



SPORTS PARTICIPATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

VEGNESKUMAR MANIAM

Peter Lang

Introduction: Sport and Multiculturalism in the Global Context

No matter where they live on the globe, most young people involved with sport today find themselves confronted with cultural diversity. At the spectator level they watch live, or on television coverage, players from different countries, with differing cultural traditions, competing in international competitions, such as the Olympics, World Cup Soccer, the Wimbledon, French or American Tennis Championships, the Tour de France, or even the Adelaide Tour Down Under in cycling. Except in the case of the Olympics, the professional teams involved are assumed to be made up of the best players available, regardless of the culture and country they come from.

As a result, individuals from quite different cultural backgrounds who are outstanding performers in their particular sport attract much media attention. They become familiar figures to viewers around the world who see them continually on TV, playing in matches or appearing on sports shows. T. Marjoribanks and Farquharson (2012) have pointed out that such international stars often become role models for young people across the globe, inspiring them in their participation in sport. Figures as diverse as Mohammed Ali in boxing, the West Indian Vivian Richards in cricket, Michael Jordan in basketball, Tiger Woods in golf, Sarina Williams in tennis and David Beckham in football were named as some of the leading sporting models over the last fifty years, but many other less controversial performers could also be mentioned.

The global dimension of sport is also evident in the competitions organised within regional networks and groupings, such as the European Union, Southern America, South-East Asia, Southern and Eastern Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. Here, too, the teams involved may include players from culturally diverse backgrounds, sometimes evident in their visible features or the way they speak English. Regular matches among teams representing the culturally diverse countries of the region may lead,

at best, to friendly intercultural exchange and dialogue among the players concerned in a way that enhances understanding of other cultures in the region. At worst, it can generate a bitter rivalry between certain teams and dramatically re-enforce the negative stereotypes which each set of players (and spectators) has of the other (Gasparini, 2010; T. Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2012; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007).

At the grassroots level, where young people participate in amateur sporting activities in their local communities, there are other dimensions to the issue of cultural diversity and sport. In some plural societies, the maintenance of minority cultures is frowned upon and participation in sport encouraged as a means of integrating minorities into the dominant culture. In other societies, cultural differences at both individual and group level are able to exist as an integral and accepted part of national and community life. The issue for sport in these multicultural societies is whether or not players of different cultural backgrounds actually play alongside one another in the same team and against other similarly mixed teams. Alternatively the organization of a given sport could involve competition among teams which are each composed of players drawn from a single cultural background (Gasparini, 2010).

This book is concerned with the scenario of young people playing their chosen sports at the local community level. The issue is how far, in the context of a culturally plural society, participation in sport for young people of diverse cultural identities has proved to be an inclusive or exclusive experience. In order to investigate this topic, it is important to start by clarifying what is meant by the terms ‘sport’ and ‘multiculturalism’.

The Nature of Sport

Sport has been described as having three defining characteristics. In the first place, it involves some form of physical activity. Secondly, the activities of the various sports require certain skills from those playing the game. Finally, sporting activities usually involve one or more players