Title:

The role of team structures for social integration in Swiss football clubs

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Abstract:

Introduction: Voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) are often considered as a clue of society. VSCs provide social encounters between people from different backgrounds and are a place for social integration, e.g. the establishment of belonging and identification. Yet, like other social settings, VSCs can also be a place of exclusion, where assimilative ideas and feelings of otherness are present. Both – mechanisms of social integration but also exclusion-might especially become visible in teams or training groups, where members meet on a regular basis. To explain social integration in VSCs, recent studies have followed a multilevel perspective, assuming that social integration of club members not only depends on individual characteristics, but also the opportunity structures at the club level (e.g. Elmose-Østerlund et al.,2019). Yet, these studies have missed so far to include the team level as a separate level of analysis, but called for the inclusion of the team as a structural context in future studies. Teams can be considered as relative stable social milieus within VSCs close to the members personal sphere, which most likely shape peoples opportunity structures (Esser, 1999).While teams as social groups can be expected to produce feelings of belonging from a theoretical perspective (Tyrell, 1984), qualitative research on belonging in sports (e.g. Burrmann et al., 2017) has especially highlighted the role of regular, positive social interactions, for example promoted through a pronounced sociability or a respectful cultural environment. Empirical studies that systematically consider the social context of the team together with individual and club structural factors are missing. Therefore, the following research question is addressed: What is the role of the team level for social integration of members in VSCs?

Methods: The empirical analyses utilize data from the cross-sectional study "Social integration in Swiss football clubs" conducted between 2019 and 2020 together with the Swiss football federation. The data contains observations on 1525football club members nested in 145 football teams, which are again nested in 42 Swiss voluntary football. Clubs were located in the German and French part of Switzerland and in different settlement structures. Within each club, club representatives selected 2-5 teams, which were visited by the research team before or after practice. Coaches completed a questionnaire on team structures (e.g. team goals, team culture) and present team members answered a questionnaire on individual characteristics, including individual social integration. The visited teams played in youth (44), active (84) and senior (13) competitions. The surveyed members were on average 24.6years old and member of the club for 8.8years. 208 members (13.7%) were female and 287 (19.3%) had a voluntary or full-time job in the club. 245 members (16.2%) were born outside of Switzerland. To analyze the role of the team level for social integration in VSCs, multilevel models were implemented. They allow considering the similarity of nested observations and testing variables at different levels at the same time. The depended variable social integration was conceptualized along the dimension of identification after Esser (2009), operationalized by four items based on the systematic measurement instrument of Adler Zwahlen et al. (2018) to analyze social integration in VSCs (Cronbachs alpha = .714). Following the relevance of positive social interactions for the development of feelings of belonging, variables at the team level were selected in the field of team sociability (e.g. sociability goal of the team, team events) and team culture and climate (e.g. respectful team culture). Most typical variables used in recent multilevel models on social integration were included as controls at the individual and club level.

Results: The analysis of the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC, Hox, 2010) showed a small ICC of 3.5 percent at the club level and a medium to large ICC of 13.3 percent at the team level. This means that only a small portion of the total variance in the members identification is explained by differences between clubs, but a medium to large portion is explained by differences between teams. Therefore, the inclusion of the team level is justified from an empirical perspective and