

SPORT PARTICIPATION IN IMMIGRANTS' ACCULTURATION: A CASE OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS

Won Jae SEO¹, Bo-Young MOON¹, Nam-Su KIM², Seunghwan LEE³,
Seong-Hee PARK² & Seungjin HAN¹

¹ *Department of Sports and Outdoors, Eulji University, Gyeonggi, Republic of Korea*

² *Division of International Sport and Leisure, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies,
Gyeonggi, Republic of Korea*

³ *College of Physical Education, Kookmin University, Seoul, Republic of Korea*

ABSTRACT

Because sport participation has increased among Asian immigrants, studies have explored the relationships among ethnic identity, acculturation and sport participation behaviour, and have found a significant link between acculturation and participation. A grounded theory approach was used to examine the relationship between the sport participation and acculturation of 22 Korean immigrants. Open and axial coding were used to develop a conceptual model, relating to seven motives of participation. Two categories of outcomes were found to assist with acculturation and three means that the outcomes supported acculturation. The outcomes are in alignment with Ward's (1996) psychological and socio-cultural factors. The conceptual model suggests sport participation reduced culture conflict and assisted in the acculturation process.

Key words: Immigrants; Sport Participation; Acculturation.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a phenomenon that affects most countries around the globe (Stodolska & Yi, 2003). Previous research investigated sport participation patterns and preferences across immigrant groups (Taylor & Toohey, 1996; Gobster, 1998) and cultural impacts on their behaviour (Hofstetter *et al.*, 2008). Other studies have also explored the relationships among ethnic identity, acculturation level and sport participation behaviour (Crespo *et al.*, 2001; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004). While previous literature provided insight about immigrants' sport participation and the function of sport in the acculturation process, the majority of the work on this topic has focused on European-Americans (Hutchison, 1987; Grey, 1992; Stodolska & Yi, 2003; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004) and Mexican-Americans (Jackson, 1973; Floyd & Gramann, 1993; Stodolska & Yi, 2003).

Although these are certainly large immigrant groups, the numbers of Asian immigrants in the United States has been increasing rapidly, with 11.7 million immigrants in the US coming from Asian countries (Choi & Thomas, 2009). Of this group of Asian immigrants, Koreans are one of the fastest growing groups and are the fourth largest Asian-American ethnic group in the United States. As with other immigrant groups, sport is an entrenched part of Korean immigrants' lifestyles, with 32% of Koreans in the United States avidly participating in sport

and exercise (Hofstetter *et al.*, 2008). In addition, recent studies found that Korean women immigrants devoted more time to vigorous exercise as their acculturation increased. This result is in line with findings of Crespo *et al.* (2001) that the acculturation process was positively associated with participation in leisure-time activity. Although there has been some research examining the relationship between physical activity and acculturation level, participation in sport, and the acculturation of Asian immigrants in the context of daily life, work and leisure activities, is still limited (Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport participation motives and Korean immigrants

Prior research has explored the motives that influence sport participation and identified the physical, psychological and social outcomes (enjoyment, skill development, challenge, achievement, social experience and fitness) that exist for participants (Huang *et al.*, 2007; Ebben & Brundzynski, 2008; Ko *et al.*, 2008). While there have been numerous studies on the motives of sport participants, few have concentrated on Korean (or other Asian) immigrants. Moreover, there is reason to believe that Western-based studies may not fully capture the motives of immigrants from Eastern cultures. For example, in a qualitative study of the cultural integration of older Korean immigrants, Kim *et al.* (2001) identified "Ki-Bun-Chun-Whan", meaning 'refreshment' and self-development as a key motive for older Korean-Americans to participate in leisure activities. These findings provide a basis for understanding why Korean immigrants engage in recreational and sport activities after settlement in the US. Although this study demonstrated that the motives of Korean immigrants were similar to those found among American-born participants, the study did not interpret the results based on culture. In other words, it is possible that a new cultural setting could influence the motives and activities of immigrant that has not yet been examined. Immigration involves encountering a new and different social milieu, where the individual must cope with and overcome the stresses of adaptation, such as identity confusion, language barriers, different socio-cultural norms, economic hardship, racial prejudice, or family conflict (Kim, 2002; Hofstetter *et al.*, 2008; Hwang *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is likely that different socio-psychological needs may motivate Korean immigrants to participate in sport.

Acculturation in sport

Sport and health psychology in previous literature have reported that participation in sport and exercise can provide psychological benefits, such as a sound state of being, happiness, personal well-being, stress release and mental health (Desha *et al.*, 2007; Sebire *et al.*, 2009). For example, Desha *et al.* (2007) found that males who were highly involved in sport clubs and exercise showed fewer symptoms of depression and a greater sense of well-being than males not involved in sport and exercise. In addition, some studies proposed that various leisure activities can function as social platforms for participants to interact with other members and to build sociability and social networks (Allender *et al.*, 2006; Burnett, 2006). Therefore, it appears possible that sport participation would reduce psychological symptoms, such as tension, depression, anger and fatigue symptoms originating from culture shock.

In 1996, Ward introduced the socio-cultural adaption framework and provided pivotal insights for understanding the acculturation process in a recreational sporting context. The socio-cultural adaptation is a useful framework for understanding acculturation and explains how an individual's personal well-being can be improved during the acculturation process. Ward argued that learning and acquisition of culture and social skills play important roles in understanding adaptation across various cultures and accelerate acculturation.

During the last 50 years, studies on ethnic minorities, their participation in sport and their acculturation, produced two different views of the role of sport participation in the acculturation process. The earlier studies supported the assimilation model to explain the relationship between sport participation immigrants and their cultural adaptation (Gordon, 1964). This model suggests ethnic minorities adopt the values, norms and behaviours of the host culture through participation in mainstream sports (Allison, 1982; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Floyd *et al.*, 2008). Similarly, in a more recent study examining the role of sport in the adaptation of Korean and Polish immigrants, Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) found active leisure participation plays an important role in facilitating inter-group contacts and breaking down barriers between ethnic minority members and mainstream Americans.

Critics of the assimilation model have argued that it is limited in that it focuses on the acculturation of immigrants participating only in mainstream sport clubs. In addition, the critics have suggested there is a limited effect of sport as an acculturation agent because of the self-segregation of immigrant sport participation. Stodolska *et al.* (2007) found that minorities use ethnic enclosure during leisure to distance themselves from ethnically motivated and unfair treatment at work, school or in public places. In line with ethnic enclosure, immigrants tend to engage in sport through their ethnic sport clubs, so sport participation does little to facilitate inter-group contact. Instead, participation in an ethnic sport club has a tendency to reinforce one's own ethnic identity and partially block the acculturation process (Stodolska *et al.*, 2007).

Since the mid-1990s, there have been a number of studies examining the leisure behaviour and cultural adaptation of Korean immigrants. None have yielded new findings and have simply reaffirmed the previous frameworks of the assimilation and limited effect models. In addition, there has been no consistent evidence supporting one paradigm over the other.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

In line with the assimilation view, Kim *et al.* (2005) found that sport helped Korean adolescents to deal with establishment-related problems, enhanced self-esteem and reduced stress related to acculturation. However, Hughes (1999) reported the significant role of sport clubs in the development of ethnic identity. Kim *et al.* (2001) found leisure activities contributed to maintaining the cultural bonds of Koreans, restored their sense of ethnic identity, reinforced their 'Koreanness' and maintained cultural traditions. Although these two views are in opposition, they each provide useful insight into the potential role sport can play in the acculturation process and they suggest the role of sport in the adaptation of immigrants to be complex. The problem is neither perspective provides a holistic framework with which to examine both the negative and positive aspects of sport. Unpacking the ways in which Korean immigrants think about sport participation and the meanings attached to their sport participation in the context of their lives within the host society, is an important step in understanding the

holistic effects of sport on the acculturation process. Consequently, the objectives of this study are: (1) to explore the psychological and socio-cultural aspects embedded in the acculturation process, as a result of sport participation by Korean immigrants, and (2) to produce useful insights for using Korean immigrants' acculturation to American life.

METHODOLOGY

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) was used to develop a conceptual framework that outlines the identified themes and their associations. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, this study employed purposive and theoretical sampling, iterative in-depth interviews, open and axial coding and constant comparative analysis.

Participants

A purposive and theoretical sample of 22 Korean immigrants was recruited for this study. Korean immigrants who regularly participated in sport for the last 3 years formed the sampling frame. Participants were first-generation Korean immigrants. The sample consisted of 16 males and 6 females. The average age of the participants was 42.2 years of which all but 3 had a full-time job and at least 16 had a college degree. The average period they have lived in the US was 14.6 years and the average period of their sport participation in the US was 7.3 years.

Procedure and data analysis

The study consisted of 4 phases. Phase 1 entailed participant recruitment and 8 rounds of interviews. In order to recruit volunteers that would provide the most relevant information, the researchers contacted the ethnic Korean organisation of the city, explained the purpose of the study and asked to be introduced to 3 potential volunteers for the first interview. The volunteers were contacted via e-mail or telephone to explain the purpose of the study and confidentiality procedures to obtain consent and to schedule an interview. At the interview, participants were provided with a written consent form and asked to offer demographic information. This information was imparted verbally at the start of each interview and verbal consent was recorded. At the end of the interview, they were asked to suggest other potential participants who had been active in sport for the past 3 years.

After each round of interviews, the team engaged in further recruitment, iterative field work and simultaneous analysis. The initial open coding of transcripts (n=6) from the first 2 rounds of interviews yielded several emerging concepts representing potential motives and connectors that seemed to facilitate the acculturation process. In this phase, the team found participants were perceived to be significant for their participation. These rewards seemed to reflect the 2 central domains (psychological and socio-cultural adaptation) of Ward's socio-cultural framework and appeared to play a crucial role in facilitating adaptation to the new culture by helping to build socio-psychological connections within the host society. At this point, the need to begin theoretical sampling was apparent. In order to obtain more pertinent information about the motives and outcomes of sport participation that seemed to facilitate acculturation, interview questions were slightly refocused to explore these processes better (Borrayo *et al.*, 2005). Thus, the third round of interviews with Korean immigrants was conducted with them reporting a long history of sport participation that would contribute best to understanding these motives and outcomes.

Six more rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting 35 to 100 minutes. After each round, interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to extract phrases, words, concepts and meanings that reflected the lived experience of Koreans participating in recreational physical activities in the United States. In addition to data coding and analysis, meetings were used to determine when conceptual themes became saturated, to identify new emerging themes and to discuss the relationships among the identified themes. The axial coding process provided insights regarding the relationship between psychological and socio-cultural adaptation beyond the 2 distinct domains of Ward's framework. It guided the team to identify other catalysts that seemed to impact the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of Korean immigrants. Based on the findings, the team added interview questions to seek out additional catalysts.

After 8 iterative rounds of field work and constant comparative analysis, interviewing ended when new interviews no longer enriched the conceptual framework (McAllister, 2001). Coding yielded 12 initial conceptual properties, namely 7 motives of participation, 2 categories of participation outcomes assisting acculturation and 3 means by which the outcomes support acculturation.

Phase 2 examined the linguistic equivalence of data. All interviews were conducted in Korean, thus interviews needed to be translated to English. In order to produce English interview transcripts equivalent to the original Korean transcripts, a bilingual native English speaker who was not involved in this project and the principal investigator (a bilingual native Korean speaker) collectively translated the original Korean interviews to English. The translated English transcripts were revised where necessary, and confirmed by 2 additional bilingual researchers.

The purpose of Phase 3 was to review and refine the identified themes and their relationships. In order to refine the initial conceptual model, the working themes and their connections were reviewed by all team members. In this phase, some concepts were rephrased and shifted to other categories. Changes were discussed until the team reached consensus.

Phase 4 examined the validity of the results and conceptual model. Credibility was validated through member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Three key participants reviewed their own data, the team's interpretation of those data, and the model developed to represent the data. Each agreed that his or her perspective had been adequately represented and that the conceptual model was a good representation of the relationship between sport participation and acculturation for Korean immigrants in the United States.

RESULTS

Results suggest seven motives of sport participation of Korean immigrants, two categories of outcomes of sport participation that immigrants perceived facilitated acculturation and three means, by which, the outcomes support successful acculturation. Each is described below in detail. The motives, categories of outcomes, means and themes associated with each of these were used to form a conceptual model of the effects of sport participation on the acculturation of Korean immigrants to America.

Motives

The study identified 15 themes that were synthesised into seven motives of sport participation of Korean immigrants: ethnic identity, psychological benefits, domestic benefits, information, access, physical benefits and achievement. With the exception of the physical and the achievement categories, each category contains themes unique to the socio-cultural forces faced by Korean (and perhaps other) immigrant populations.

Ethnic identity

Three themes related to ethnic identity emerged from the data, namely intra-ethnic relationships, language and commitment to the ethnic group. The data indicated that participants seek to create and develop relationships with other Koreans through sport. While not all Korean immigrants choose to participate in an ethnic sport club, many do. Korean sport clubs reportedly provided participants with opportunities to interact and build connections with each other. A 33-year-old male tennis player said, "I don't have very many friends, and in my case, I play tennis to meet other Koreans and make friends". Similarly, a 44-year-old male, body shop owner explained:

It seems like playing golf with the Koreans who attend the same church is more comfortable than playing golf with American friends... after golf, sometimes we have dinner and go out for drinks. These social gatherings naturally form a close-knit group of friends, who I can depend on...

The participants repeatedly described sport participation with other Koreans as comfortable and stress-free in ways that participating with Americans was not. Some of this was related to language. Language was reported to influence participants to become involved in sport in two ways. First, some participants only participated in ethnic sport clubs due to language problems. A 37-year-old male commented, "I feel more comfortable when I play tennis with the Koreans because there are no language barriers, we understand Korean culture and customs, and so we share a sense of homogeneity". On the other hand, it was suggested that sport can be an effective path to connect Korean immigrants with host country members, because language is not that necessary while playing sport.

Ethnic commitment was shown to be a strong motive of regular attendance at the ethnic sport club. Some participants felt a sense of responsibility in attending an ethnic sport club. This is consistent with Korean values, where if somebody decides to join a group, he or she should be committed, as a sign of respect, to the group members, or the person making the introduction to the group. A 33-year-old female elementary school teacher said,

In the first place, because it is an organisation, I don't skip any sessions, and attend regularly. I play tennis at [ethnic sport club] every Friday night... Just like church, if I don't attend, I worry that someone will notice I am absent... I feel an obligation to attend.

Psychological benefits

Three themes were related to the psychological motives for sport participation of Korean immigrants: hedonic reward, stress release and stimulation. Korean immigrants spoke of the pleasure obtained through movement and interaction with other players, but there did not seem to be anything unique in their pursuit of hedonic reward through sport. Participants also reported participating in sport and exercise in order to reduce psychological stress, which is a

familiar motive for sport participation. Yet, the sources of stress driving their participation were directly linked to the socio-cultural changes facing immigrants. A 51-year-old female who worked as an oriental medicine specialist explained by saying:

I am jogging because it is good for my mental health... Sometimes I got angry with myself when I thought I got discrimination while meeting with other Americans or at the stores... When stress builds up and I become very angry, I go outside to run... after about 30 minutes later, I realise the problem was nothing significant.

Korean immigrants perceived fewer entertainment options for stimulation in the United States than in Korea. As our participants observed, the US is a boring place to live due to a perceived lack of variety in entertainment. Accordingly, they see sport as a stimulating alternative source of entertainment. A 34-year-old male engineer mentioned, "In Korea, there are a lot of places I can go to entertain myself, but here in America there are not many places I can go out to have fun. So, here in Texas, I exercise in order to pass time."

Domestic benefits

Family time is often cited as a motive for sport participation. Not surprisingly, family bonding was one of two family-related themes which emerged from this data. The other was family conflict. Results show that sport provides Korean immigrants with a place to escape from family conflict. Korean immigrants experience family problems due to the stress of adjusting to differences between Korean and American institutions, including the education system (Kim, 2002). Socio-cultural changes can create tension among family members. In order to depressurise conflict among family members, some participants utilised sport as a refuge. A 37-year-old male described his behaviour when he gets frustrated with cultural differences:

Occasionally, when I have stress, I argue with my wife regarding family problems, and when that happens, I use sports as a way to escape. Whenever I fight with my wife, I run out of the house, avoid going home, go to either the bowling alley, or golf course, exercise, and then return home.

Information

Findings indicate some Korean immigrants participate in sport in order to obtain necessary information for living in the host society. A 43-year-old male engineer replied:

I have many American friends who I met on the golf courses... they are very friendly to me and we often talk about car problems, house issues, restaurants, and many other things... Sometimes, I give information about Korean restaurants and food, but often they offer more tips on American living... Even though they are very short chats, they are very helpful to me.

Access: Two assess-oriental themes emerged from the data: Structural and social

While a lack of access to sport facilities is a common barrier to sport participation, access to facilities and programmes is particularly problematic in Korea. Perhaps because of this, Korean immigrants perceive the US is a better environment for exercise and sport. Participants repeatedly mentioned they participated in sport because they had easy access to sport facilities and the cost was very affordable. Social access is also a common motive of sport participation. It refers to the importance of significant others and their ability to pull participants into sport settings. Interview data shows that friends and family often entice participants to take up a sport or exercise regime and/or join a sport or fitness club.

Physical benefits

It is common for people of most cultures to seek out opportunities for physical activity for physical and health related benefits (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2005). The Korean immigrants were no different. Although stress is not unique to immigrant populations, the acculturation process can add significantly to stress levels. When the stress levels are high, the physical and health benefits of sport become more important. A 51-year-old female oriental medicine specialist explained it in this way:

Because I came here to America when I was older, it was very difficult to adapt... I had stress every day, suffered from migraine, and even had an instance where I was taken to the emergency room via ambulance... Since that time when I experienced severe pain, I found time to begin jogging and playing tennis... and I thought exercise was necessary in order for me to survive... when I exercise and sweat comes out, I feel that my body is getting better.

In short, immigrants and natives alike, participate in sport and physical activity for the perceived physical and health benefits. However, it may be a more salient need for immigrants due to the increased stress of trying to adapt to a new culture.

Achievement

The Korean immigrants, like their American counterparts, suggested that mastery, achievement and competition were important motives of their sport participation. As one 42-year-old male engineer said: "In the workplace, I cannot feel the advancement... there is no special feeling. In sport, when I concentrate one thing, I can see my progress. And that is what I enjoy about it".

Outcomes of sport participation assisting acculturation

In addition to identifying key motives of sport participation of Korean immigrants, interviews suggested participation itself was perceived to produce outcomes that assisted immigrants to acculturate to the host country. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that six of the seven identified drives were perceived to directly assist in the cultural adaptation process, namely psychological benefits, physical benefits, ethnic identity, domestic benefits, information and access. Achievement was not perceived to be of direct benefit to acculturation. Eleven themes emerged to represent key outcomes of sport participation that immigrants felt assisted them in their acculturation. These eleven themes align with the psychological and socio-cultural factors identified by Ward (1996). The five psychological themes identified were: a positive personality, an energetic lifestyle, positive body image, self-confidence and social approval. Six themes were identified that align with Ward's socio-cultural factors, namely support from other Koreans, emotional stability, release from feelings of alienation, sense of belonging, reduced domestic conflict and interaction with members of the host culture.

Psychological benefits and cultural adaptation

Participants in this study perceived psychological rewards (positive personality and energetic lifestyle) from their participation. Further, these rewards were seen as a means to help Korean immigrants gain a sense of confidence, as well as the social approval of members of the host culture. Interviews revealed that exercise provides psychological energy and a vigorous lifestyle, which helps them to cope with the depressors they faced in making a life in the host country. Findings also suggest perceived mental well-being leads to a positive personality,

which facilitates socio-cultural adaptation by changing the attitudes of immigrants toward host community members. A 43-year-old male engineer mentioned:

I think that exercise keeps me mentally healthy and has made me more happy... these benefits are expressed in my face through my smiles and people at my workplace and everyone around me show good feelings toward me... These positive feelings make it easier to communicate with my colleagues at work.

As our participants observed, a positive personality enables Korean immigrants to more easily interact with host members. He continued by saying, "These positive feelings make it easier to communicate with my colleagues at work".

Physical benefits and cultural adaptation

According to the findings, Korean immigrants seek to obtain physical benefits and perceive these benefits to be associated with psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. While participating in sport, participants seeking physical benefits also perceived psychological rewards (energetic lifestyle, positive body image and self-confidence). Interestingly, positive body image was reported to help female Korean immigrants to strengthen their self-confidence in their daily lives. A 29-year-old female florist replied, "I realise that I am physically healthy, have confidence in myself and never gain weight at all. My outward appearance gives me a huge feeling of self-confidence, since my body is very toned".

Ethnic identity and cultural adaptation

Some of the Korean immigrants are involved in ethnic sport clubs and feel a strong sense of support from other Korean members. However, rather than interfere with their cultural adaptation, participants reported that participation in the ethnic sport club enhanced their adaptation by providing emotional stability and a release from feelings of social alienation. Importantly, findings indicated that participants perceived their ethnic sport club as an ethnic reference group that reduced social isolation and provided a sense of belonging. A 39-year-old engineer explained:

Living in America is lonely for foreigners like us. But life at work is more bearable, because I look forward to every Friday night when I play tennis with other Koreans, have a few beers with them afterwards, and am able to release stress. I feel like I belong in a group.

Beyond a sense of belonging, participants reported membership in an ethnic (Korean) sport club helped them to continue working through the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation process, not only by providing emotional stability, but also by building their social confidence. This finding is quite insightful, since previous research identified continued ethnic bonding as a source of inter-cultural conflict, which interferes with the acculturation process (Kim *et al.*, 2001; Stodolska *et al.*, 2007). A 34-year-old male accountant mentioned:

At work, I received a great amount of stress from having to learn American culture and English, but after exercising with other Koreans, I felt a sense of relief by having a group supporting me. This kind of support helps me to maintain my mental stability. Therefore, my stress and pressure from working in an American workplace is lessened. And so I gain more and more confidence in working at my company and interacting with my co-workers... knowing that I have a Korean group behind me, unconsciously, I gain a sense of confidence in working with American co-workers.

Reduction in domestic conflict and cultural adaptation

In part, Korean immigrants used sport to minimise domestic problems caused by interacting with the new host's socio-cultural system. This seems to be important, particularly for Korean males, because it makes it easier to concentrate on work tasks. A 34-year-old male engineer stated:

My wife receives a lot of stress because she cannot communicate very well in English, the children's school system is very different and American culture is so different. After arguing with my wife due to the above several reasons, our relationship is strained... But in my case, this conflict does not continue on for long, because I usually exercise with my wife in order to quickly resolve the conflict.

Information seeking and cultural adaptation

Findings suggest that sport provides Korean immigrants with the social capital and opportunities, which they perceive to help them to obtain living information, as well as business opportunities. In addition, sport participation enabled some Korean immigrants to pursue information for their business and to develop a social network with future clients. Participants who are managing their own business reported using sport as a communication platform where they begin reaching these future clients, not only the Koreans, but also to approach potential Americans.

Access and cultural adaptation

Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) observed Korean immigrants participate vigorously in recreational sport in the US, due to the availability and quality of facilities. Our findings also suggest environmental factors, such as accessibility and cost, encourage Korean immigrants to participate in sport in the US. Moreover, these factors also promote socio-cultural adaptation by providing opportunities to expand their social networks, as well as to learn American cultural values. Moreover, the interview results suggest that accessibility enables Korean immigrants to become familiar with American sport culture and also, they are able to learn the basic values of the host culture, which are embedded in sport. A 42-year-old engineer commented:

Here in America, it is very easy to book a tee time, cost is low, and if I want, I can naturally join and play with American people... While playing golf, I learn and become familiar with parts of the American culture, such as their liberated atmosphere.

Facilitator supporting acculturation

The Korean immigrants in this study clearly identified the outcomes of their sport participation and the ways in which those outcomes helped them to adapt to American culture. They also identified the means by which the outcomes support successful acculturation through sport participation: (1) enhanced confidence in social settings; (2) increased knowledge of American cultural values; and (3) greater opportunities to connect with members of the host culture. Participants suggested that their sport participation played a key role in becoming more knowledgeable, confident and comfortable in American society. This occurred in a number of different ways. For some participants, the sport context allowed them to participate with Americans without the stress of, or need for, verbal communication. A 34-year-old male engineer put it this way, "When I play tennis, even though the language is different, culture is different, and racially we are different, we can transcend beyond it". For others, sport with other

Koreans was a safe place to share information about the host culture and the challenges of day-to-day life.

A 37-year-old male summed up this perspective this way, "While talking with other Korean members in ATP, I gained useful information about living in America..., such as children's school districts, body shop..." Still others saw increasing self-confidence in their bodies and/or sport competence, spills over to give them more confidence to interact with Americans at play and at work. Two female immigrants discussed their newfound confidence in similar ways. A 43-year-old health club worker stated:

Everyone is surprised because I am female, and yet I have such a muscular body. When people look at me, they know how hard I work out. Before my body was built, I was not treated right. Now after becoming so built, people's attitudes have changed. Therefore, I have confidence in my daily life and this confidence is my strength.

For most participants, sport participation has affected them in more than one way. Yet, in every case, participants felt their participation reduced culture conflict and assisted in the acculturation process.

Conceptual model

The categories and themes identified by participants and the relationships among them are represented in the conceptual model in Figure 1. The seven motives of sport participation, and their sub-themes, appear on the left of the figure. The outcomes of participation described by participants are central to the diagram. The facilitators that assist with acculturation then lead to reductions in culture conflict and enhanced acculturation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Korean immigrants of the role of sport participation in their acculturation to American life, through an examination of the psychological and socio-cultural meanings of sport and their associations with processes of acculturation. Four key findings emerged and form the basis of the conceptual model derived.

The study identified seven motives of sport participation. Six of these are consistent with general motives for sport participation. However, one motive reflects the unique nature of ethnic identity of Asian immigrant populations. While many immigrant cultures find safety and community in their own ethnic group, this is especially true for collectivist cultures. Collectivists show more interdependence and dependence than individualists, and they seek connectedness with in-group members (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1996; Kimmelmeier *et al.*, 2003). Predictably, the three themes related to ethnic identity (commitment to ethnic group, ethnic gathering and language) embody interdependence, which is core to collectivist cultures.

The other six motives appear to be similar to motives identified in previous work. However, a deeper analysis shows the meanings underlying these motives for Korean immigrants to differ from their American counterparts. These differences reflect the socio-cultural tensions Korean immigrants experience in the US, as a function of the changes in their socio-cultural environment. Thus, the identified motives seem to be related to the attempts of Korean immigrants to manage the socio-cultural stressors associated with acculturation.

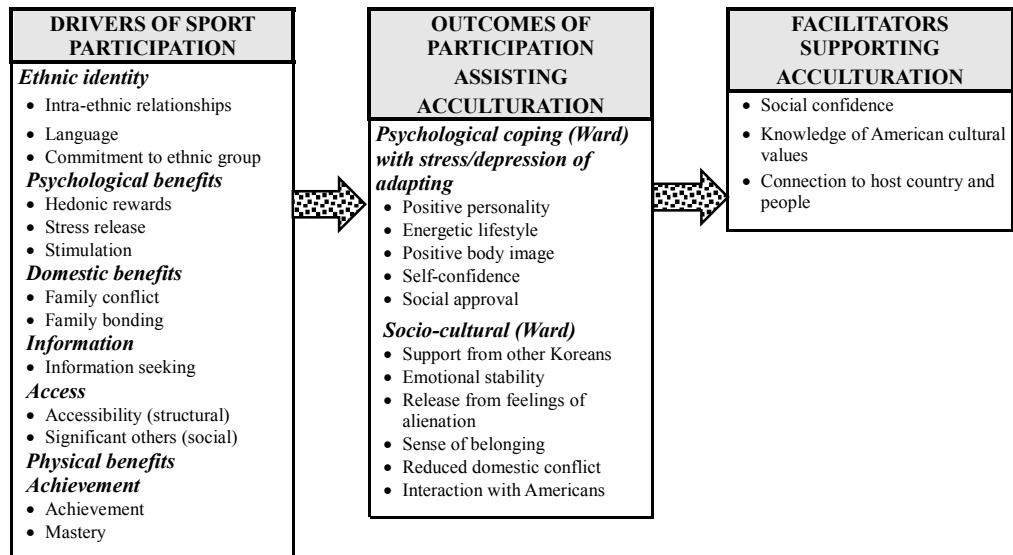


Figure 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORT PARTICIPATION AND ACCULTURATION

As shown in the developed framework, sport participation serves as an important coping mechanism, which can ultimately facilitate acculturation by producing outcomes which assist immigrants with adapting to the host culture. This has important implications for sport clubs seeking to reach ethnic population. Findings also suggest that access to sport facilities plays a pivotal role in lessening socio-cultural tensions by providing places to interact with members of the host country and to learn more about American culture. Sport facilities (whether indoor or outdoor) seem to be comfortable environments for interaction with the host culture. This could be enhanced via the inclusion of areas for informal socialisation before and after sport participation. Sport facilities have the capacity to serve as important 'third places' (Oldenburg, 1991) in the lives of US immigrants. Third places are those places that are not home or work, but are informal meeting places that serve to anchor community life while stimulating interaction among community members.

Ward's (1996) socio-cultural adaptation framework provides an insightful index to interpret the psychological and socio-cultural adaptation processes in a sport participation context. In accordance with Ward's framework, the psychological changes and socio-cultural shifts of the current participants were believed to assist the acculturation process. However, Ward's work fails to account for the positive aspects of a strong ethnic identity. In fact, a strong ethnic identity has traditionally been seen to interfere with acculturation (Kim *et al.*, 2001; Stodolska *et al.*, 2007). The qualitative nature of this study enabled a deeper understanding of the role of ethnic identity, and in particular the ethnic sport club, in facilitating acculturation. This is a key theoretical finding, in that it helps to explain two opposing theories of acculturation in the assimilation model (Gordon, 1964; Allison, 1982) and the limited model (Kim *et al.*, 2001; Stodolska *et al.*, 2007).

The limited model suggests participation within ethnic sport clubs would impede the acculturation process, not only by isolating the immigrants from host society, but also by intensifying their ethnic identity. However, the impact of this participation appears to be more complex. In accordance with the assimilation model, this study found immigrant sport participants felt sport participation provided information that assisted with day-to-day challenges faced when living in another culture. Also, sport participation was seen to be a non-threatening way to interact with members of the host culture, and to learn more about the norms and values of American culture.

Interestingly, the strong ethnic identity that led them to participate in Korean sport clubs was seen as enhancing their ability to interact with the host culture in positive ways. Korean immigrants perceived ethnic sport clubs as supporting reference groups, which helped to provide emotional stability and a sense of safety, thus reducing their sense of isolation. More importantly, participants felt social confidence was enhanced by the psychological benefits obtained from ethnic reference groups.

These results present two insightful views to understand the roles of ethnic sport clubs in acculturation. Firstly, ethnic sport clubs may function as a coping resource that helps to preserve the psychological well-being of Korean immigrants (social pressure release and emotional stability). Secondly, beyond ethnic bonding, ethnic sport clubs function as socio-cultural catalysts promoting the acculturation process. These findings support prior literature, suggesting that ethnic enclosure in leisure activities could provide a stress-relieving mechanism and acculturation stresses can be reduced through culturally protective factors, such as ethnic unity (Hwang *et al.*, 2008). However, findings of the current study indicate the potential of ethnic sport clubs in facilitating socio-cultural adaptation beyond psychological rewards. In terms of ethnic identity and participation in ethnic sport clubs, these findings provide a broader perspective than the limited model. At first glance, participation in ethnic sport clubs seems to isolate immigrants from the host society. Yet, when inspecting its psychological base and rewards more carefully, it actually empowers Korean immigrants with a sense of confidence in their interactions with host members and institutions.

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Prof Seungjin HAN: Department of Sports & Outdoors, Eulji University, 553 Sanseongdaero, Sujeong-gu, Seongnam-si, Gyeonggi, 461-713, Republic of Korea. Tel.: 82-31-740-7333, Email: happiness@eulji.ac.kr

(Subject Editor: Dr Engela van der Klashorst)