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Does membership of civil society organizations foster social integration?

The case of Danish voluntary sport organizations

Abstract

Voluntary organizations are generally perceived as important arenas in which social integration can be fostered. There is, however, no consensus on the meaning of such integration, and the empirical evidence for the claim is lacking. This article studies social integration within voluntary sport organizations, which make up a significant element of civil society in most Western societies. The article provides a theoretical framework well suited for the study of social integration, which differentiates members according to their levels of social interaction and emotional bonding across four community types: Strong, pragmatic, mediated and weak. When applying this framework to the case of Danish sport organizations, the distribution of members among the four community types indicates that, although sport organizations are important arenas for the growth of social integration, there is also a large minority of members, who do not experience social integration. In continuation of this finding, the article shows that both individual characteristics linked to members and organizational characteristics linked to sport organizations exert significant influence on the level and nature of social integration. Jointly, the results demonstrate that there are grounds to reassess the general conception that sport organizations are important arenas in which social integration can be fostered.

Keywords: social integration, voluntary sport organizations, community, civil society, sport

Introduction

There is widespread belief among researchers and policy makers in the benefits of a strong civil society. Participation in voluntary organizations, which make up the largest element of civil society, is generally perceived as a social good and a way to foster social integration in a late modern society that is increasingly characterized by social differentiation and disintegration (Etzioni, 1995; Putnam, 2000). This general conception has given the voluntary sector legitimacy, and consequently the sector receives substantial public funding. The belief in the socially integrative effects of participation in voluntary organizations is, in fact, so strong that it appears as self-evident. This could perhaps explain why few politicians or researchers have examined the relationship more closely (Auld, 2008; Hoye & Nicholson, 2008). There is a distinct lack of empirical research on the subject, and those studies that have been conducted generally fail to distinguish between different elements of civil society (Nicholson, Brown & Hoye, 2013). This represents a significant gap in the literature, given that the population of voluntary organizations is highly diverse (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010).

In light of the above, the purpose of this study is to move beyond the general assumption that voluntary organizations foster social integration by studying a significant element of civil society, namely voluntary sport organizations¹ with regard to the level and nature of social integration experienced by members of these organizations. Sport organizations are relevant objects for study, because they constitute a large section of the voluntary sector in many Western societies. In Denmark, they constitute the largest part, in terms of the total number of organizations and members (Ibsen & Boje, 2006), and substantial public funding is earmarked for these organizations. Quite often, the funding is allocated with the explicit or implicit purpose to foster social integration (Breddeidrætsudvalget, 2009; Regeringen, 2011), and this is not only the case in Denmark, but also in a number of other countries (Hoye & Nicholson, 2008; Hoye, Nicholson & Brown, 2012).

This study will seek to contribute theoretically, methodologically and empirically to the literature on social integration in civil society, and the aim is threefold. Firstly, the aim is to elaborate on the meaning of the concept of social integration, and to introduce a theoretical framework that can readily be applied to empirical studies on the topic. Secondly, empirical knowledge on social integration within voluntary sport organizations will be developed. More specifically, the distribution of members across four distinct community types will serve a greater understanding of the level and nature of social integration. The third aim is to examine if and how individual characteristics of members (e.g., gender and age) as well as organizational characteristics of sport organizations (e.g., size and activity) give rise to variations in the levels and nature of social integration within the applied framework. The article thereby takes into account the fact that levels and characteristics of social integration might not be the same across the population of sport organizations and sheds light on some of the characteristics that bring about these variations. This three-pronged approach will help qualify the general conception that voluntary organizations build social integration.

The article will first discuss the concept of social integration and the application of the concept in relation to civil society. An elaboration of what social integration will be taken to mean in this study will then be presented and a theoretical framework designed for the study of social integration within the world of voluntary organized sport will be introduced. Following some reflections on the social mechanisms that are believed to promote social integration in sport organizations, the main characteristics of the voluntary sport sector in Denmark will be introduced in order to better understand the context in which social integration is studied. Subsequently, data and methods will be presented, followed by the results from the empirical studies. The results section of the article will include both the dispersion of members within community structures and analyses of the

individual and organizational characteristics that bring about differences in community structures. Finally, the article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

The theoretical framework applied in this study is inspired by a Norwegian study on social integration. In Seippel's study, a theoretical framework was devised and applied to the case of voluntary sport organizations in Norway, where it provided some interesting and useful results (Seippel, 2005). In light of these positive outcomes, it seems relevant to apply the same theoretical framework in order to illuminate the extent to which it can provide equally useful results when applied to the Danish case. Besides extending the object field to Danish sport organizations, this study also provides a more sophisticated methodological approach to the study of variations in the levels and nature of social integration. In the Norwegian study, only members' individual characteristics were included in the analysis, whereas, in this study, organizational characteristics are also included. This is an important addition, since the population of sport organizations is diverse, and it seems reasonable to expect that structural differences affect social integration. Thereby, unlike the Norwegian study, this study generates important information with regard to the organizational traits that can inhibit or promote social integration.

The concept of social integration – applications and approaches

Robert K. Merton describes the concept of social integration as a 'general sociological orientation' (Merton, 1945: 464). It directs attention to an important sociological topic, but, at the same time, the concept lacks the specificity that would allow for fruitful empirical testing. Firstly, the concept is generally used interchangeably with a number of related concepts, such as solidarity, community, social groups, social capital, trust and social networks (Ulseth, 2004). Furthermore, the approach in studies of social integration is often quite normative, focusing on social disintegration as the result of alleged progress linked to modernity, such as the dissolution of the nuclear family and/or the

local community. Thirdly, there are considerable differences in the way the concept is understood and applied within social science. Although most studies of social integration have in common an examination of the integration (or disintegration) of social units, they differ significantly in their understanding of social integration and their approach to the study of the concept (Lorentzen & Opdalshei, 1997; Seippel, 2002).

In order to approach the study of social integration in a more systematic manner, the distinction made by David Lockwood between what he calls social integration and system integration is a useful approach towards a clearer understanding. Lockwood describes how ‘the problem of social integration focuses attention upon the orderly or conflictful relationships between the *actors*’, whereas ‘the problem of system integration focuses on the orderly or conflictful relationships between the *parts*, of a social system’ (Lockwood, 1964: 245). In much of the literature on social integration, both studies that focus on actors and parts of social systems are referred to as social integration studies (Roberts, 2009), which contributes to the complex nature of the concept. In this study, the term social integration will be used in line with Lockwood’s definition, since actors (individuals) will be applied as the main units of analysis.

Employing individuals as the main units of analysis, this study will focus on horizontal social integration. The questions raised in this article will surround ways in which individuals are linked together through mutual interactions and the meaning they ascribe to these interactions. The focus is on the community-building effects of participation in voluntary organizations. Using social capital terminology, the main emphasis of this study will, therefore, be on bonding social capital, in the sense that it is the relations between members of a community that will be in focus. This does not mean that the community relations examined are necessarily closed or exclusionary. They have the potential to exert high levels of bridging social capital, as bridging and bonding are not a matter of ‘either-or’, but rather a matter of ‘more or less’ (Putnam, 2000: 23).

There are at least three grounds for the relevance of a study of horizontal social integration in voluntary organizations. Firstly, up until now, a limited number of studies on this topic have been conducted (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Nicholson, Brown & Hoye, 2013). Secondly, voluntary organizations are frequently emphasized as arenas that can foster the formation of binding communities. Binding in the sense that members feel obligated towards other members to take part in organizational activities (for instance the sport activity, social gatherings and voluntary work), but also binding in the sense that it is an arena for the formation of new contacts or even friendships (Ibsen, 1999; Nicholson, Brown & Hoye, 2013). Thirdly, the more or less tightly-knit communities within voluntary organizations can fulfil important social functions for the people within them (Delanty, 2003; Brown, Hoye & Nicholson, 2012). Putnam recognizes these social functions, when he argues that bonding social capital is crucial for ‘getting by’ and calls it ‘a kind of sociological superglue’ (Putnam, 2000: 23).

It is worth noting that, later in his famous book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam also mentions that there is a potentially dark side of social capital, which is associated with exclusive communities that exert strong values of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). This is, indeed, a relevant remark, since communities within voluntary sport organizations could potentially be strong in bonding and weak in bridging social capital (Seippel, 2008). Such characteristics might even be reinforced by the nature of competitive sport, where individuals and teams are set against each other. This could potentially foster strong in-group loyalty and out-group antagonism. Therefore, even if we find high levels of social integration among members of sport organizations, we cannot exclude the possibility that this integration might in some cases be selective and exclusionary (Coalter, 2007; Lake, 2011). Furthermore, this study does not examine the extent to which social integration in sport organizations spread to other aspects of social life. The study examines social integration solely within the context of voluntary sport organizations, and it is therefore left for other studies to

examine the transferability of social integration within the context of voluntary organized sport to other aspects of social life.

Since the focus of this article is on horizontal social integration through community building, it seems relevant to reflect briefly on the concept of community before moving on to a description of the theoretical framework. The concepts of community and social integration share common historical traits with regard to their application within social science. Both concepts lack the specificity required for systematic studies, and they have often been applied with normative connotations (Delanty, 2003; Lee & Newby, 1995). In the case of the community concept, the concept pair '*Gemeinschaft*' and '*Gesellschaft*', introduced by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 (Tönnies, 1988), has contributed strongly to this normative application. Such normative approaches are, however, too general to form the foundation for fruitful analyses of community structures. Furthermore, this approach would contribute to the conception of community as something conservative and static, when it is, in fact, something transformative and dynamic (Delanty, 2003; Lee & Newby, 1995).

The American sociologist Steven Brint articulates a critique of the aforementioned use of the community concept, and proposes a less normative and more analytical approach to the concept of community. Inspired by the seminal work of Émile Durkheim, he argues that community cannot be tied to a specific epoch or place. Rather, community should be seen 'as a set of variable properties of human interaction', and studies of community should aim to extract 'more precise and narrowly defined variables from the community concept' (Brint, 2001: 3). This approach is in line with the purpose of this study.

A theoretical framework for the study of social integration in voluntary sport organizations

Even though there have been several attempts to define community, hardly any consensus has been reached (Delanty, 2003; Lee & Newby, 1995). Nevertheless, in order to apply the concept of community as a gateway to the study of social integration, it seems relevant to start out with a definition. In accordance with the analytical approach proposed by Brint, his definition will be applied (Brint, 2001: 8):

I will define communities as aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together *principally* by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in the personalities and life events of one another).

This definition implies that, in order to speak of a community, it is not sufficient that members are linked together by some rational interest. They can have rational grounds for the membership of a specific community, but, according to Brint, communities are characterized by the fact that members are connected *principally* by relations of affect, loyalty, common values and/or personal concern. Furthermore, the definition implies that communities can be built on common activities (activity-based communities) and/or common beliefs (belief-based communities). This is in line with the psychosocial approach to social integration as presented by Sheldon Cohen. He argues that the concept involves two components: A behavioural component, the active engagement in social relationships, and a cognitive component, the sense of identification with the community (Brissette, Cohen, & Seeman, 2000; Cohen, 2004).

On the basis of the above definition of community, Brint goes on to build up relatively complex community typologies² (Brint, 2001). These typologies are not applicable to this study for two reasons; Firstly, because not all of Brint's community types are relevant to the context of sport organizations; and, secondly, because Brint's approach does not differentiate between community

types according to the level and nature of social integration. Instead, the simplified community typology developed by Ørnulf Seippel for the study of social integration in sport organizations will be applied (Seippel, 2005). It utilizes the analytical approach to the community concept introduced by Brint, and starts from the definition of community presented above.

The distinction between common activities and beliefs implied in Brint’s definition forms the backbone of the typology. There are at least two important components that are useful for the differentiation of community types within voluntary sport organizations: The frequency of social interaction and the level of emotional bonding. In the context of voluntary sport organizations, social interaction can be defined as the ‘frequency of interaction within the setting of the sport organization’, and emotional bonds as ‘the obligations and reciprocity the members assign to others and the social relations within the sport organization’ (Seippel, 2005: 250). Combining high and low values for these two components, the theoretical typology of community structures is presented in Table 1 (Seippel, 2005: 251).

Table 1. Theoretical typology of community structures.

		Social interaction (frequency)	
		High	Low
Emotional bonding (level of)	High	Strong communities	Mediated communities
	Low	Pragmatic communities	Weak communities

The typology distinguishes between four different types of community, which, depending on the make-up and functioning of the organization, could potentially be present in voluntary sport organizations: Strong, mediated, pragmatic and weak. These community types represent differences in the level and nature of social integration. For instance, a high level of social interaction and emotional bonding, the characteristics of a strong community, should – all other things being equal – imply a higher level of social integration than a low level of social interaction and emotional bonding, which are the characteristics of a weak community. Regarding the nature of social

integration, the differences between mediated and pragmatic communities are of interest. A mediated community implies a high level of emotional bonding combined with a low level of social interaction, whereas a pragmatic community implies a high level of social interaction combined with a low level of emotional bonding.

The case of social integration within voluntary sport organizations

Before turning to the Danish case, we will reflect generally on the case of voluntary organized sport and social integration. More specifically, the focus of this section will be the social mechanisms within voluntary organized sport that promote social integration. Sport has been ascribed a number of advantages, one of the most prominent being its alleged community-building potential. This characteristic has been linked to the sporting activity itself, as well as to the organizational framework in which sport operates. Social integration through sport can take place outside the framework of voluntary organized sport, but most of the literature on the topic argues that sport organizations are particularly well placed to foster social integration. Even in cases where the sporting activity can be practiced individually, sporting organizations are believed to provide frameworks within which communities can flourish (Auld, 2008; Hoye & Nicholson, 2012; Ibsen & Ottesen, 2001; Steen-Johnsen, 2004).

Sport organizations are believed to be important arenas for social integration for many of the same reasons as are other voluntary organizations. They bring people together through common activities within an organizational framework, where horizontal social relations predominate, and where strategic power relations are less evident than in most other areas of everyday life. Such circumstances are believed to foster favourable conditions for the formation of communities between members (Auld, 2008; Putnam, 2000). There is even some evidence to suggest that voluntary sport organizations might foster more favourable conditions for social integration than

most other voluntary organizations, due to the relatively high levels of face-to-face interaction (Hoye, Nicholson & Brown, 2013; Ibsen & Ottesen, 2001; Walseth, 2008). If we are to believe Putnam's claim that face-to-face contact is an important prerequisite for building communities between members, this is a positive feature in sport organizations with regard to their potential to foster social integration (Putnam, 2000).

On a similar note, for some members membership of voluntary sport organizations is associated with activity and involvement in voluntary work, whether formally or informally (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006). Most Danish sport organizations are largely dependent on members to do voluntary work (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010; Østerlund, 2012). This dependence upon member efforts is believed to play an important role in social integration, because the feeling of joint responsibility can help bring people together to take responsibility for, and carry out, essential tasks. Joint task performance can therefore form an important arena in which social integration can be fostered (Brown, Hoye & Nicholson, 2012; Cuskelly, 2008; Doherty & Misener, 2008).

There is, nevertheless, some evidence that relations between members and voluntary organizations are undergoing change, at least in many Western societies. The relations are allegedly becoming more instrumental in nature, resembling to a higher degree a consumer relationship, thus leading to less readiness among members to do voluntary work (Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007; Selle, Lorentzen, & Wollebæk, 2000). So far, Danish sport organizations continue to rely on voluntary work, but should the alleged development continue, the element of joint task performance in sport organizations will be diminished, and this could potentially have consequences for the socially integrative effects of these organizations.

To sum up, the social mechanisms that promote social integration seem to be closely related to the framework that sport organizations provide for social interaction between members. For this reason, we may also expect the socially integrative effects of sport organizations to vary across the

population of organizations and between members within an organization. Social integration, therefore, does not seem to be a natural consequence of membership (Auld, 2008; Jensen, 2006; Lake, 2011). The social mechanisms presented above therefore provide us with a framework for understanding how sport organizations promote social integration. However, in order to gain insight into the level and nature of social integration among members, empirical studies are required.

The case of voluntary organized sport in Denmark

The voluntary sector in Denmark is relatively large, in comparison with most other European countries (Curtis, Baer, & Grabb, 2001; McCloughan, Batt, Costine, & Scully, 2011). There are approximately 52,000 voluntary organizations in Denmark, one for every 82 inhabitants. Sport organizations make up a quarter of the total (Ibsen & Boje, 2006). Based on magnitude alone, the voluntary sector in general – and voluntary sport organizations in particular – exert great potential to contribute to social integration.

Structurally, most Danish sport organizations are relatively small. Half of them have fewer than 100 members, with less than a fifth having more than 300 members (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010). Recent studies of participation in sport estimate that 41% of the adult population (aged 16 years and above) are members of at least one sport organization, and that the five most popular activities are keep-fit exercise, football, badminton, fitness and golf (Laub, 2013).

The number of adults participating in individual sports activities in sport organizations has grown significantly faster in recent decades than the number participating in team sports activities. Outside the world of voluntary organized sport, the development is even more evident. Individual activities, such as hiking, jogging and fitness are rapidly gaining ground. So far, this has not led to a decrease in the numbers involved in voluntary organized sport. Instead, the development reflects a general increase in the proportion of the population who take part in sport. Nevertheless, in recent

years, commercially organized and self-organized sports have grown more rapidly than voluntary organized sport (Pilgaard, 2009). The implications of this development in relation to social integration are yet to be thoroughly examined.

Data and methods

Sampling procedures

The data on members of Danish sport organizations is derived from a large survey study conducted at the Centre for Sports, Health and Civil Society, University of Southern Denmark in 2012. All adult members and volunteers (aged 16 years and over) within 30 sport organizations were included in the study, yielding a sample of 4,159 respondents, of which 2,023 responded. This is equivalent to a response rate of 49%. The 30 participating sport organizations were chosen from a population of 5,203 organizations that had previously participated in a general study on volunteering, conducted in 2010. In that study, the chairpersons received questionnaires in which they were asked a series of questions with regard to their respective organizations. Useful information such as activity, organization size, degree of urbanization, degree of professionalization, etc. was gleaned in order to secure a high level of diversity in the selected sample.

Sample representativeness

The sample of 30 sport organizations applied in the study cannot be regarded as representative of the entire population of sport organizations in Denmark. This is, firstly, because a sample of 30 sport organizations is not likely to fully reflect the diversity within the population. Secondly, the participating sport organizations were chosen within five selected sports, namely football, handball, cycling, tennis and keep-fit exercise. This approach was chosen because it ensures a sufficient

amount of data to allow for explorations of similarities and differences between members and volunteers within the five selected sports.

When comparing distributions on gender and age within each sport to the population distribution, the sample is mainly representative³. This indicates that, although the sample cannot be expected to be representative of the entire population of sport organizations in Denmark, it seems to be largely representative for members of organizations within the five selected sports.

Applied sample

The focus of this study is on members of sport organizations, and, therefore, non-members who do voluntary work will not be included. Consequently, of the total number of 2,023 respondents in the survey, the number of included respondents is 1,777.

Operationalization and construction of community types

In the Norwegian study, that has served as an inspiration for this study, social interaction was operationalized as the frequency of participation in the sports activity (exercise and competitions), and emotional bonds in terms of social and material reciprocity (Seippel, 2005). The combination of exercise and competitions captures the activity-related interaction between members, which is the primary form of social interaction in sport organizations. The operationalization of emotional bonds in terms of social and material reciprocity links the concept to ties between members rather than between members and their respective sport organizations. This operationalization involves relevant aspects of social integration, and, therefore, this study will apply largely the same focus. With regard to the operationalization of emotional bonds, however, material reciprocity will not be included. Although one would generally characterize willingness to provide economic support as expressions of social integration, some people are not prepared to do so, even for even their closest

friends or family. Omitting material reciprocity enables a clearer focus on non-material aspects of social integration.

Instead of material reciprocity, a question regarding whether or not members have made new friendships through participation will be included. Not only does this question provide indications as to the strength of the bonds formed within organizations, it also enables us to differentiate between members who have high levels of emotional bonds towards other members, because they knew them before becoming a member, and those members who have built up emotional bonds through participation. A lot of members are likely to have done both, but the distinction is relevant, because it allows us to reflect on whether sport organizations are predominantly arenas for the maintenance of social relations, or if they are also arenas in which social integration can be generated. It is worth noting that the concept of friendship was not further defined in the questionnaire. For this reason, respondents have applied their understanding of the concept when completing the questionnaire and therefore we cannot expect that it has been interpreted uniformly. Nevertheless, friendship would normally imply relations of a certain depth unlike, for instance, acquaintances. Descriptive statistics on the variables included in the typology is provided below.

Social interaction

Table 2: Frequency of participation in the sports activity (exercise and competition) (n=1,777)

Never	1.0
Less than once a week	6.6
Once or twice a week	72.9
More than twice and fewer than four times a week	15.5
Four times a week or more	4.1
Total	100.1

Social interaction is operationalized as the frequency of participation in the sports activity. In Table 2, the distribution of answers is displayed⁴. Judging from the distribution of members, the vast

majority participate regularly in the sports activity. If we define regular participation as at least once a week, 93% of members are included. At the same time, it is evident that only about one in five members participate more than twice a week, showing that the majority of members exercise regularly, but no more than twice a week, in their respective sport organizations.

Emotional bonds

Table 3: Social reciprocity: Tendency among members to think that they can get help, support or care from other members if they encounter personal problems (n=1,634)

Yes, definitely	25.0
Yes, I think so	31.3
No, I do not think so	19.9
No, definitely not	9.3
I do not know	14.5
Total	100.0

Emotional bonds are operationalized through two questions. The first is concerned with the level of social reciprocity, and the distribution of answers is displayed in Table 3⁵. The distribution of answers can serve as an indication that a two-dimensional approach to social integration is appropriate. Even though 93% of members participate regularly in the sports activity, only 56% either think or are sure that they can get help, support or care from other members, should they encounter personal problems. This indicates that regular participation does not necessarily result in high levels of emotional bonding. The 56% of members with high levels of social reciprocity might seem low in comparison to the 93% participating regularly in the sport activity, but it is still a majority of members who claim to experience high levels of social reciprocity in their respective sport organizations. This indicates that a majority of members are well integrated. Such an assertion is further substantiated when looking at the second aspect included in the operationalization of

emotional bonds, namely whether or not members have made new friendships through participation.

Table 4 shows the distribution on this question⁶.

Table 4: The distribution of members on the question of whether or not they have made new friends through participation (n=1,528)

Yes	77.7
No	22.3
Total	100.0

It is significant that almost four out of five members have made new friendships through participation. It shows that, for a vast majority of members, sport organizations function as more than arenas for maintaining friendships. The higher proportion of members having formed new friendships (78%) compared to members with high levels of social reciprocity (56%) probably indicates that some friendship relations are perceived as such even without high levels of social reciprocity. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but it shows that there can be different perceptions of what constitutes friendship. Responses to a question tapping into the proportion of members who have made new friendships that they associate with outside the context of the sport organization, further substantiates this point. Nearly half of all respondents that have made new friendships claim that these relations expand beyond the context of the sport organization. The friendship relations are therefore quite often limited to the context of the sport organization, but it is also frequently the case that friendship relations expand to other aspects of social life.

The complete community typology with empirical results

Having displayed the distribution of answers to the three questions that form the backbone of the community typology, it is now time to present the complete typology (the procedure used in this construction is presented in the Appendix). The results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Typology of community structures and the empirical results (n=1,515)

	Frequency of social interaction	Level of emotional bonding	
Strong	High	High	51.2
Pragmatic	High	Low	41.8
Mediated	Low	High	4.5
Weak	Low	Low	2.6
Total			100.1

The distribution of members shows that two types of community are prevalent, namely strong and pragmatic. Combined, they account for 93% of members, while mediated and weak communities combined account for only 7%. The main explanation for this finding is that more than nine out of ten members participate regularly in the sport activity, with regularity being defined as at least once a week. This gives rise to a debate about the relevance of the complete typology. One could argue that the low prevalence of mediated and weak communities renders it only partially useful for the study of social integration. There are, however, at least two reasons to apply the complete typology. Firstly, although the prevalence of mediated and weak communities is low, they still capture a small, but significant group of members. Secondly, the low prevalence of mediated and weak communities in this study distinguishes it from the Norwegian study, where members were more dispersed across all four community types⁷, primarily due to a higher diversification in participation trends than in the Danish case (Seippel, 2005). Without elaborating further on the differences between the Danish and the Norwegian cases⁸, the results from Norwegian sport organizations exemplify the relevance of the complete typology.

In spite of the above argumentation, there is no doubt that the most striking result in Table 5 is the balance between members taking part in strong and pragmatic communities. For more than half of all members (51%), high levels of participation are accompanied by high levels of emotional bonding. This indicates that voluntary sport organizations are, indeed, important arenas for social integration. At the same time, the results also show that high levels of participation are far from

always accompanied by high levels of emotional bonding. This is not a surprising result per se. In fact, it was anticipated earlier in the article, where it was argued that social integration is not a natural extension of membership. What is perhaps surprising is that as many as 42% of members participate regularly in the sports activity without building emotional bonds towards other members. This result calls for a modification of the general conception that sport organizations are important arenas for fostering social integration. They are for a lot of members, but by no means for all.

The influence of individual and organizational characteristics on social integration

The previous section revealed substantial differences in the level and nature of social integration. As a result of this, and because the population of sport organizations is heterogeneous and appeals to a wide range of individuals, it is relevant to examine how the distribution of members on community structures depends on characteristics that are linked both to members and to organizations.

Hypotheses

Before turning to the empirical analyses, it seems fruitful to elaborate briefly on the characteristics that can be hypothesized to influence social integration. Initially, the hypotheses with regard to the individual characteristics of gender, age, recruitment, duration of membership and group size will be presented, followed by the organizational characteristics of activity and organization size. Where possible, the hypotheses will build on empirical research within the realm of sport. Where such empirical data is lacking, the hypotheses will build on general theories on sports participation and social integration as well as common sense considerations. The hypotheses are constructed on the basis of the balance between strong and pragmatic communities, since the numbers of respondents

taking part in mediated and weak communities are not sufficient to make for fruitful empirical analyses.

Gender: Throughout recent years, the gender gap in sports participation has narrowed significantly. Nevertheless, men still spend more time on sport than women, and they are still significantly more active with regard to participation in voluntary organized sport (Laub, 2013). Among those who are active within sport organizations, however, it seems that women are more motivated by the social aspects of participation than are men (Enjolras, Seippel, & Waldahl, 2005). These alleged motivational differences could bring about differences in social integration between the sexes, provided that they are translated into practise. On this basis, hypothesis 1 is formulated. *H1: Women are more likely than men to be enrolled in strong communities and less likely to be enrolled in pragmatic communities.*

Age: Young people spend more time on voluntary organized sport than any other age group (Pilgaard, 2009). Also, they are generally more motivated by the social aspects, though some evidence indicates that the social aspects of sport are at least equally important for the elderly (Ibsen & Ottesen, 1999). This leads to the formulation of hypothesis 2. *H2: The young and elderly are more likely to take part in strong communities and less likely to take part in pragmatic communities than are middle-aged adults.*

Educational level: Studies of participation in sport have shown the proportion of people participating in sport to incline with educational level (Ibsen & Ottesen, 1999; Pilgaard, 2009). At the same time, the proportion of people who are motivated by the social aspects of sport declines with increasing levels of education (Ibsen & Ottesen, 1999). This observation brings about the third hypothesis. *H3: The higher the educational level of members, the less inclined they are to take part in strong communities and the more inclined they are to take part in pragmatic communities.*

Duration of membership: It usually takes time to build social relations towards other members of a community (Crow & Allan, 1995). There can be significant variation in the time it takes for an individual to build these relations, but it seems plausible to assume that, inter alia, time will make for stronger social relations. Hypothesis 4 will build on this conception. *H4: The longer the duration of membership in a sport organization, the more inclined members are to take part in strong communities, and the less inclined they are to take part in pragmatic communities.*

Group size: In parts of the literature on community, it is argued that smaller groups make for closer and stronger relations between individuals within these groups, or, in a community typology, more tightly knit communities (Brint, 2001). Based on this consideration, hypothesis 5 can be formulated. *H5: The smaller the groups that members normally train with, the higher the prevalence of strong communities and the lower the prevalence of pragmatic communities.*

Recruitment: Being recruited through an already existing network within a sport organization is likely to have a positive influence on levels of emotional bonding. For example, the possibility of receiving help, support or care from other members must, inter alia, increase. Hypothesis 6 reflects this consideration. *H6: Members who were recruited through existing networks are more likely to take part in strong communities and less likely to take part in pragmatic communities than members who were not recruited in this way.*

Activity: Team sport activities are believed to exert particular potential to build social relations, at least when they are operationalized as activities where members are required to communicate with each other both verbally and non-verbally in order to perform satisfactorily (Andersen, Andersen, & Nedergaard, 1997). This is the case with the operationalization in this study, where the two team ballgames, football and handball, are categorized as team sport activities, while cycling, keep-fit exercise and tennis are categorized as individual sport activities, because they do not necessarily demand this kind of interaction. Empirical studies indicate that members involved in

team sport activities are significantly more motivated by social considerations than members enrolled in individual activities (Enjolras et al., 2005). Based on this, hypothesis 7 can be formulated. *H7: Members enrolled in team sport activities are more inclined to take part in strong communities and less inclined to take part in pragmatic communities.*

Organization size: Similar to group size, it is sometimes argued that smaller is better when it comes to the size of sport organizations. The rationale behind this is that smaller sport organizations often have more homogeneous memberships and a stronger focus on the social aspects of sports participation (Coalter, 2007; Ibsen, 1999). This conception forms the foundation for the eighth hypothesis. *H8: Members of large sport organizations are more inclined to take part in pragmatic communities and less inclined to take part in strong communities.*

Descriptive statistics on independent variables

Having presented the eight hypotheses, it is now time to introduce the independent variables. In Table 6, descriptive statistics for the independent variables are presented. The purpose of including the distributions in Table 6 is to examine the influence they exert on the distribution of members on community types, but they will not be elaborated further in this article.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for the independent variables.

Variable	Code	Distribution (%)	n
Individual level variables			
Gender	0: Woman	49%	1491
	1: Man	51%	
Age	1: 16-30 years	17%	1476
	2: 31-45 years	25%	
	3: 46-60 years	32%	
	4: 61+ years	26%	
Educational level (applied as continuous)	1: Primary school	12%	1449
	2: College/vocational education	31%	
	3: Higher education, less than 3 years	9%	
	4: Higher education, 3-4 years	33%	
	5: Higher education, 5 years or more	16%	
Duration of membership (applied as continuous)	1: Less than 1 year	10%	1514
	2: 1-2 years	11%	
	3: 3-4 years	17%	
	4: 5-10 years	22%	
	5: 11-20 years	20%	
	6: More than 20 years	19%	
Group size (applied as continuous)	1: Train alone	2%	1451
	2: Train with 1-2 others	8%	
	3: Train with 3-5 others	9%	
	4: Train with 6-10 others	18%	
	5: Train with 11-20 others	31%	
	6: Train with more than 20 others	33%	
Recruitment	0: Did not know somebody before	33%	1476
	1: Knew somebody before	67%	
Organizational level variables			
Activity	0: Individual sport	82%	1515
	1: Team sport	18%	
Organization size	1: 0-200 members	29%	1515
	2: 201-400 members	21%	
	3: 401+ members	50%	

Multilevel logistic regression analyses

For the purpose of examining the individual and organizational characteristics that explain the distribution of members on community types, multilevel logistic regression analyses have been conducted. The dependent variables are the two community types with sufficient numbers of

respondents to make for fruitful empirical analyses, namely strong and pragmatic. Respondents belonging to weak or mediated communities are therefore only included as part of the reference groups in the two constructed dummy variables for strong and pragmatic communities⁹. The independent variables are the ones presented in Table 6¹⁰. The results from the regression analyses are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Community structures (dummy variables) explained by individual and organizational characteristics. Multilevel logistic regression. Coefficients (log odds) are displayed (n=1,339)

	Strong communities		Pragmatic communities	
Individual level				
Intercept	-1.249	**	0.199	
Gender (male)	-0.176		0.114	
Age, 16-30 years (ref.)				
Age, 31-45 years	-0.595	*	0.528	
Age, 46-60 years	-1.142	***	0.991	**
Age, 61+ years	-0.331		0.347	
Educational level	-0.206	***	0.123	*
Duration of membership	0.347	***	-0.290	***
Group size	0.313	***	-0.115	
Recruitment (knew somebody before)	0.467	***	-0.534	***
Organizational level				
Activity (team sport)	0.494	*	-0.533	*
Organization size, 0-200 members (ref.)				
Organization size, 201-400 members	-0.273		0.308	
Organization size, 401+ members	-0.946	***	1.054	***
Model assessment				
Intra-class correlation (ICC)	0.122		0.151	
Variance, organizational level (empty)	0.458	**	0.585	**
Variance, organizational level (full)	0.189	*	0.239	*

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

The results show how both individual and organizational level factors influence the distribution of members on community structures. This demonstrates how the inclusion of organizational level variables constitutes a significant methodological development in the study of social integration. When confronting the hypotheses with the regression coefficients, the majority is either wholly or

partially confirmed, but there are also a few instances where the hypotheses are either not supported or even contradicted.

If we start out by examining the influence from individual level variables, the hypothesized relationship between gender and community structures (H1) is not supported by the results. Women are not significantly more inclined to take part in strong communities than men. This shows that in spite of the alleged motivational differences between the sexes, men and women are equally likely to become socially integrated through participation in sport.

Age, on the other hand, plays a significant role in relation to social integration. As was expected by the hypothesis (H2), young people aged 16-30 are significantly more inclined to take part in strong communities and less inclined to take part in pragmatic communities than are middle-aged adults. Furthermore, people over the age of 60 are not significantly less socially integrated than young people, which is also as anticipated by the hypothesis.

With regard to educational level, the hypothesis (H3) is confirmed. The prevalence of strong communities decreases significantly with educational level, while the prevalence of pragmatic communities increases. Unlike the findings with regard to gender, this indicates that the alleged motivational differences translate into practise in the sense that the level of social integration does seem to decline with increasing levels of education. There are no simple explanations for this finding, but it seems worthwhile to study further the relationship between educational level and social integration, since educational levels in society are gradually increasing. With evidence showing that highly educated adults are less inclined to engage socially with other members, this development could potentially affect the ability of sport organizations to promote social integration.

The influence from duration of membership is also in line with the expectations in the hypotheses (H4). The longer the duration of membership, the more inclined members are to take part in strong communities, and the less inclined they are to take part in pragmatic. These

correlations seem intuitively reasonable, but the interpretation can be twofold. On the one hand, the results could mean that social integration in sport organizations is built up over time. On the other hand, the results might indicate that members who are socially integrated are more likely to remain members for a long time. In practice, both interpretations are probably relevant explanations. However, regardless of which explanation is most relevant, the results show that social integration plays an important role in member retention.

Group size is another independent variable that significantly influences the level and nature of social integration. In the hypothesis (H5), it was expected that there would be a negative correlation between group size and the prevalence of strong communities, but the data reveals the opposite relationship, while there is no significant correlation between group size and the prevalence of pragmatic communities. There does not seem to be a simple explanation for this contradiction, but it indicates that there are grounds for rethinking the hypothesized relationship, at least in the context of voluntary organized sport.

The last individual level variable is recruitment, which also exerts significant influence on social integration. Members who knew somebody within their respective sport organizations before joining were more inclined to take part in strong communities and less inclined to take part in pragmatic communities. This is as predicted by the hypothesis (H6).

Moving on to the organizational level variables, activity seems to play a significant role with regard to the level of social integration in the direction predicted by the hypothesis (H7). Specifically, strong communities are more prevalent among members taking part in team sport activities, while pragmatic communities are more prevalent among members taking part in individual sport activities. Hence, team sport activities are more socially integrative than individual ones. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that this conclusion builds on a comparison of only five

selected sports. Therefore, we cannot ascertain whether the findings can be generalized to the entire variety of sport activities.

When including the five sports separately in the multilevel regression analyses, instead of as an individual vs. team sport variable, the results show how cycling is not significantly less conducive to social integration than football and handball, but that tennis and keep-fit exercise are¹¹. This underlines both the complexity involved in categorizing sport activities as either team or individual sports in an unambiguous manner and informs us that we might not capture the complexity of different sport activities by dividing them into two groups, as in Table 7. Regardless, the results show that some sport activities are more conducive to social integration than others, and that the distinction between individual and team sports explains this variation to a significant extent.

The finding that some parts of the voluntary sport sector are more conducive to social integration than others is underpinned by an examination of the influence from organization size. Large sport organizations were expected to be less conducive to social integration than small ones (H8), and this is substantiated with regard to the distribution of members on strong relative to pragmatic communities. The negative correlation between size and social integration is, however, only significant for sport organizations with more than 400 members. Hence, organizations must be of a certain size, before they impede the development of social integration.

All in all, the results show that there are significant variations in the level and nature of social integration within the population of voluntary sport organizations. In that manner, this study agrees with the former Norwegian study on social integration, where explaining community structures were found to be a complex undertaking. Both studies found age and recruitment to have similar effects on the dispersion of members on strong and pragmatic communities, but in addition, this study found educational level, duration of membership and group size to be important variables at the individual level. The Norwegian study did not include variables at the organizational level, but

it did include the distinction between individual and team sport activities as an individual level variable. In both cases team sport activities were found to be more conducive to social integration than individual sport activities. Nevertheless, it seems more accurate to include the distinction between types of sport activities at the organizational level rather than at the individual, as such characteristics are tied to the sport organization. Furthermore, the successful inclusion of organization size along with the relatively high ICC-values reported in Table 7 show that there are significant variations to be explained at the organizational level. Therefore, the inclusion of variables at the organizational level represents an important methodological advance when examining the level and nature of social integration in sport organizations.

Discussion and conclusion

In order to pave the way for a fruitful study on the degree to which voluntary sport organizations are arenas in which social integration can be fostered, the article started out by drawing attention to the ambiguousness of the concept of social integration, and the need to clarify the aspects that would form the object of study. A choice was made to focus on individuals as the units of analysis and on horizontal integration. Next, a theoretical framework for the study of social integration in sport organizations was introduced. The approach differentiated the level and nature of social integration by dividing members according to the level of social interaction and emotional bonding into four distinct community types: Strong, pragmatic, mediated and weak. This community typology was applied to the case of Danish sport organizations.

The empirical analyses showed how the most important community structure is strong communities, implying high levels of social integration. Nevertheless, around half of the members did not take part in strong communities. Instead, these members were dispersed on the other three community types, namely pragmatic, mediated and weak, with pragmatic communities, associated

with high levels of social interaction and low levels of emotional bonding, being clearly the most common of the three.

At least two main conclusions can be drawn from the distribution of members on the four community types. Firstly, the high prevalence of strong relative to weak communities shows how sport organizations are important arenas for social integration. Secondly, since a little fewer than half of the members are not enrolled in strong communities, but rather in pragmatic, mediated or weak, it is evident that membership does not necessarily imply social integration. These are critical findings, because they help qualify the general conception that membership of voluntary organizations automatically fosters social integration. This is true for a large proportion of members in Danish sport organizations, but because of the significant variations, the need to study social integration empirically, rather than taking it for granted, is highlighted.

In an attempt to explain the described variations in social integration, eight hypotheses were formulated and subsequently tested in relation to the distribution of members on strong and pragmatic communities. At a general level, the analyses showed that there are significant variations at both the individual and the organizational level, and that explaining community structures therefore seems a complex matter. A vast majority of the hypotheses were either wholly or partially confirmed, but there were also a few instances where the hypotheses were either not supported or even contradicted. On a methodological note, the complexity associated with explaining community structures underlines the relevance of the approach applied in this study, where independent variables at both the individual and organizational level were included through the use of multilevel regression analysis.

The complexity in explaining community structures is also relevant on a more substantial note for at least two reasons. Firstly, the influences from individual level variables show that not all members are equally inclined to experience high levels of social integration. The analyses show

how socioeconomic factors exert an influence on social integration within sport organizations. The young and elderly are more inclined to be socially integrated than middle-aged adults, while the level of social integration declines with educational level. In contrast, gender seems to be less crucial. Judging from these findings, social integration is to some extent selective, but we cannot tell whether this reflects conscious choices by the individuals or structural barriers. The finding that highly educated people are less integrated could serve as an indication that social integration in sport organizations is primarily a matter of choice, since this group is generally regarded to be resourceful. Regardless, the results call for a research agenda that focuses not only on membership vs. non-membership as an expression of selective integration, but also on selective integration among members of sport organizations. Within the boundaries of such a research agenda, it is not only socioeconomic characteristics that seem worthwhile examining, but also characteristics regarding the relations of the individuals to their respective sport organizations. In this connection, the results from this study show duration of membership, group size and recruitment to significantly influence social integration.

Secondly, the complexity in explaining community structures is also relevant because of the influence from organizational level variables, which shows that sport organizations are not equally inclined to foster social integration. This demonstrates how the inclusion of organizational level variables constitutes a significant methodological development in the study of social integration. The variations in the level and nature of social integration are thus largely explained by organizational characteristics, and the two included variables, activity and organization size, explain significant elements thereof. More specifically, the results show that team sport activities are significantly more socially integrative than individual activities, and that large sport organizations are significantly less likely to build social integration than are smaller ones.

In light of the previously presented evidence that individual sport activities are growing more rapidly than team sports activities, the findings from this study could provide a useful starting point for discussions on the desirability of such a development. Given that the development is likely to continue, the results from this study predict that the overall socially integrative effects of both the sport sector in general, and the voluntary sport sector in particular, are likely to be reduced. Furthermore, the results also indicate that, although bigger might in some respects be better when running a sport organization, larger units could potentially mean less social integration. When recommending sport organizations to grow or to form larger units, it should therefore be weighed against the potential consequences with regard to, for instance, social integration. Further studies are required in order to provide a better understanding of the consequences that developments such as those described here will have for the socially integrative effects of participation in voluntary organized sport, and ideally also for other areas of sports participation as well as other civil society organizations. It is the belief of the authors that this article has contributed with new and significant knowledge on social integration, which can, hopefully, inspire future studies on social integration within various sectors of civil society.

Appendix

The following is a brief description of how the empirical data in Tables 2, 3 and 4 has been applied to create the community typology presented in Table 5. When assigning the values of low, medium and high to the level of emotional bonding, the authors of this article have used sound judgment, because there is no obvious way to combine the values, and, hence, sound judgment is needed to conclude on where to place the ‘qualitative anchors’ (Ragin, 2000). The values assigned could be debated, and therefore the method of assigning values is explicitly displayed. This transparency allows other researchers to evaluate the values according to their own criteria.

With regard to the frequency of social interaction, Table 2 has been applied in its entirety.

With regard to the level of social reciprocity and the tendency to have made new friendships, high and low values have been ascribed to the answers in Tables 3 and 4. In Table 3, the answers ‘Yes, definitely’ and ‘Yes, I think so’ have been ascribed the value high, while the other three answers have been ascribed the value low. In the case of Table 4, the answer ‘Yes’ has been ascribed the value high, while the answer ‘No’ has been ascribed the value low.

Subsequently, these values were combined to create a measure for the level of emotional bonding, distinguishing between high, medium and low levels of emotional bonding.

Table 8: The combination of high and low values on social reciprocity and new friendships (n=1,515)

Level of emotional bonding	Social reciprocity (Table 6)	New friendships (Table 7)	
High	High	High	52.9
Medium	High	Low	4.6
Medium	Low	High	24.8
Low	Low	Low	17.6
Total			99.9

Finally, the levels of emotional bonding (Table 8) were cross-tabulated with the frequency of social interaction (Table 2). From this table, the distribution of members on the four community structures was established in Table 9.

Table 9: Construction of community typology (n=1,515)

Social interaction	Emotional bonding		
	Low	Medium	High
Never	0.3	0.2	0.3
Less than once a week	2.1	1.8	2.4
1 to 2 times a week	14.5	22.6	35.1
More than 2 and fewer than 4 times a week	0.6	3.9	11.7
4 times a week or more	0.2	0.9	3.5
Total	17.6	29.4	52.9

● Weak communities; ● Mediated communities; ● Pragmatic communities; ● Strong communities

The principle behind the above distribution of members on community structures is derived from Seippel's 2005 study on social integration, where he made the same cross-tabulation and divided members in the same manner (Seippel, 2005). The only difference is to be found in the operationalization of the concept of emotional bonds.

Notes

¹ The focus of this article is on mainly small, Danish voluntary sport organizations, which could also be called voluntary sport clubs or voluntary sport associations. None of these terms is wrong or directly misleading, and any of them could just as well be used.

² Brint distinguishes between eight types of community: Communities of place, communes and collectives, localized friendship groups, dispersed friendship networks, activity-based elective communities, belief-based elective communities, imagined communities, and virtual communities. The community types are created by distinguishing primarily between; firstly, geographic communities and communities of choice; secondly, between activity-based and belief-based communities; and, thirdly, between frequency of interaction (for geographic communities) or location of other members and amount of face-to-face contact (for choice-based communities) (Brint, 2001).

³ This is especially true for cycling, keep-fit exercise and tennis, where the variations between the sample and population distributions are relatively small. For handball and football, the deviations are somewhat larger. For handball, this applies only to the age distribution, where young people are underrepresented in the sample, while for football both young people and women are somewhat underrepresented. Nevertheless, within all of the sport activities, both genders are significantly represented along with all of the age groups.

⁴ Members were asked ‘How often do you usually participate in the sport activity in/with your sport organization?’. Both exercise and competitions are implied in this formulation.

⁵ Members were asked ‘If you encountered personal problems and needed help, support or care, do you think you could get this from some of the other participants in your sport organization?’

⁶ Members were asked to respond to the following statement with either ‘yes’ or ‘no’: ‘I have made new friends through my participation in the sport organization’.

⁷ This is even the case when the exact same operationalization as in this study is applied to the Norwegian data. The distribution of Norwegian members on the four types of community then becomes: Strong 43%, pragmatic 16%, mediated 25%, and weak 15%.

⁸ Such a comparison would otherwise seem worthwhile due to the similarity of the voluntary sport sector in Denmark and Norway, but methodological differences particularly with regard to the collection of data make such comparisons, for example with respect to the distribution of members on community types, questionable. Therefore such comparisons are not included in the text.

⁹ The dummy variables are coded in the following way: For pragmatic communities (pragmatic=1, strong, mediated and weak=0), and for strong communities (strong=1, pragmatic, mediated and weak=0).

¹⁰ Further variables other than those included were tested before arriving at the final model. At the individual level, variables such as attachment to the local community and resident children were included without significant results. At the organizational level, the same is true for variables concerning the degree of urbanization in the respective locations of the sport organizations as well as the degree of professionalization operationalized as the percentage of paid employees relative to volunteers.

¹¹ In practice, keep-fit exercise was applied as the reference category. The results showed football, handball and cycling to be significantly more conducive to strong communities and less conducive to pragmatic ones, when comparing them to keep-fit exercise. There were, on the other hand, no significant differences between tennis and keep-fit exercise in the distribution of members on either of the two community types.

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