

## **The Role of Sport in Supporting Newcomer Youth Identity Negotiation**

Assadullah Ali Bik, University of Calgary

Identity is a central component of the human experience. Religion, occupation, life style and leisure have been identified as examples of anchors which individuals have built their identities around (Riley, 2008). This concept of anchoring could prove especially difficult for youth whose families are forced to migrate for various reasons because “migration leads to significant life changes” (Chuang et. al, 2011, p. 149). For youth who are still exploring and learning about the world and themselves, this drastic change may challenge their concept of identity. Further, youth who migrate to foreign countries also face the double-bind of being both a newcomer and youth (Selimos & Daniel, 2017). Newcomer youth especially struggle with identity because their identities at home and away from home often juxtapose with each other (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017; Kiramba & Oloo, 2020; 2023; Phelps & Nadim, 2010). These juxtaposing identities force newcomer youth into a position wherein they constantly negotiate their identity. Swann (1987) explained that identity negotiation begins with an individual’s concepts of self changing from previous perceptions to updated ones, or as he put it, “a major reorganization in the way [individuals] view themselves” (p. 1044). With the many changes that occur in the lives of migrant youth, they undoubtedly reorganize the way in which they view themselves as result of the many changes to their environment.

Currently, academia examines the role of sport in benefiting the lives of newcomers, and specifically newcomer youth. Much of this literature focuses on the sense of inclusivity and belonging that sport brings to the lives of these newcomers (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Kramers et al., 2021; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). There is a dearth of literature that explores the benefit of sport to the identity negotiation of newcomer youth. This paper seeks to explore the way in which sport, specifically soccer, supports newcomer youth through the process of identity negotiation by being an anchor in their lives.

This paper came out of a corollary finding of my master’s thesis which looked to build understanding about newcomer youth leadership development through sport. While newcomer youth participants noted many changes to their lives as a result of migration, all of them mentioned soccer as a constant. Soccer served as the anchor by which they could authentically be themselves within their countries of origin, while in refuge and here in Canada.

### **Positionality**

My family and I migrated from Afghanistan to Canada in 2005 and we are honoured to call Treaty 7 Territory home. Like the participants of my master’s thesis, I migrated in my youth and I thrived playing sports here. I navigated my identities of being an Afghan at home, which entailed not speaking English and abiding by the cultural norms of my familial heritage. Outside of my home, I spoke English and abided by the cultural norms of Canada. I too found an anchor in sport, and sport became the one thing that was constant throughout my life. In these aspects, the participants and I share many of the same experiences, and this paper represents our collective experience.

### Literature Review

Swann (1987) explained that identity negotiation is “a major reorganization in the way [individuals] view themselves” (p. 1044) specifically at a transitional time in their life. A critical component to the process of identity negotiation is other peoples’ views and how they influence the subject’s identity; that is, these views can serve to validate or confirm one’s identity. In Swann’s (1987) view, examples could be transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, or going from a single person to being coupled. In each of these cases there is a definite before period, a liminal phase, and the after period. Within the liminal phase there are constant negotiations that occur internally within the individual as they interact with others. Perceptions and expectations from others shape the identity of the individual being perceived, as they process the negotiation of their identity (Swann, 1987). Put concisely, identity “negotiation highlights the continual and evolving nature of becoming—identity as a process, not a thing” (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017, p. 118).

The concept of identity negotiation is ever-present in the lives of newcomer youth as they are constantly under the perception of different people. Compton-Lilly et al. (2017) claimed that contrary to earlier discussions on identity, “identity negotiations begin long before children approach adolescence” (p. 118). As for newcomer youth, they often undergo multiple occurrences of identity negotiation within their young lives, adding ambiguity to their already challenging upbringing (Phelps & Nadim, 2010). Further, unlike Swann’s (1987) explanation of there being a definite before period followed by a liminal phase and then an after period, newcomer youth are often left stuck in the liminal phase after immigration (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017; Kiramba & Oloo, 2020; 2023). In their study, Kiramba and Oloo (2023) noted how one of their participants even “developed an in-between identity” (p. 16). The findings of these studies affirm that newcomer youth are in an everlasting liminal phase wherein they must continually negotiate their identity.

### Methodology and Methods

I conducted a case study in accordance with Sharan Merriam’s (1998, 2009) methodological approach. Not only does Merriam (2009) allow for personal perplexing questions to take the forefront of a research study, but she goes further, by having the researcher be the research instrument of the case study. She also claimed that the goal of case study is to build “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40) which was exactly my aim. This case study methodology allowed me to be immersed in the research which had the ultimate goal of building an in-depth understanding of the bounded system under study.

I used semi-structured interviews involving nine participants: eight youth participants who arrived to Canada between the ages 6–15 years old and one leader who were all from the same organization. This organization supported newcomer youth in sport participation and focused on leadership development of the youth. These interviews were conducted over the span of three weekends at soccer camps held in August of 2023. The sample pool consisted of different ages, gender, countries of origin. All participants were proficient in English and fit within my inclusion criteria, and they each selected their own pseudonyms. I enlisted the support of an organization liaison in the recruitment of participants as she had a better understanding of the population and could help me select potential youth participants using the following inclusion criteria:

## The Role of Sport in Supporting Newcomer Youth Identity Negotiation

1. Must be a member of the organization.
2. Must be/have been a newcomer to Canada in their youth.
3. Must have participated in sport through the organization.
4. Must have participated in the leadership program provided by the organization.
5. Must have/be holding a current volunteer or work position in the organization.

In addition to this, the leader inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Must be an active member of the organization.
2. Must be holding a leadership position at the organization for three or more years.

After the interviews were transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis to uncover the emergent themes.

### Findings and Discussion

Newcomer youth participants shared that when they are at home, they speak their first languages and they behave in accordance with the cultures they were born into. However, when they are outside of their homes, whether at school or other spaces in Canada, they are perceived to be part of Canadian society: they are expected to speak English and to act in accordance with Canadian culture. The experiences of these participants were echoed by Kiramba and Oloo's (2020) participant who faced linguistic challenges as an African immigrant to America. Interestingly, she did not face the same challenges within her home life or her time on social media connecting to her friends in Africa. In this sense, she did not struggle at home, however outside of home, she was expected to speak English a certain way, that is, without an accent. The contrasting perceptions and expectations placed on newcomer youth puts stress on their lives and forces them to constantly negotiate their identities but to never fully transition. They are constantly stuck with one foot in their "before" period, one foot in the "after" period, all the while being fully in the liminal phase and never actually transitioning.

Within this study, newcomer youth participants found solace from their struggle with identity negotiation in sport. Sport was an activity they partook in their countries of origin, while they were refugees, and here in Canada. Additionally, sport was often claimed to be a familial activity which their families understood and participated in. As such, there was no mentioning of conflicting pressure on them to identify in any which way while participating in sport. In the literature, sport as well as English Language Learning (ELL) class has also shown to support newcomer youth with identity negotiation (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017; Kiramba & Oloo, 2023). In both studies, it was found that these spaces (sport and ELL class) were environments which made space for and thus allowed the newcomer youth to be fully their unique selves at all times. Since the participants of this study highlighted sport, I will delve deeper into the sport example found.

The experience of sport supporting identity negotiation in Compton-Lilly et al.'s (2017) study aligned with the sentiments of the participants of this study. In their longitudinal study, a participant named Carlos described by his teachers as "socially awkward" demonstrated the power of sport in supporting his navigation of identity negotiation (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017). While he was described to be socially awkward, he was also noted to be a great soccer player with many teammate friends. This suggests that outside of sports, like participants of this study, Carlos struggled with identity negotiation but within sports there were no such struggles. Similar to Carlos, difficulties of navigating a new language and culture made Xavier, a participant of this study, shy in social settings. After sharing his experience he went on to say that "soccer has made me build confidence. I was very shy when I first got into soccer...[and now] when I see

## The Role of Sport in Supporting Newcomer Youth Identity Negotiation

people who are really shy I tried to make them feel comfortable, and like they belong”. This transition of being shy to becoming a confident leader who supports others, demonstrates the impact that sport had on supporting Xavier’s identity negotiation. While in other social settings Xavier struggled due to his contrasting identities and the barriers that posed, through soccer, he and Carlos thrived.

Added parallels to participants of this study and Carlos were the fact that the families shared a common understanding of sport and there was steady continuum of sport within the youths’ lives. The reason why both Hobbs and Tia got into soccer was because of their dads. Specifically, Hobbs noted that she played soccer because her dad was “obsessed with it” and when he saw her playing well on the field against boys he signed her up for organized soccer. Unlike areas such as language and culture where newcomer youth were faced with constant differences inside and outside of the home, sport was constant. Sport supported the identity negotiation of the newcomer participants of this study.

It is important to note that some participants mentioned playing soccer the “traditional” way as opposed to a structured way, which is common here in Canada. This could be viewed as a lack of continuation of sport as a concept and could be further viewed as an area in which newcomer youth must negotiate this identity. However, participants learning soccer fundamentals and playing in a more organized and structured way was not viewed as a constant liminal phase they had to navigate. In fact, participants relished the opportunity to participate in organized soccer because that is what they saw their idols do. This version of soccer was also understood by their families, thus whether they were at school or at home or anywhere else, they could confidently identify one singular identity of being an athlete.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this paper suggest that sport, specifically soccer, supported newcomer youth with the difficulties of identity negotiation. Newcomer youth participants who often negotiated juxtaposing identities, did not need to when participating in sport. Sport provided them solace from their identity negotiation. Sport was the place where they could maintain having one singular identity throughout their lives. This was because their participation in sport was constant throughout their lives and it was a mutually understood activity among all of the people who they interacted with. Specifically, their Canadian peers and their families perceived them as athletes in a shared way. While participating in sport, there was no juxtaposing that newcomer youth participants had to navigate.

### **Future Directions**

As expressed earlier, the contents of this paper are written based on a corollary finding of my master’s thesis, but this topic is very important and is worth its own inquiry. Future researchers may ask specific questions about identity to their participants who are, or once were, newcomer youth and had participated in sport. Similarly, this study could be conducted exploring other activities that may serve as anchors to newcomer youth. Examples such as music, dance, religious observances, and other activities could be studied.

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