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Individual and organisational factors of social integration of members and volunteers in European sports clubs

Abstract

Sports clubs are often perceived as important vehicles for social integration, but the empirical evidence to support this claim is limited. This article sets out to identify individual and organisational characteristics that are conducive to social integration of members and volunteers. Drawing on survey data from more than 8,000 members and volunteers in ten European countries, a factor analysis identified three dimensions of social integration. They match the three-fold theoretical distinctions between socio-affective (interaction and identification) and socio-cultural integration made in the article. Multilevel regression analyses examined the effects of individual-level variables (socio-economic background, affiliation and participation) and organisational-level variables (management and structural characteristics) on the three dimensions of social integration. Emprical analyses revealed that the individual-level variables, especially affiliation and participation (e.g. the number of years connected to the club, the frequency of sports and competition participation, the team/group size and volunteering), had explanatory power, while the organisational-level variables (management and structural characteristics) mainly showed weak correlations. These findings were relatively consistent among the three dimensions of social integration, which indicates that it is mainly the same individual and organisational characteristics that are conducive to social integration in sports clubs.

Keywords: Social integration; sports clubs; socio-cultural integration; socio-affective integration; members.

1. Introduction

European societies face important challenges when it comes to increasing social inequality (Piketty, Wilkinson) and social integration of various social groups (ref, Putnam has an article on this). Voluntary organisations and sports clubs are often promoted as important vehicles for meeting these challenges: In the general public (Seippel 2018), in sports policy documents (Hoye & Nicholson, 2008; Ibsen et al., 2016) and among researchers (Etzioni, 1995; Putnam, 2000),.

Even though social integration is a topic of interest and concern to a number of researchers in the area of sports (REF), studies of social integration of members and volunteers in sports clubs have two short comings. First, existing studies differ in the way they *conceptualize* social integration (ref). In many cases, the multidimensional nature of the construct is hardly considered, and only a few facets of social integration are analysed (for an overview of analytical concepts: Adler Zwahlen, Nagel, & Schlesinger, 2018). For a proper understanding of social integration in sports clubs, qualitative aspects of integration, such as cultural understanding and acceptance and social interaction and identification among members and volunteers, need to be addressed (Elling, De Knop, & Knoppers, 2001; Esser, 2009).

Second, the *context* of social integration through sport clubs is insufficiently covered, and we lack knowledge of how national characteristics, sports clubs and individuals together promote or inhibit social integration (Auld, 2008; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). Departing from this research deficit, this article provides information about the characteristics of members and volunteers (e.g. socio-economic background and attachment and participation), sports clubs (e.g. management and structural characteristics) and national context that are associated with social integration. This sort of information can create a more complete and accurate understanding of the potential of sports clubs in fostering social integration. Ultimately, such knowledge could inform initiatives targeted at promoting social integration in sports clubs and potentially other organised social contexts.

Accordingly, in this article we ask the following question: Which individual and organisational characteristics are conducive to different forms of social integration (socio-cultural and socio-affective integration)?

We answer the research question drawing on data from the project 'Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe' (SIVSCE), which has collected comparable knowledge about sports clubs, members and volunteers in ten European countries, including Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. Hence, the results presented do not only refer to one national context but cut across different national contexts with different sports systems.

We start the article by elaborating on the concept of social integration and the dimensions of the concept as they will be applied. Next, we describe central theoretical perspectives, review previous research and develop a set of hypotheses about which individual and club-level factors influence social integration. We will then introduce the data material and the methods applied before presenting the results. Finally, the article offers a discussion and conclusion.

2. The concept of social integration and its contextual/empirical dimensions

2.1 The concept of social integration

Looking for how integration might occur in sports clubs, one could look at the topic from two sides: from an organisational and a societal perspective. From the organizational side, Seippel (2005) and Østerlund and Seippel (2013) have developed a framework distinguishing between integration as various types of interaction and commitments. From the societal side, Esser (2009) has identified various forms of integration and showed how they are mediated through, in addition to factual

participation and interaction, processes of understanding of, identification with and acceptance of the social relations within a social arena.

Taken together, these ways of thinking about integration through sports clubs in an organizational and societal context meet in Elling et al. (2001) differentiating between three dimensions of the concept: structural, socio-cultural and socio-affective. These three analytical distinctions draw attention to different aspects of social integration. *Structural integration* is primarily concerned with nominal membership and the unequal representation of various population groups in sports clubs. This will not be the focus point of this article. *Socio-cultural integration* is concerned with "the existence and continuous confirmation and challenging of dominant and marginal norms and values" (Elling et al., 2001, p. 418). More specifically, we are interested both in the ability of members and volunteers to know and master dominant values and norms in sports clubs ('understanding') and the acceptance of multiculturalism within clubs and among the club affiliates ('acceptance'). This distinction is inspired by the work of Esser (2009), who distinguishes between 'assimilation' and 'pluralism'. *Socio-affective integration* deals with "sport as an instrumental practice for meeting others" (Elling et al., 2001, p. 418). Inspired by Esser (2009), we differentiate socio-affective integration in two dimensions. The first is 'interaction', understood as the socialisation and the formation of social networks among members and volunteers in sports clubs. The second dimension is 'identification', which can be viewed as the degree to which members and volunteers identify with and feel emotionally connected to their respective sports clubs and the other club affiliates.

2.2 Contexts: Individual and structural factors

To structure our theoretical framework and include all explanatory factors we use a multilevel model developed for sports studies (Nagel, 2007; Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker, et al., 2015). The

purpose of the model is to understand actions and in light of individual characteristics (e.g. social background, sports practice) as they play out in interaction with contextual factors (e.g. economic, social, material and/or political).

2.2.1. Individual-level characteristics

How social integration in sports clubs develops depends on how individuals with specific characteristics, resources and competencies use their opportunities for action. Among individual factors, it seems reasonable to distinguish between social background and the affiliation and participation of members and volunteers in the clubs.

On the one hand, a stereotypical understanding says that females, due to basic gender socialisation (Gilligan, 1982), are more social in the sense that they develop stronger social relations to other people, whereas males have more superficial social relations. This makes for females being more inclined to integrate socially than males. On the other hand, sports have traditionally been a masculine arena (Connell, 2009; Theberge, 2000), which could discourage females from integrating socially. Studies in sports clubs find that gender has no or a very limited effect on the democratic and social participation as well as the strength of social relations among members (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; Seippel, 2005; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013)ref. In line with these findings, our first hypothesis on the individual level (Hi1) is that we will not find significant gender differences in our study.

In most nations, sports clubs are first and foremost a site for children and youth (ref, some SIVSCE report perhaps). Opportunities, cultures and policies are conducive to younger people's participation in sports clubs, and a very high proportion of European youth takes part in sports (ref). Previous research also supports this picture (Baur & Braun, 2003; Hovemann & Wicker, 2009; Seippel, 2015; Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, & Bracke, 2010; Vandermeerschen, Vos, & Scheerder, 2015; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). Therefore, we expect that (Hi2) younger people

in general are more socially integrated in organised sports than older people. There could be a difference where older people have a better knowledge and understanding of what goes on in sports clubs (socio-cultural integration), whereas younger people are better socio-affectively integrated.

One could think that social class (measured as education and/or income) is conducive to integration in sports in cases where the sport has a class character: being costly, demanding time or having a specific class culture. Studies of sports participation have found educational level to correlate positively with levels of physical activity and sports club participation (EU, 2014; Scheerder & Vos, 2011; Seippel, 2015; Studer, Schlesinger, & Engel, 2011) (Andersen & Bakken, 2018). Research conducted among members in sports clubs indicate, however, that once affiliated with a sports club, educational level exerts no or a limited influence on democratic and social participation as well as engagement in community relations. This could be because some of the costs of participation – money and cultural knowledge – is already "paid" when participating in sports and further social participation is less costly. There is, accordingly, even some support for the claim that among members of sports clubs, those who are well educated engage less in the social life of sports clubs (Seippel, 2005; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). Based on these findings, we hypothesise (Hi3) that we will not find significant effects of social class on social integration in sports clubs.

Sports are often presented as a good arena for the integration of minorities because, compared to other social arenas, both the practical and cultural threshold to participate is low. Nevertheless, minority groups are often found to be underrepresented in sports clubs (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018; Finch, Lawton, Williams, & Sloper, 2001) (Strandbu, Bakken, & Sletten, 2017). Building on these general findings, we hypothesise (Hi4) that minorities are not only underrepresented in sports clubs, but also less socially integrated than majority groups.

I know very little on disabled persons in sports, but we need something around here …

Integration takes time and depends on involvement, which might come both from participation and volunteering in sports. Previous research support this claim with regard to length and type of affiliation as well as participation frequency and form (Baur & Braun, 2003; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Nagel, 2006; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). In these studies, positive correlations have been identified between different measures of social integration (e.g. community structures, social participation and member commitment) and various factors related to the affiliation and participation of club members (e.g. duration of membership, being a volunteer, frequency of participation in the sports activities, competition participation and size of the team or group in which club affiliates do sports). With regard to affiliation, we therefore suggest that (Hi5) people affiliated as members and/or volunteers are better socially integrated than other club affiliates, and that (Hi6) social integration is positively associated with length of affiliation. As for participation, we hypothesise that social integration is positively correlated with the frequency of participation in the sports activities (Hi7), competition participation (Hi8) and the team/group size (Hi9).

2.2.2. Club-level characteristics

There are several characteristics of sports clubs that could matter for social integration, and they tend to be of three kinds: management, organizational structures and sports (Seiberth & Thiel, 2010). Our data do not allow for appropriate analyses of social effects of sports, so we focus on the first two.

With regard to club management, some clubs are more concerned with the social aspect of sports, which could potentially foster social integration among members and volunteers. Other clubs are more oriented towards sports achievement, which could in some cases be a hindrance to social integration. Research indicates that inclusive democratic club politics and decision-making processes promote socio-cultural and socio-affective integration (Baur & Braun, 2003). As far as

we know, there is less research on the two aspects that we wish to examine: social versus sports/performance ambitions. Nevertheless, we extract the following hypothesis (Hc1): clubs emphasising social events have higher levels of social integration, whereas clubs with high sport ambitions risk lower levels of social integration.

Also connected to aspects of management, modern sports clubs are becoming more professional. Professionalisation is a contested concept (Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015; Seippel, 2010), but one reasonsable operationalisation of the concept is whether a club has employees or not. On a theoretical level, one could think that employees make for more bureaucratic organisations that provide more opportunities for doing sports, but fewer opportunities for involvement and volunteering in the organisations. In line with these assumptions, German studies indicate that socio-affective integration is lower in sports clubs that have paid staff (Nagel, 2006), whereas Baur & Braun (2003) find this effect, whether the work of officials or coaches is voluntary or paid, rather negligible (for integration-related performance of sports clubs). Nevertheless, we hypothesise (Hc2) that sports clubs that have employees promote less social integration. How professionalisation matters to integration will in the end largely depend on how professional resources are used and function, because employers and management can obviously make a difference, both on a personal level and as part of an organisation.

For structural characteristics, one could think that smaller clubs bring people closer together and are more conducive to social integration – especially of the affective kind – than larger clubs. One could make the same assumptions about single-sport vs. multisport clubs. In previous research, Nagel (2006) showed how socio-affective integration is higher in single-sport clubs than in multisport clubs. Østerlund and Seippel (2013) show how smaller clubs are more conducive to social integration than larger clubs. Therefore, we suggest (Hc3) that smaller clubs stimulate social

integration more than larger clubs and that (Hc4) single-sport clubs are better for social integration than multisport clubs.

A final structural aspect that could have relevance for social integration is not club-specific, but a trait connected to the specific area in which the club is located. This aspect is relevant because the general rhetoric surrounding smaller communities is that they are characterised by closer social relations than larger, urban communities. Studies do not agree on whether this has an effect on participation in voluntary associations, including sports clubs, and voluntary engagement. Some studies find higher participation and engagement levels (Wollebæk, Selle, & Lorentzen, 2000), while others find no such effect (Koch-Nielsen, 2005; Sørensen, Svendsen, & Jensen, 2011). In spite of this disagreement in the literature, we follow the general rhetoric and suggest that (Hc5) clubs in rural areas score higher on social integration than clubs in urban neighbourhoods.

4. Data and methods

The multilevel analyses conducted in this article build on data from the SIVSCE project, which was the first to collect large-scale comparative data on sports clubs in Europe. Ten countries participated in the project, and, in each of these countries, comparative data has been collected on three different analytical levels: the macro-level, meso-level and micro-level. All are relevant for understanding how sports clubs function and why (Nagel, 2007; Nagel, Schlesinger, Wicker, et al., 2015). In the context of the topic of this article, a combination of data collected among members and volunteers (micro-level) and sports clubs (meso-level) was applied in the statistical analyses.

4.1. Micro-level data material – members and volunteers

At the micro-level, an online survey was conducted in the spring of 2016 among adult (16+ years) members and volunteers in European sports clubs. The survey used national translations of an English questionnaire developed in the research group. It included questions about the involvement in and commitment to sports clubs, but also key characteristics of the members and

volunteers. The sports clubs from which the members and volunteers were recruited were selected to represent a certain variation both among European sports clubs and within each of the ten participating countries. Variation according to structural characteristics (club size, single-sport vs. multisport clubs and sports) and the context of the sports clubs (degree of urbanisation in the area in which the club is located) were central criteria.

[Table 1 near here]

In all ten countries, at least thirty sports clubs, representing a total of at least 2,000 members and volunteers, were included. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent directly to members and volunteers or through club representatives. As Table 1 shows, a total of 13,082 members and volunteers replied to the survey ranging from about 450 in Spain to about 3,200 in Denmark. These replies stem from a total of 642 clubs that ended up participating in the data collection. It is not possible to calculate response rates for the member and volunteer survey since sports club representatives were responsible for distributing the main part of the survey invitations to members and volunteers. It is, however, likely that the most engaged members and volunteers were more inclined to complete the survey than the less engaged. If this is indeed the case, this group will be somewhat overrepresented in the final survey sample.

4.2. Meso-level data material – sports clubs

The 642 sports clubs selected for the micro-level data collection were taken from a sample of 35,790 clubs that replied to a sports club survey in the fall of 2015. Information is drawn from this survey about the structural characteristics of the sports clubs and the main issues related to the management of them.

4.3. Data analysis

The data contained fourteen items designed to measure the dependent variables of social integration (see paragraph 4.4). By conducting a factor analysis, we aimed to determine whether

these items could be reduced to dimensions of social integration – and whether these dimensions matched the theoretical division into socio-cultural (understanding and acceptance) and socio-affective (interaction and identification) integration outlined in paragraph 2. The purpose was to increase the validity of the measures.

The statistical analyses were conducted using 'IBM SPSS Statistics 24'. The factor analysis applied the 'principal components' method of extraction (Field, 2013). Because the hypothesised dimensions of social integration are unlikely to be completely uncorrelated, oblique rotation ('direct oblimin') was applied. Having conducted the factor analysis, reliability checks were conducted on the identified dimensions using the Cronbach's alpha test before constructing the indexes for each of the identified dimensions.

The statistical regression analyses were conducted using the 'Generalized Mixed Models' approach (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2012). The hierarchical structure of the dataset was taken into account by conducting multilevel analyses including three levels: macro (country), meso (club) and micro (member and volunteer). The results revealed that intercept variances at the country level were non-significant in the statistical multilevel models for all three dependent variables. The country level ICCs were relatively low (between 0.02 and 0.05), indicating that a limited percentage of the variation in the dependent variables can be explained by differences at the country level. The number of units at the country level is smaller than recommended in most of the literature on multilevel modelling (Maas & Hox, 2005; Snijders & Bosker, 2012), but recent simulation studies (Stegmueller, 2013) indicate that as long as the models are relatively simple (in our case: random intercept models only), the standard errors (and the estimation of confidence intervals) are within reasonable limits.

4.4. Dependent and independent variables

Fourteen items were designed to measure social integration. Of these fourteen items, three were measures of socio-cultural integration, and two of these focused on the ability of members and volunteers to know and master dominant values and norms in sports clubs (connected to the aspect of understanding), while one was concerned with their feeling of acceptance and mutual respect from other club affiliates (connected to the aspect of acceptance). With regard to understanding, a choice was made to focus on a defining aspect of sports clubs, namely the democratic decision-making structure. This choice has merit, because knowledge about how the member democracy works is important for understanding other aspects of how a sports club functions and what lies beyond the sports activities. The concept of acceptance was reduced to a single item asking members and volunteers if they feel respected for who they are by other people from the club. This is also a simplification, but it provides an indication as to whether there is a climate of acceptance in sports clubs, and, by combining this with socio-economic background information, this item can be used to identify whether certain social groups feel less accepted.

The remaining eleven items were measures of socio-affective integration. Six items were concerned with the social participation and formation of networks (connected to the aspect of interaction), while the remaining five items describe the degree to which members and volunteers identify with and feel emotionally connected to their respective sports clubs and affiliates (connected to the aspect of identification). The six items used to operationalise the interaction aspect represent: the frequency of participation in different forms of social interaction, the depth of the social relations formed and the breadth of socialisation. All of the five indicators used to operationalise the identification aspect relate to facets of the club: the atmosphere in the club, the significance of the club (proudness and importance as a social arena) and the club as a social group (its relative importance and potential spillover into private socialisation). The specific wordings and descriptive statistics for the fourteen items are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

In order to examine how the fourteen items describing social integration covariate, a factor analysis was conducted. As it can be seen from the presentation of the main results in Table 3, the factor analysis resulted in three dimensions of social integration. The dimensions identified in the factor analysis follow the theoretical expectations, except for socio-cultural integration, in which all three indicators make up one dimension that does not differentiate items according to the theoretical distinctions between understanding and acceptance. Hence, there is a strong correlation between understanding how a club functions and the feeling of being accepted by other people from the club. Jointly, the three dimensions explain about 60% of the total common variation in the dependent variables. The reliability tests revealed acceptable values for all three dimensions ranging from 0.750 to 0.832.

[Table 3 near here]

Having established the reliability of the three dimensions, indexes were constructed in two steps. First, the original variables were recoded to a common scale (ranging from 0 to 100), and then the mean value across the items included in each scale was calculated. The respondents were included in the indexes if they had given valid answers to at least one of the questions included in each scale. Before arriving at this decision, we sought to determine how criteria of at least two or three valid answers affected the averages and standard deviations for the three indexes, and since the changes were negligible, it was chosen to include as many cases as possible. Table 4 contains descriptive statistics for the indexes.

[Table 4 near here]

We have four categories of independent variables: 1) socio-economic background, 2) affiliation and participation, 3) club management and 4) structural club characteristics. For socio-economic background, we included gender, age and educational level alongside indicators of

disability and migration background. As for affiliation and participation, indicators for the forms of affiliation with the club (as member or volunteer) and the number of years affiliated were included. Also included in the analyses were variables informing on the frequency of sports participation, participation in competitive sport and the size of the team or group within which each club affiliate does sports most frequently. At the club level, the management aspect contains club goals, whether the club sets high value on companionship and conviviality and/or sporting success and competitions. The other aspect of management is professionalisation with a focus on whether the club has a paid manager or not. Finally, the significance of structural club characteristics is examined through the inclusion of club size, whether the club is a single-sport club that offers only one sport or a multisport club that offers at least two sports, and the size of the community in which the club is located. Table 5 contains the descriptive statistics for all the independent variables.

[Table 5 near here]

5. Results

For each dependent variable, Table 6 contains an empty model and a full model containing all independent variables. Across the three forms of social integration measured, the individual-level variables seem to be of greater significance than the club-level variables. With regard to the two aspects of socio-affective integration examined (interaction and identification), the variables describing the affiliation and participation of members and volunteers are particularly important, while there is less consistency in the effects of the socio-economic background variables. However, with regard to socio-cultural integration, fewer affiliation and participation variables are of significance at the same time as more socio-economic background variables seem to be of importance. Club-level variables – both management and structural characteristics – exert a limited influence on all three forms of social integration examined. Hence, factors at the individual level seem to be of greater importance for social integration than factors at the club level.

[Table 6 near here]

The results in Table 6 mostly confirm the hypotheses at the individual level. As expected (Hi1), we do not find strong gender differences with regard to social integration. The only statistically significant result is that men are slightly more socio-culturally integrated. We expected that younger people would score higher on socio-affective integration than older people (Hi2), but we find that this only applies to the interaction aspect, not with regard to identification. Hence, younger people seem to socialise more frequently, but they do not identify more with the club and other members. In the same hypothesis (Hi2), we suggested that older people would have a better knowledge and understanding of what goes on in a sports club. In line with this, we find that older people score significantly higher on socio-cultural integration than younger people. In line with our expectations (Hi3), educational level has no effect on the affective aspect of social integration. This means that when in clubs, there is no difference according to levels of education with regard to interaction and identification. Contrary to our expectations, we find that levels of socio-cultural integration increase with educational level. With regard to the expectation that minorities are less integrated than majorities in sports clubs (Hi4), the results are mixed. Contrary to our expectation, people with a disability score significantly higher on both aspects of socio-affective integration, while, as expected, people with a migration background score significantly lower on socio-cultural integration.

Having described the statistically significant effects of the socio-economic background variables, it is worth mentioning that the non-standardised beta coefficients vary in size from 1.2 (the difference according to disability on identification) to 3.7 (the difference between non-migrants and migrants on socio-cultural integration). Since all coefficients stem from dichotomous independent variables (some of them dummy variables) and refer to displacements on scales from 0 to 100, the sizes of all the described effects seem to be relatively modest.

With regard to the length and type of affiliation as well as participation frequency and form, we suggested a number of factors of relevance for social integration and posed five hypotheses. These are mainly confirmed by the results presented in Table 6. As expected (Hi5), the three forms of affiliation with the club – membership, regular volunteering and occasional volunteering – are positively associated with the three forms of social integration. The only exception is that members seem to be no less socio-culturally integrated than non-members. The strongest driver for social integration seems to be regular volunteering, which could also be regarded as the strongest form of connection. The significance of volunteering for social integration can be illustrated by the fact that regular volunteers score more than ten points higher on the interaction aspect of socio-affective integration. We also learn from Table 6 that the level of social integration generally rises with duration of affiliation as suggested in hypothesis Hi6. The effect size is largest with regard to the interaction aspect of socio-affective integration, which could either mean that social participation fosters retainment or that years of affiliation foster more participation – or that both explanations are relevant.

As suggested, participation in sports activities (Hi7) and competitions (Hi8) are also drivers for social integration. Significant and positive correlations can be identified for both variables with regard to socio-affective integration, but not with regard to socio-cultural integration. It is, however, not only sports and competition participation at large that influence social integration, but also the conditions under which this participation takes place. As expected (Hi9), we generally find that socio-affective integration is positively associated with the team/group size. The effect is stronger for interaction than identification, while no effect on socio-cultural integration can be traced. It may seem somewhat surprising that the group of non-sports-active individuals scores significantly higher than those doing sports regardless of team/group size, but this is mainly because the group of non-sports-active individuals contains a large proportion of volunteers.

Turning to the club-level variables, we mainly find no or only weak effects. With regard to management, we posed the hypothesis (Hc1) that clubs emphasising social events have higher levels of social integration, whereas clubs with high sports ambitions risk lower levels of social involvement. We find very limited support for these claims in that only members and volunteers in clubs that set a high value on companionship and conviviality score slightly higher on the interaction aspect of socio-affective integration. The general lack of correlations could indicate that club attitudes are somewhat detached from member and volunteer actions. Drawing on this, it seems that aiming for sporting success is no antecedent to social integration. In fact, as described earlier, people that are active in competitive sports in a club are better socio-affectively integrated. Detachment from member and volunteer actions also seems to be present with regard to the aspect of professionalisation we measure here – whether the club has a paid manager or not. Using this measure, we find no significant correlations with the social integration of members and volunteers in clubs. This is contrary to our expectation (Hc2) that sports clubs that are more professional promote less integration. Having used only one measure, we cannot conclude more generally about the effect of professionalisation on social integration in sports clubs.

The final aspect we included at the club level was structural characteristics of clubs. We expected (Hc3) that smaller clubs stimulate social integration more than larger clubs, and we do find some support for this claim. With regard to both identification and socio-cultural integration, the level of integration declines significantly with club size. Hence, it seems that members and volunteers in small clubs find it easier to identify with the club and other members, and they are more inclined to master dominant values and norms and to feel respected by other people affiliated with the club. Conversely, the effect of club size on the interaction aspect of socio-affective integration is limited. The only significant result is that members and volunteers in clubs with 200-399 members are slightly better integrated than members and volunteers in clubs with 0-199

members. Thus, it would seem that the levels of social participation among members and volunteers are influenced by club size to a very limited extent. Connected to the argument that smaller clubs are to be better suited to promote social integration among club affiliates, we hypothesised (Hc4) that single-sport clubs would have better socially integrated members and volunteers than multisport clubs. However, we find no support for this claim. Thus, it seems that club size is more important than whether a club has only one or several branches of sports. Finally, we hypothesised (Hc5) that clubs in rural areas would score higher on social integration than clubs in urban neighbourhoods. The correlation between the size of the community in which a club is located and social integration among members and volunteers is, however, weak, and only significant with regard to socio-cultural integration. However, there is a modest decrease in socio-cultural integration with the size of the community, which could be related to the closer bonds that often exist in smaller local communities.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to examine which characteristics of individuals and sports clubs are conducive to three forms of social integration: socio-cultural and socio-affective integration (interaction and identification). The results of the analyses showed that individual-level variables were more important for all three forms of social integration examined than club-level variables. Since few studies so far have examined the effect of individual and organisational-level variables on social integration together, the findings from our study inform the literature on social integration by underlining the importance of individual-level factors relative to organisational ones. The contribution of our independent variables is mainly consistent between the two dimensions of socio-affective integration, but less so for socio-cultural integration. In general, the socio-economic background variables exert a stronger influence on socio-cultural than socio-affective integration. This indicates that socio-cultural integration is more selective than socio-affective integration.

Instead, socio-affective integration is more strongly associated with different forms of affiliation and participation, e.g. being a member and/or a volunteer and participating in the sports activities and competitions. The fact that the differences in the effects of independent variables are greatest when comparing socio-cultural integration to socio-affective integration is hardly surprising as theoretically they are described as different dimensions of social integration (Elling et al., 2001; Esser, 2009).

Turning to the effects of socio-economic background, the results mainly confirmed the first three hypotheses. Gender differences were almost absent with regard to social integration, younger people scored higher on interaction than older people, while the opposite result was found for socio-cultural integration, and the effect of educational level was only significant with regard to socio-cultural integration. These findings mainly confirm results from previous studies (e.g. Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; Seippel, 2005, 2015; Vandermeerschen, Vos, & Scheerder, 2015; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). Less consistent were the results obtained in relation to the integration of minorities. As expected, people with a migration background were found to be less socio-culturally integrated, while people with disabilities, contrary to our expectations, were found to be more socio-affectively integrated. This result indicates that in order to understand how belonging to a minority group affects social integration, one must apply a differentiated perspective that distinguishes according to both different forms of social integration and different minority groups. Furthermore, when previous studies have found minority groups to be underrepresented in sports clubs, this does not necessarily mean that those who are in clubs are also less socially integrated. Participation and integration should therefore be seen as measures of different concepts.

In line with our expectations, the affiliation and participation patterns of members and volunteers were found to be central to social integration – particularly socio-affective integration. People affiliated as members and/or volunteers were found to be better integrated, as were people

with a longstanding affiliation with the sports club. The intensity of the participation in the sports activities in the clubs and in competitions was also found to be positively correlated with social integration, but only with respect to socio-affective integration. The same can be said for team or group size. People doing sports on larger teams or in larger groups were found to be more socio-affectively integrated than people doing sports alone or in smaller teams or groups. At large, this study confirms findings in previous research (e.g. Baur & Braun, 2003; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Nagel, 2006; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2015; Østerlund, 2014; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013), which underline the significance of affiliation and participation patterns for social integration. At the same time, our findings suggest that affiliation and participation are not necessarily equally important to different aspects of social integration.

At the club level, we find limited support for most of our hypotheses: close to no association was identified between social integration and management when operationalised as club goals (to foster social engagement or sporting success) and professionalisation (paid management). Even though our operationalisations of management are different from the ones used in previous studies, and not directly comparable, the results run counter to much existing literature (e.g. Baur & Braun, 2003; Nagel, 2006). Our findings indicate that both club goals and management structure are detached from the actions of members and volunteers.

Contrary to our expectations, the effect of structural characteristics of clubs was also of little relevance for social integration. The most significant result was that smaller clubs were found to be better equipped to promote social integration than larger clubs, with the exception of the interaction aspect of socio-affective integration. Close to no effect was identified with regard to clubs being structured as single-sport or multisport clubs, and the degree of urbanisation in the area in which a club is located had only a modest effect. Clubs in rural areas scored higher on socio-cultural integration than clubs in urban neighbourhoods. The results confirm the role that previous studies

have found club size to play in social integration (e.g. Østerlund & Seippel, 2013). Hence, size seems to be of importance to social integration, but not only at the club level. The team or group level should not be ignored when examining the role of size in social integration. As for the lack of findings with regard to the remaining structural variables running counter to the existing literature (e.g. Nagel, 2006; Wollebæk et al., 2000), the integration of individual and club-level characteristics in this study is likely to be of relevance in an attempt to explain the discrepancy. When taking into account the hierarchical structure of our data and controlling for the influence of individual-level variables, the club-level variables show limited explanatory power.

6.1. Inspiration for the management of social integration

Our results indicate that club managers and board members have limited opportunities to actively promote social integration in sports clubs. However, it should be highlighted that our results also show that social integration is not something sports clubs automatically promote as long as their members share some characteristics. Active promotion of (broad) member involvement could still play an integrative role. Our study shows that members who are active in different roles and contexts have higher chances of being socially integrated.

First, the results show that it is important to be a member of a sports club. This is particularly interesting from a policy perspective, as many policies are aimed at getting people physically active, regardless of the type of organisation where they do so. These flexible memberships, or 'sport light' initiatives, seem to successfully foster sports in targeted population groups (Borgers, Vanreusel, Vos, Forsberg, & Scheerder, 2016; Pilgaard, 2012; Van der Roest, Vermeulen, & Van Bottenburg, 2015). This article shows that, for social integration in sports clubs, formal membership remains important.

Second, this article also shows the importance of volunteering. Hence, to increase the social integration in European societies through sports clubs, it would be advantageous to actively

promote volunteering. In this context, whether people are regular or occasional volunteers is secondary. The results show greater effect sizes for regular volunteers than for occasional volunteers, but the effects are visible for both types. From a social integration perspective, managers and board members of sports clubs should try to get more people to be active volunteers. Sports policies can support clubs in trying to do so.

6.2. Limitations and implications for future studies

Since the data applied in this article was collected in ten European countries, and because we find only limited variation at the country level, our findings are likely to be generalisable to European sports clubs. However, as with many quantitative studies, this article shows little understanding of the social mechanisms that lie behind the promotion of social integration. Indeed, it has become clear that being active as a member or volunteer brings higher chances of social integration. However, it is unclear how people get more involved in sports clubs. Similarly, it is also unclear what causal links are apparent. Does being integrated mean that one is more likely to become involved as a member or a volunteer, or do members and volunteers get more involved in society when they are active in their sports clubs? Furthermore, clarification is needed on the limited explanatory power of the variables at the club level. It is difficult to imagine that clubs can do nothing at all to promote social integration among members and volunteers, and it should be noted that part of the explanation for the lack of correspondence between club management and social integration could be due to operationalisations. Therefore, we recommend that future studies devote particular attention to identifying club-level variables with relevance for social integration.

7. References

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Table 1. The number of clubs selected and the number of responses from members and volunteers per country included in the data collection.

Country	**N** clubs	**N** responses
Belgium (Flanders)	47	762
Denmark	36	3,163
England	40	717
Germany	141	2,455
Hungary	47	716
The Netherlands	144	1,965
Norway	30	1,330
Poland	61	570
Spain	55	445
Switzerland	41	959
Total	642	13,082

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the 14 items of social integration in sports clubs.

Items	**Average (Std. deviation)**	**Total number of replies* (N)**
Socio-cultural integration – understanding		
I understand how the club functions (1-5)	4.07 (0.99)	9,909
I know when and how to give my opinion when decisions are made in the club (1-5)	4.04 (1.02)	9,667
Socio-cultural integration – acceptance		
Other people from the club respect me for who I am (1-5)	4.20 (0.88)	9,126
Socio-affective integration – interaction		
I participate in the club's social gatherings (e.g. parties, family days, Christmas dinners, etc.) (1-7)	2.99 (1.52)	9,824
I stay in the club sometime after training, matches, tournaments or the like to talk to other people from the club (1-7)	4.94 (2.18)	9,539
When I am in the club, I talk to other people from the club than those who belong to my team/group (1-7)	5.00 (2.09)	9,199
I have made new friends through participation in the club (0-1)	0.85 (0.35)	10,002
I socialise with people from the club, which I did not know before joining, outside of the club (0-1)	0.59 (0.49)	9,884
How many people from the club would you estimate that you know by name? (1-7)	5.55 (1.31)	10,747
Socio-affective integration – identification		
There is a good atmosphere in the club (1-5)	4.30 (0.93)	10,180
I am proud to say that I belong to the club (1-5)	4.26 (0.98)	9,995
It is important for me to socialise with other people from the club (1-5)	4.02 (1.05)	10,177
The club is one of the most important social groups I belong to (1-5)	3.41 (1.30)	10,117
In the club we help and support each other in private matters if necessary (1-5)	3.56 (1.18)	9,046

Note: *In the calculation of the total number of responses, the 'do not know' and 'not relevant' answers have been excluded. This means that between 0 and 1,376 responses have been excluded for each of the items in the table.

Table 3. Rotated factor loadings from the factor analysis involving the 14 items describing social integration using oblique (direct oblimin) rotation. Cells in grey background indicate the dimension to which each variable had the highest rotated factor loading. N=9,046-10,180 cases were included in the factor analysis depending on the number of missing values in the pairwise analyses.

Items	**Dim. 1**	**Dim. 2**	**Dim. 3**
I understand how the club functions (1-5)	0,182	-0,084	0,804
I know when and how to give my opinion when decisions are made in the club (1-5)	0,146	-0,065	0,838
Other people from the club respect me for who I am (1-5)	-0,014	-0,436	0,509
I participate in the club's social gatherings (e.g. parties, family days, Christmas dinners, etc.) (1-7)	0,647	-0,109	0,043
I stay in the club sometime after training, matches, tournaments or the like to talk to other people from the club (1-7)	0,784	0,055	0,094
When I am in the club, I talk to other people from the club than those who belong to my team/group (1-7)	0,747	0,164	0,205
I have made new friends through participation in the club (0-1)	0,530	-0,276	-0,138
I socialise with people from the club, which I did not know before joining, outside of the club (0-1)	0,567	-0,241	-0,177
How many people from the club would you estimate that you know by name? (1-7)	0,738	0,043	0,118
There is a good atmosphere in the club (1-5)	-0,282	-0,726	0,264
I am proud to say that I belong to the club (1-5)	-0,105	-0,777	0,205
It is important for me to socialise with other people from the club (1-5)	0,280	-0,683	-0,059
The club is one of the most important social groups I belong to (1-5)	0,362	-0,648	-0,095
In the club we help and support each other in private matters if necessary (1-5)	0,196	-0,701	-0,005
Eigenvalues	5,280	2,000	1,210
% of variance	37.716	14.285	8.642
Cronbach's alpha value	0.750	0.832	0.799

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables (the three indexes constructed).

Dependent variables (the three indexes constructed)	**Average (Std. deviation)**	**Total number of valid cases (N)**
Dimension 1	64.22	10,834
Socio-affective integration – interaction	(24.29)	
Dimension 2	72.43	10,487
Socio-affective integration – identification	(21.83)	
Dimension 3	77.30	10,110
Socio-cultural integration – understanding and acceptance	(20.92)	

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the independent variables included in the analyses.

Independent variables	**Percentage (%)**	**Total number of replies (N)**
Individual-level variables – socio-economic background		
Gender		10,525
1: Woman	41	
2: Man	59	
Age (categorised)		10,201
1: 16-39 years (ref.)	33	
2: 40-59 years	44	
3: 60 years or more	23	
Educational level		10,134
1: Low (ref.)	9	
2: Medium	40	
3: High	51	
Has at least one form of disability (yes)	14	10,323
Born in the country in which the club is located (no)	4	10,396
Individual-level variables – affiliation and participation		
Connection to the club (0-1 items)		
- Member of the club (yes)	88	11,814
- Regular volunteer (yes)	40	11,913
- Occasional volunteer (yes)	54	12,049
Number of years connected to the club		12,401
1: Less than 1 year	8	
2: 1 to 2 years	12	
3: 3 to 4 years	16	
4: 5 to 10 years	23	
5: 11 to 20 years	19	
6: More than 20 years	22	
Frequency of sports participation in the club		12,123
0: Never / not sports active in the club	24	
1: Less than once a month	3	
2: 1-3 times a month	9	
3: 1 time a week	21	
4: 2 times a week	24	
5: 3 times a week or more	18	
Participation in competitive sport in the club		12,042
0: No	58	
1: Yes	42	
Size of team/group in which the person most often do sport in the club		11,783
0: Not sports active in the club	25	
1: 0-2 others (ref.)	8	
2: 3-10 others	26	
3: More than 10 others	41	
Club-level variables – management		
The club sets high value on companionship and conviviality		12,744
1: Don’t agree at all	2	
2: Don’t agree	2	
3: Undecided	9	
4: Agree	40	

5: Totally agree	47	
The club sets high value on sporting success and competitions		12,730
1: Don't agree at all	5	
2: Don't agree	19	
3: Undecided	29	
4: Agree	31	
5: Totally agree	16	
The club has a part or full time paid manager (yes)	17	12,714
Club-level variables – structural characteristics		
Club size		12,755
1: 0-199 members (ref.)	29	
2: 200-399 members	22	
3: 400-999 members	23	
4: 1000+ members	26	
Single or multisport club		12,706
1: Single-sport club	59	
2: Multisport club	41	
Size of community in which the club is located		12,554
1: Less than 500 inhabitants	1	
2: 500-4,999 inhabitants	11	
3: 5,000-19,999 inhabitants	21	
4: 20,000-49,999 inhabitants	17	
5: 50,000-99,999 inhabitants	16	
6: 100,000-499,999 inhabitants	22	
7: 500,000 and more inhabitants	10	

Table 6. Results from the statistical multilevel analyses.

	Socio-affective Interaction (n=8,399)		**Socio-affective Identification (n=8,298)**		**Socio-cultural Understanding and acceptance (n=8,112)**	
Independent variables	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β	Empty model non-stand. β	Full model non-stand. β
Individual-level variables – socio-economic background						
Gender (man)		-0.387		-0.768		1.444*
Age						
- 16-39 years (ref.)						
- 40-59 years		-1.306		-1.771		1.280
- 60 years or more		-1.719*		0.018		2.635**
Educational level						
- Low (ref.)						
- Medium		-0.582		0.001		1.700*
- High		-1.712		-1.738		3.367***
Has at least one form of disability (yes)		1.995*		1.157*		-0.530
Born in the country in which the club is located (no)		-2.497		-0.594		-3.671***
Individual-level variables – affiliation and participation						
Connection to the club (0-1 items)						
- Member of the club (yes)		4.378***		2.968*		1.845
- Regular volunteer (yes)		10.734***		6.510***		9.197***
- Occasional volunteer (yes)		7.962***		4.428***		3.164***
Number of years connected to the club (1-6)		3.436***		1.436***		1.930***
Frequency of sports participation in the club (0-5)		3.303***		2.128***		0.549
Participation in competitive sport in the club (yes)		7.421***		3.543***		0.353
Size of team/group in which the person most often do sport in the club		18.119***		10.165***		-0.151
- Not sports active						
- 0-2 others (ref.)		10.458***		6.150***		1.032
- 3-10 others		11.462***		8.550***		1.522
- More than 10 others						
Club-level variables – management						
The club sets high value on companionship and conviviality (1-5)		0.813*		0.925		0.458

The club sets high value on sporting success and competitions (1-5)		0.042		0.451		-0.290
The club has a part or full time paid manager (yes)		1.250		0.219		-0.709
Club-level variables – structural characteristics						
Club size						
- 0-199 members (ref.)						
- 200-399 members		1.252*		-1.553*		-2.078**
- 400-999 members		1.017		-2.507***		-4.038***
- 1000+ members		-2.189		-4.188***		-5.429***
Single-sport or multisport club (multisport)		-1.277		0.762		0.223
Size of community in which the club is located (1-7)		-0.196		-0.194		-0.301*
Model characteristics						
Intercept	67.924***	20.916***	75,536***	45.065***	78.943***	60.718***
Intercept variance (country)	29.753	25.934	18.752	15.502	7.512	10.971
Intercept variance (club:country)	58.280***	24.650***	31.368***	17.490***	26.472***	7.900***
Intercept variance (residual)	495.47***	322.30***	430.02***	370.48***	406.20***	352.85***
ICC (country)	0.0510	0.0696	0.0390	0.0384	0.0171	0.0295
ICC (club:country)	0.0999	0.0661	0.0653	0.0433	0.0601	0.0213
-2 Log Likelihood	98,508.63	72,648.23	93,749.92	72,839.74	89,778.35	70,720.33
Akaike Inf. Crit.	98,514.64	72,654.23	93,755.93	72,845.74	89,784.35	70,726.33
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	98,536.50	72,675.32	93,777.70	72,866.80	89,806.01	70,747.32

Note: *P<0,05; **P<0,01; ***P<0,001.

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