



# **RETHINKING INTEGRATION AS A PARADIGM FOR IMMIGRANT ATHLETES: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT RESEARCH**

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## **Abstract**

This study critically examines the integration of immigrant athletes within sociology of sport through the lens of relational integration, emphasizing the active and reciprocal nature of social interactions between immigrants and host communities. Drawing on the works of Klarenbeek (2023) and Agergaard (2021), it challenges traditional unidirectional assimilation models by highlighting immigrant athletes as active agents embedded in transnational social fields. The paper suggests that future research should adopt grounded theory-informed mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative social network and sociometric analyses, to better capture the complex and dynamic processes of identity negotiation and social inclusion in sporting contexts. Additionally, it highlights the significance of incorporating intersectionality and feminist perspectives to address the compounded barriers faced by immigrant women in sport. Participatory action research is also proposed as a valuable method to empower immigrant athletes and illuminate their strategies of resistance against exclusion. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations to policymakers and sports organizations aimed at fostering inclusive sporting cultures that recognize the agency and diversity of immigrant athletes. This comprehensive approach aims to deepen theoretical debates and promote equitable, pluralistic environments that authentically reflect contemporary social diversity.

## **Keywords**

Relational Integration, Structural Exclusion, Intersectionality, Symbolic Violence, Sport and Migration

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, sport has become an increasingly central instrument in public policies aimed at facilitating the integration of immigrants across diverse national contexts. Often framed as a culturally neutral and universally accessible domain, sport is widely assumed to foster social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and a sense of belonging. From grassroots programs targeting refugee youth to elite-level campaigns celebrating diversity, the sporting field is frequently imagined as a natural site for building inclusive societies. However, this optimistic narrative has rarely been subjected to sustained critical scrutiny. While the broader migration literature has long debated the assumptions and power dynamics embedded in integration discourses, these reflections have not always been adequately taken up within the sociology of sport. What kinds of “integration” are promoted through sport? Whose norms, values, and cultural practices are centered in these processes? Does sport function merely as a convenient vehicle for conveying integration policies, or is it itself part of the ideological apparatus shaping what “integration” is expected to mean? And to what extent do such initiatives reflect a genuine commitment to pluralism rather than an implicit demand for conformity?

Recent scholarly debates have increasingly challenged the dominant frameworks of immigrant integration, which often rely on normative assumptions of unidirectional adaptation to a pre-defined national culture. As Klarenbeek (2023) argues, such models frequently reproduce hierarchical social imaginaries by positioning immigrants as passive recipients of host society norms. In contrast, her concept of relational integration reconceptualizes integration as a mutual, dynamic process in which both immigrants and receiving communities participate in the reshaping of social relations. This perspective foregrounds interactional reciprocity, structural

embeddedness, and the importance of dismantling rigid immigrant–native dichotomies that underpin much of the policy and academic discourse. Rather than abandoning the concept of integration altogether, Klarenbeek proposes its rehabilitation through a focus on the integration of social relations, not merely individuals.

Extending this critique into the field of sport sociology, Agergaard (2018) examines how similar assumptions underlie many sport-based integration initiatives. Through a transnational and super-diversity lens, she demonstrates how the framing of sport as a tool for integration often reinforces neo-assimilationist expectations, where participation is implicitly tied to the adoption of dominant cultural norms. Agergaard's work thus underscores the need to rethink integration in sport not as a unidirectional process of adaptation, but as a pluralistic, negotiated space shaped by diverse identities, transnational ties, and contested power dynamics.

Building on these critical perspectives, this article aims to interrogate the normative underpinnings of sport-based integration discourses through a sociological lens. It argues that while sport is frequently mobilized as a practical tool for promoting integration, such efforts often obscure the asymmetrical power relations and cultural hierarchies embedded within the concept itself. By integrating Klarenbeek's (2023) notion of relational integration with Agergaard's (2018) transnational critique of assimilationist assumptions in sport, this article calls for a rethinking of integration beyond policy instrumentalism and toward a more socially embedded, mutually negotiated process.

The article contributes to sport sociology and migration studies by foregrounding the need for an intersectional and relational approach when analyzing the role of sport in immigrant incorporation. It highlights the theoretical and empirical gaps in current scholarship—particularly the tendency to treat immigrant athletes as case studies of successful adaptation, rather than as active agents embedded in complex fields of social, cultural, and symbolic negotiation.

In doing so, this work not only advances a critical conceptual framework for future research but also sketches out methodological directions that can operationalize this shift. Qualitative, participatory, and ethnographic methodologies—especially those attentive to the lived experiences of immigrant athletes—are proposed as essential tools to uncover the multilayered dynamics of sport as a site of both inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, the article advocates for a reorientation of academic inquiry that resists framing sport as a neutral vehicle of integration, and instead situates it as a contested social field where recognition, identity, and belonging are constantly negotiated.

## 2. Critical Sociological Inquiries into Sport, Migration and Integration

### 2.1 *The Sporting Field as a Structured Social Space: Habitus Conflict and Symbolic Violence*

The sporting field, often idealized as an inclusive space that promotes meritocracy and social cohesion, is in fact a highly structured social arena governed by historically sedimented norms, embodied dispositions, and unequal distributions of various forms of capital. Pierre Bourdieu's field theory offers a critical framework to understand sports not merely as recreational activities but as autonomous social fields where power relations circulate and social distinctions are reproduced through specific forms of capital: physical, cultural, and social (Bourdieu, 1984; Andrews & Carrington, 2013). These capitals are closely linked to a particular "sporting habitus," a set of embodied dispositions, values, and competences that participants are expected to possess and display in order to be recognized as legitimate within the field (Bourdieu, 1990).

For immigrant athletes and youth, their habitus—shaped by different cultural backgrounds, socio-economic positions, and experiences of marginalization—often conflicts with the dominant sporting habitus embedded in host societies. This clash manifests in diverse ways, such as divergent interpretations of bodily language, differing responses to authority, or unfamiliarity with the tacit rules governing team dynamics (Klein, 2014). These disparities can lead to misunderstandings, exclusion, and symbolic struggles over recognition and belonging within sports organizations.

Symbolic violence, a core concept in Bourdieu's oeuvre, illuminates how such conflicts are often masked by apparently neutral or naturalized norms. It refers to the subtle imposition of dominant cultural values and expectations that appear legitimate to both the enforcer and the subject, thereby securing consent and perpetuating inequality without overt coercion (Bourdieu, 1991). In the context of sports, symbolic violence is evident when immigrant athletes are pressured to conform to dominant norms under the guise of "integration" or "discipline," effectively enforcing assimilation and suppressing cultural difference. For instance, immigrant youth may be tacitly expected to internalize particular behavioral codes or to subordinate their own cultural expressions in order to gain acceptance within teams (Wacquant, 2016).

However, it is crucial to recognize the dynamic and processual nature of habitus. While habitus is deeply ingrained, it is not fixed or deterministic; rather, individuals continuously negotiate, adapt, and sometimes resist the dominant structures through their practices (Bourdieu, 2000). Theories of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provide valuable insights into how immigrant athletes may gradually acquire the competencies and dispositions valued within the sporting field, potentially transforming their

habitus and renegotiating their social positions. Yet, these processes are uneven and embedded within broader social hierarchies, often constrained by systemic inequalities.

This complex interplay between structure and agency highlights why sports do not automatically offer equal opportunities for social inclusion. Instead, they can reproduce exclusionary practices through symbolic violence and habitus conflicts, disproportionately affecting immigrant youth and other marginalized groups. Understanding the sporting field as a contested social space enables scholars to critically interrogate the integration narratives that often obscure these power dynamics and to develop more nuanced approaches to inclusion.

## ***2.2 Sport as a Field of Migration and Cultural Negotiation***

Sport serves as a unique social field where migration and cultural negotiation intersect, offering both opportunities and challenges for immigrants and their descendants. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualization of the social field, sport functions as an autonomous arena characterized by its own rules, capital forms, and power dynamics, yet it is also deeply embedded within broader societal structures and migratory processes (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Agergaard, 2018). Within this framework, sport acts not merely as a site of physical activity but as a complex space of identity formation, cultural negotiation, and transnational connectivity.

Alan Klein's (2014) ethnographic research on Dominican baseball exemplifies how immigrant athletes navigate and negotiate identities within the sporting field. His work highlights the persistence of racial and cultural prejudices even as sports offer upward social mobility and symbolic capital. This duality reflects the tension between inclusion and exclusion that characterizes the migratory sporting experience.

Moreover, the concept of super-diversity introduced by Vertovec (2007) adds nuance to this discussion by emphasizing the intricate heterogeneity within immigrant populations. Super-diversity challenges homogenizing narratives and calls attention to differentiated patterns of participation and representation in sports. In the context of European football, Burdsey (2006) explores how British Asians face structural and cultural barriers, contributing to their marginalization within the sport despite high participation rates in other social arenas. This case study underscores the intersection of ethnicity, culture, and exclusion in sport-migration scholarship.

These perspectives collectively illustrate that sport is not merely a facilitator of immigrant integration, but a contested space where power relations, cultural capital, and identity politics play out. Therefore, investigating sport as a field of migration demands attention to the complex, multi-layered negotiations immigrants engage in, as well as the structural constraints and opportunities that shape these processes.

## ***2.3 Critical Approaches to Integration: Ideology, Comparative Theories, and Implications for the Sociology of Sport***

This section critically examines dominant conceptualizations of integration within migration studies, highlighting their critiques and exploring alternative frameworks that emphasize reciprocity, power dynamics, and social justice. Traditional theories, such as assimilation and ethnic stratification models, largely conceptualize integration as a one-way, gradual process whereby immigrants adapt to the cultural norms of the host society (Esser, 2010). These perspectives often assume hierarchical relations between cultures and overlook the complex, multidimensional realities of immigrants' experiences.

In contrast, works by Favell (2001) and Aleinikoff and Klusmeyer (2001) critique the normative and homogenizing tendencies of integration policies, emphasizing their incompatibility with the diversity of immigrant identities. Their critiques call for greater pluralism and reflexivity in integration research and practice.

Schinkel (2018) offers a more radical critique, framing the integration paradigm as a form of neocolonial knowledge production that reproduces existing power structures by positioning immigrants as passive objects of adaptation. He argues for the abandonment of the integration concept in favor of approaches that recognize immigrants as active agents and incorporate anti-colonial perspectives.

Responding to these critiques, Klarenbeek (2023) proposes the concept of "relational integration," which frames integration as a mutual and negotiated process involving both immigrants and host communities. This approach moves beyond simplistic immigrant/native binaries, foregrounding the social relations and power dynamics that shape integration.

Fraser's (2001) recognition theory further enriches this discourse by emphasizing the necessity of cultural recognition alongside economic redistribution for social justice. Her framework highlights the importance of acknowledging cultural differences equitably in integration processes.

Additionally, Meer and Modood (2011) contrast interculturalism with multiculturalism by advocating for active, meaningful interactions between diverse cultures rather than mere coexistence. This perspective underlines communication and engagement as foundational for successful integration.

Within the field of sport sociology, especially when addressing migration-related phenomena or studying the intersections of migration and sport, these critical theoretical frameworks are indispensable. Although much of the cited literature originates from migration studies rather than sport research per se, their insights provide essential conceptual tools that must not be overlooked. Incorporating relational integration, recognition theory, and critiques of normative integration paradigms enables sport sociologists to better understand the complex social

dynamics at play. These frameworks encourage moving beyond simplistic or instrumental uses of sport as a mere tool for immigrant assimilation, instead fostering nuanced analyses that acknowledge immigrants as active agents within sporting contexts and the broader social fabric.

#### **2.4. Intersectionality: The Multidimensional Barriers Faced by Immigrant Women in Sport**

Intersectionality, a conceptual framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and further elaborated by scholars such as Yuval-Davis (2006) and Collins (2000), provides critical insight into how overlapping social identities—such as ethnicity, gender, and class—intersect to shape unique experiences of marginalization and exclusion. This multidimensional perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing the participation and representation of immigrant women in sports, where multiple axes of inequality converge.

The intersection of ethnic identity, gender, and socioeconomic status creates compounded barriers for immigrant women aspiring to engage in sport. These barriers are not merely additive but interact in complex ways, reinforcing systemic inequalities and restricting access to opportunities. As Yuval-Davis (2006) emphasizes, understanding these intersecting identities is crucial to addressing the broader social and structural forces that marginalize individuals and groups.

Within the sport context, research by Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) highlights paradoxical gender practices embedded in sport organizations, where formal inclusion often coexists with subtle exclusionary mechanisms that maintain gender hierarchies. For immigrant women, these dynamics are intensified by ethnic and class-based prejudices, resulting in a “triple jeopardy” of exclusion. Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes (2014) further discuss how social exclusion operates globally through sport, underscoring how immigrant women face unique challenges not only as ethnic minorities but also due to gendered expectations and economic disadvantages.

Moreover, Collins’s (2000) foundational work on Black feminist thought provides a lens to appreciate the agency and resilience of marginalized women despite systemic oppression. This perspective encourages moving beyond victimhood narratives to recognize immigrant women athletes as active agents negotiating and challenging the intersecting structures that limit their participation.

In sum, incorporating an intersectional framework into sport sociology enriches our understanding of the multifaceted barriers faced by immigrant women. It calls for research approaches that attend to these overlapping identities and power structures, urging scholars to adopt methodologies—such as qualitative interviews, ethnographies, and participatory action research—that center the voices and experiences of immigrant women athletes. By doing so, future studies can contribute to more inclusive and equitable sport environments that address the nuanced realities of diversity and social justice.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Building upon the critical discussions by Klarenbeek (2023) and Agergaard (2021), this study centers the concept of relational integration to challenge traditional, one-sided views of immigrant assimilation in sports sociology. Unlike conventional models that often portray integration as a unidirectional process, Klarenbeek’s relational integration framework emphasizes the active, reciprocal negotiation of social relations between immigrants and host communities. Similarly, Agergaard’s work highlights the importance of recognizing immigrant athletes as active agents who both shape and are shaped by transnational social fields. These perspectives offer a more nuanced understanding of integration that transcends simplistic binaries and acknowledges the complexity of identity and belonging within sporting contexts.

Within this theoretical framework, it is crucial for research on migration and sport to move beyond viewing immigrants as passive recipients of integration policies. Instead, scholars, social scientists, should see immigrants as active participants whose social relations and identities are continuously negotiated and redefined. To effectively capture these dynamic and relational processes, grounded theory presents a particularly valuable methodological approach. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory enables researchers to inductively generate theory directly from empirical data, allowing for rich, context-sensitive insights that reflect the lived experiences of participants. Its iterative cycles of data collection and analysis facilitate deep understanding of complex social phenomena, such as immigrant athletes’ negotiations of identity and integration within sporting fields. In this way, grounded theory offers a rigorous yet flexible framework well-suited to exploring the multilayered, negotiated nature of integration from the perspective of immigrant sport participants in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Employing mixed methods research that combines in-depth qualitative interviews (such as semi-structured and/or narrative interviews) with quantitative social network analysis and sociometric tools can effectively trace these complex interactions. Complementing this, sociometric methods—pioneered by Jacob Levy Moreno in the 1930s—offer valuable tools for mapping and analyzing the structure of social relationships within groups by quantitatively and visually representing social ties and preferences (Moreno, 1934). Building on sociometry, social network analysis (SNA) integrates graph theory and mathematical models to study complex relational patterns, with foundational contributions from Barnes and others in the mid-20th century (Barnes, 1954). These approaches

enable researchers to unravel the social capital flows, inclusion/exclusion dynamics, and power relations among immigrant athletes as they negotiate integration within sporting fields. Specifically, qualitative interviews provide rich insights into immigrant athletes' lived experiences and identity negotiations, while social network analysis maps evolving social ties and support structures within and beyond sport environments, revealing patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This integrative approach facilitates a deeply contextualized understanding of how power relations and cultural capital circulate within sporting fields.

Moreover, incorporating feminist and intersectionality perspectives into qualitative methodologies is essential to uncover the layered and intersecting forms of disadvantage experienced by immigrant athletes, especially women, who often face compounded barriers related to ethnicity, gender, and class. Participatory action research (PAR) presents a promising methodology to engage immigrant athletes as co-researchers, thereby ensuring their voices and perspectives directly shape both research processes and outcomes. This participatory approach fosters empowerment and highlights resistance strategies that immigrant athletes employ against exclusionary dynamics.

Integrating these methodological approaches offers significant potential for sport sociology, which has traditionally emphasized quantitative data. Embedding sociometric analyses within a robust theoretical framework like relational integration and complementing them with feminist and participatory methods can generate richer, more nuanced insights that bridge structural patterns and individual lived experiences. Such a comprehensive approach not only advances theoretical debates but also informs practical strategies to create inclusive sporting environments that recognize the agency and diversity of immigrant athletes.

Practically, policymakers, sports clubs, and federations should design and implement targeted programs to strengthen social ties across diverse athlete communities. Examples include mentorship schemes pairing immigrant and native athletes, intercultural team-building workshops, and inclusive leadership training for coaches and administrators. Additionally, clear anti-discrimination policies and monitoring mechanisms are vital to address subtle exclusionary practices.

By incorporating these methodological and practical recommendations into future research and policy frameworks, this study contributes to a comprehensive, socially embedded approach for understanding and enhancing immigrant integration in both sociology of migration and sociology of sport literature. Such an approach fosters more equitable and pluralistic sporting cultures that genuinely reflect the diversity of contemporary societies.

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