugees: challenges for instructors and their support needs*. Berlin: Camino – Werkstatt für Fortbildung, Praxisbegleitung und Forschung im sozialen Bereich gGmbH.
- SIN, N. L. AND LYUBOMIRSKY, S.** (2009) 'Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis'. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65(5): 467-487.
- SMYTH, G., STEWART, E. AND DA LOMBA, S.** (2010) 'Introduction: Critical Reflections on Refugee Integration: Lessons from International Perspectives'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23(4), 411-414.
- SPAAIJ, R.** (2015) 'Refugee youth, belonging and community sport'. *Leisure Studies* 34(3): 303-318.
- SUPER, S., HERMENS, N., VERKOOIJEN, K. AND KOELEN, M.** (2014) 'Enhancing life prospects of socially vulnerable youth through sport participation: a mixed methods study'. *BMC Public Health* 14: 703.
- TAYLOR, T.** (2003) 'Issues of cultural diversity in women's sport'. *Journal of the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance* 39(3): 27-33.
- TERRY, G., HAYFIELD, N., CLARKE, V. AND BRAUN, V.** (2017) 'Thematic Analysis'. In Willig, C. and Rogers, W. S. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2nd ed, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 17-37.
- THEEBOOM, M., SCHAILLÉE, H. AND NOLS, Z.** (2012) 'Social capital development among ethnic minorities in mixed and separate sport clubs'. *International Journal of Sport Policy* 4(1): 1-21.
- UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, CONVENTION RELATING TO THE STATUS OF REFUGEES**, 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html> [accessed 20 March 2019]
- VACCHELLI, E.** (2018) 'Embodiment in qualitative research: collage making with migrant, refugee and asylum seeking women'. *Qualitative research* 18(2): 171-190.
- VAN THIJN, E.** (1994) *Integratie minderheden*. Nota van de Minister van Binnenlandse zaken.
- WALSETH, K. AND FASTING, K.** (2004) 'Sport as a Means of Integrating Minority Women. *Sport in Society* 7(1): 109-129.
- WALSETH, K.** (2006) 'Sport and belonging'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41: 447-464.
- WESTERMEYER, J.** (1989) *Mental health for refugees and other migrants. Social and Preventive Approaches*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas Publisher.
- XU, F., LIU, W., CHEPYATOR, T., JEPKORIR, R. AND SCHMIDLEIN, R.** (2018) 'Relations of Physical Activity and Stress Vulnerability in University Students'. *College Student Journal* 52(1): 65-73.

YARDLEY, L. (2000) 'Dilemmas in qualitative research'. *Psychology and Health*, 15: 215, 228.

ZACHEUS, T. (2010) 'The significance of sport and physical activity during the acculturation and integration process of immigrants in Finland – the experts' view'. *European Journal for Sport and Society* 7(2): 155-166.

Appendix I

Table 2: Frequency of themes across participants.

Participant	Building up network	Voluntary work	Education	Language	Collaborating	Social skills	Improving wellbeing	Integrating role models	Integrating buddy systems	Reaching minority women	Reaching target groups
Sarah	X		X	X	X		X	X		X	
Frederik	X	X		X			X		X	X	
Heleen	X	X	X	X	X	X		X			
Andrea	X	X	X	X	X		X			X	X
Samuel		X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Carmen	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Anna	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X