

Transnational physical activity and sport engagement of new Asian migrants in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract: Based upon a literature review, this paper first identifies and articulates the importance of studying physical activity and sport (PAS) engagement of new Asian migrants within a particular geographical location – New Zealand. A pilot study with a series of in-depth interviews highlights some challenges that New Zealand Regional Sports Organisations (RSOs) and new Asian migrants face in terms of PAS engagement. Findings from the pilot study interviews indicate that RSOs in New Zealand are well aware of these challenges, and these challenges mainly stem from a lack of understanding of the needs of new Asian migrant communities. These findings also indicate that ethnicity plays a significant role in influencing migrants’ PAS engagement.

Keywords: Asian migrants, integration, New Zealand, physical activities, sport engagement, transnational migration

Introduction

Aotearoa/New Zealand is a traditional immigrant-receiving country that borders the Pacific Rim. This country used to be extremely selective regarding its immigrant source countries with a preference for migrants from Great Britain or migrants of European descent and/or from Pacific island countries (McKinnon, 1996). This race-based immigrant selection process was in force until 1986 when a major immigration policy review occurred (Trlin and Kang, 1992). The 1986 review abolished the traditional source-country preference and proclaimed a more open approach of selecting migrants based on a ‘criteria of personal merit without discrimination on grounds of race, national, or ethnic origin’ (Burke, 1986: 11). This approach essentially aims to revitalise New Zealand’s economy through channelling in financial and human capital. This review, together with the enactment of the Immigration Act 1987, opened New Zealand to a wider range of source countries and resulted in an immigration wave from various regions, including Asia (Ip, 1995).

With this new wave, cultural diversity became an obvious reality within New Zealand. The Asian population contributes to this diversity

and is 15.1% of the New Zealand population. Moreover, the Asian ethnic group was the second-largest non-European ethnic group in the 2018 New Zealand Census, just after the Indigenous Māori population (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Among the Asian population, Chinese, Indians, Filipinos and South Koreans are major contributors (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Moreover, 85.6% of Asian people in New Zealand were born overseas (Yong, 2018). This means that the majority of the Asian population in this country are new migrants. These statistics highlight the importance of new Asian migrant¹ groups to New Zealand’s future population growth (Spoonley, 2020) (Fig. 1).

This paper uses the New Zealand context to identify and articulate a relatively under-researched area in migration studies – that of physical activity and sport (PAS)² engagement by new Asian migrants in their immigration destination country. Immigrants’ PAS engagement is not a new area of research. In sport sociology and leisure studies, there are rich research examples on this topic; however, research on this topic from a perspective of migration studies is limited. This paper can provide some unique and nuanced insights to complement existing

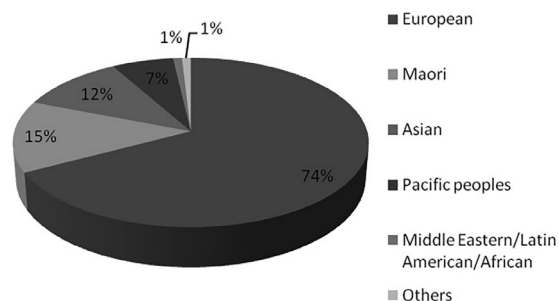


Figure 1. Asian population in New Zealand.
Source: Statistics New Zealand (2019).

research as it is from the perspective of transnational migration studies (Schiller *et al.*, 1995). For new Asian migrants, immigrating to New Zealand can provide a refreshed inspiration towards PAS engagement which may be beyond their existing mentality and experience. On the one hand, moving to New Zealand may provide great opportunities for children of new Asian migrants to discover new career options in the field of PAS (Tan, 2012). This trend may particularly be pertinent in New Zealand due to its strong sports culture (Spoonley, 2021). On the other hand, with increasing immigration levels and diversified origins of migrants, the status of New Zealand's traditional sports will receive further challenges, alongside new opportunities (Edens, 2017). For example, rugby is traditionally thought of as the main sport in New Zealand, yet the changing ethnic composition of the country has resulted in sports such as football (i.e. soccer) increasing in participation (Edens, 2017). As New Zealand diversifies, sporting activities also diversify (Spoonley, 2021). New Zealand needs to recognise such a trend and develop relevant policies to accommodate and ultimately benefit from the shift. It is necessary to regard the arrival and increasing popularity of some non-traditional sports (such as soccer, table tennis and badminton) as opportunities to enhance New Zealand's overall sport profile internationally (Tan, 2012; Edens, 2017).

This paper will first present a literature review on the PAS engagement of migrants to identify research gaps, establish an analytic framework, and articulate the practical and theoretical significance of studying the PAS engagement of new Asian migrants within a particular geographical

space – Aotearoa/New Zealand. Second, it will discuss the data collection and analysis methods of a pilot study, as well as its related ethical issues. Finally, a summary of the preliminary findings is presented.

Literature review, analytic framework and research significance

Existing literature that addresses migrants' PAS engagement is largely centred on PAS engagement as a facilitator to migrants' integration to and interaction with the immigrant host societies, thus contributes positively to cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion, and assists in breaking down racial and ethnic barriers (Stodolska and Alexandris, 2004; Walseth and Fasting, 2004; Müller *et al.*, 2008; Carter, 2011; Lee and Funk, 2011; Garrido *et al.*, 2012; Li *et al.*, 2015; Rich *et al.*, 2015). There is also a body of literature which addresses the constraints migrants face when they intend to engage in PAS and the actual patterns and levels of PAS participation (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2014; Höglhammer *et al.*, 2015).

Within the New Zealand context, previous studies show that while some migrant communities (i.e. Pacific people, South Africans and the British) engage with certain types of mainstream sports such as rugby or cricket; others, in particular Asian migrants, do not (Spoonley and Taiapa, 2009). A survey within the Auckland population found that Asian responders (9.5%) were less likely to participate in PAS than other ethnicities (14.8–23.1%) (Sport New Zealand and Auckland Council, 2016). Similarly, Active NZ survey 2019 shows that young and adult Asian have lower levels of weekly participation and spend less time being physically active (Brocklesby and Bergenhenegouwen, 2019).

These findings concur with studies conducted in other countries (Gobster, 2002; Winter *et al.*, 2004). For example, one study in the United States reported that White Americans have a higher frequency of participation in PAS than migrant groups, particularly Asian migrants. In Australia, participation in PAS was found to be higher (70%) for Australian-born individuals than migrants from Asian countries (40.5–61.9%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Some existing research shows that the lower participation of PAS among migrant groups mainly derive from linguistic barriers they face, different cultural attitudes towards PAS engagement (Porter, 2001), limited access to sports facilities and information (Spoonley and Taiapa, 2009), religious and gender beliefs (i.e. concerns of dress codes) (Erkip, 2009), lack of sport role models from their own cultures, and stereotyping and prejudice from mainstream society (Spoonley and Taiapa, 2009). For example, the Confucian culture among many East and Southeast Asian countries does not highly value PAS participation (Liu *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, Middle Eastern cultures can have strict requirements for women in terms of dress code and body exposure in public areas, including sports fields (Martin and Mason, 2004). Porter (2001) highlighted that the rejection of the picture of certain ethnic groups in certain sports (i.e. Chinese are not rugby players) results in ‘knock-on effects’ to the integration of these ethnic groups into mainstream sports. Furthermore, many migrants stated they were more likely to try new PAS options during the early stages of settlement as they had more time (Li *et al.*, 2015). This supports Lovelock *et al.* (2012) who found that new Asian migrants engaged in more outdoor recreational activities than settled migrants. Existing literature also suggests that sport preferences for different migrant populations may be different from local sports. For example, in New Zealand, Chinese migrants are still into table tennis, soccer and badminton, Indians are keen on cricket (Leckie, 2007; Spoonley and Taiapa, 2009), and migrants from the Pacific and South Africa prefer rugby which is New Zealand’s dominant sport (Rata Foundation, 2021).

While the existing literature is richly informative, three important aspects have been overlooked: (1) how regional sports organisations (RSOs), institutions and relevant industries respond to the cultural diversity brought to a country by migrants; (2) how the host society can benefit and learn from migrant communities in relation to non-traditional sports they bring into their immigration destination countries; and (3) what more can be provided to migrant communities to engender more social and economic benefits based on their PAS engagement. This paper tries to engage into these under-explored

areas by using the case of new Asian migrants in New Zealand. Practically, the research can provide practical advice to New Zealand’s RSOs and industries to improve engagement with the new Asian migrant population. Improved engagement with the new Asian migrant population can consequently help to identify and channel potential benefits this group of migrants can make to New Zealand; thus, to enhance the national sport profile of the country as a leading world nation with a strong sports culture. The research can also provide insights into the ongoing dialogue about multiculturalism and the super-diversity of New Zealand, especially in Auckland where 28.2% of its residents are with Asian ethnicity (Auckland Council Research and Evaluation Unit, 2020).

Alongside the practical benefit this research may offer to the sport and recreation industries and New Zealand Society, it can also make a potential theoretical contribution in the field of transnational migration studies. International immigration progresses at an unprecedented pace (McAuliffe and Khadria, 2020), and PAS engagement of migrants tends to be highly transnational. Therefore, this research sets up a spectrum to bring two relevant scholarships together – transnational migration studies and leisure studies that focus on people’s PAS participation. It aims to showcase how issues of migration, transnational migratory mobility, race, and ethnicity intersect with creational PAS engagement. The theory of ‘transnational migration’ that addresses migrants’ mobility across national borders is relevant to this research (Schiller *et al.*, 1995). Moreover, in recent transnational migration studies, there have been more forceful academic efforts to bring the everyday life experiences of highly mobile migrants into the scholarly discussion (Willis and Yeoh, 2004; Yeoh and Willis, 2005). It has been recognised that migrants’ embodied experience of overseas life holds potentially valuable implications on the theorisation of immigration integration, cross-border engagement, and identity-making (e.g. racial, cultural and sexual).

PAS engagement of migrants in host societies occupies an important space in immigrants embodied and lived experiences. Here, we propose a new framework to explore a particular embodied experience of migrants – that is ‘transnational PAS engagement’, referring to

migrants' physical activity patterns and preference for sports engagement when they are moving across national borders. The word 'transnational' as used here indicates a cross-border interaction between migrants and immigrant-receiving countries. It has multiple dimensions. The first is that new Asian migrants bring their preferred sports to New Zealand and maintain these sports in the immigrant-receiving society. The second is that after new Asian migrants immigrate to New Zealand, their PAS engagement and participation might change due to the influence of New Zealand's sports culture. Based on the literature review, it is surprising how little scholarship there is about migrants' PAS engagement and the associated issues such as migratory mobility and integration. This proposed new approach of transnational PAS engagement offers a rich insight into this engaging but under-researched and under-theorised area – PAS engagement when migrants move across national borders and migrants' role in sport globalisation (Harvey *et al.*, 1996).

Methodological notes

A pilot study was conducted between 2018 and 2019 with two groups of interviewees. The first group includes interviews with eight key administrative people from three RSOs in Auckland, including the Auckland Table Tennis Association (ATTA), Sports Recreation and Outdoors Trust and Harbour Sport. The key interview question for this group is how they perceive challenges or issues related to new Asian migrants' PAS engagement. The second interviewee group includes five key personnel who are heavily involved in three ethnic and migrant sports organisations, the Auckland Indian Sports Club, New Zealand Chinese Table Tennis Association, and Auckland-based Wellington Phoenix Soccer School. The key question for this group is about their connections with various RSOs, why and how these organisations have been established and operated, and what challenges many new Asian migrants face in terms of PAS engagement.

The research was evaluated by peer review and given no particular ethical concerns were identified; therefore, it has been approved by

the Human Ethics Committees of the first author's university and judged to be low risk. Prior to each interview, a participant information sheet with detailed information about the research, including statements of participant rights was presented to and discussed with the participant. Once prospective participants agreed to take part, a participant consent form assuring them of confidentiality was signed. All personal information of the participants in this research are kept confidential from others.

Challenges and obstacles new Asian migrants face in PAS engagement: A summary of the preliminary findings

From the perspective of RSOs, the three RSOs we interviewed all acknowledged that the arrival of new Asian migrants has significantly changed the ethnic mix of participants in some sports, such as table tennis, badminton, and cricket. In some cases, the majority of the players, and sometimes the coaches and administrators of these sports, are Asians. While for soccer, the majority of those participating are migrants from Great Britain and South Africa. New Asian migrants are also a part of this mix, but to a lesser extent compared with table tennis, badminton, and cricket. In contrast, the national sport of rugby has a significant number of Māori and Pacific players and coaches, with little to no Asian players within Auckland – where 28.2% of the population is Asian (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). As can be seen, the potential cultural capital the new Asian migrants can bring to New Zealand sport landscape is transnational. However, how to utilise this transnational cultural capital in New Zealand sport industry might require a transnational approach to fully embrace the cultural diversity that new Asian migrants have brought to New Zealand's sport world.

Some RSOs have done an excellent job regarding this aspect. They acknowledged the changing cultural mix of participants in some sports, which has led to a proactive and encouraging approach to operating and administering these organisations. For example, the ATTA has increased options for Asians, in particular Chinese, as China is the top country in table tennis to participate in clubs by offering them the access to stadium during nights. Moreover, they

have provided support for visa applications for coaches from China under the talent visa provision to ensure these coaches can make their transnational movements smoothly.

The RSOs noted that language is a barrier that deters new Asian migrants from participating in sports that are beyond the traditions of their home countries. For example, the biggest challenge for new Asian migrants participating in rugby is understanding the rules. Without translation, understanding the rules is very challenging for many of them. Some RSOs acknowledged that there was a capacity to operate some sports in different languages, but no strategic plan had been developed due to resource constraints. This evidence speaks of the way that transnational PAS engagement for new Asian migrants has never been an easy task.

Apart from the language barrier, cost and time are important factors in influencing new Asian migrants' PAS engagement. As these new Asian migrants were working hard to establish themselves, PAS engagement impinged on the time required for work. Besides, some sporting codes do not appeal to migrant communities because of their particular requirements, such as ideal body shapes or weight. For example, Asian migrants are generally less interested in contact sports such as rugby because of the potential for injuries and stereotypes about the stature required (Spoonley and Taiapa, 2009). The challenge was educational as new Asian migrants need to understand that there is a possibility to participate in rugby. Also, schools need to encourage Asian students to participate in these sports. Of note, RSOs deal with formal registered sport engagement; therefore, informal PAS engagement warrants future investigation as increased participation within migrant groups may provide additional information.

From the point of view of three ethnic and immigrant sports organisations we interviewed, the differences between sports culture in New Zealand and sports culture in new Asian migrants' countries of origin was repeatedly highlighted. All three interviewees said that parents of new Asian migrants did not value sports as much as New Zealand parents. This resulted in discouragement of their children's participation in PAS in and out of schools. Fortunately, all five interviewees also commented that the situation would change since migrants' children

might be more adaptable and interested in experiencing new sports.

Another significant challenge identified was a lack of knowledge regarding accessing government funding for support and facilities. For example, some new Asian migrants were keen to take the initiative to establish new clubs and associations or to organise activities, but they did not know who to approach for funding and what the required procedure was in New Zealand. Lack of communication with regional sports organisations was another issue. The suggestion to overcome such difficulty is that since the local council is regarded as a body, coordinators are needed to inform the council of what goes on with the new Asian migrant communities and what they need to maintain their sports traditions, thus, funding access could be secured.

These summarised research findings again confirm the fact that while the transnational PAS the new Asian migrants engaged might have potentials to benefit themselves and New Zealand society, support from the families, community and society is critical factor in promoting and encouraging participation.

Discussion

PAS engagement is a critical avenue for the successful integration into and settlement within immigrant host societies for new Asian migrants. However, becoming actively engaged in PAS is not straightforward for some migrants. Based on our pilot study, this paper identifies some issues and the importance of studying these challenges and indicates directions for further research based on the concept of 'transnational PAS engagement'. So far, the concept is still in its development stage which needs to be further developed and used to guide a full investigation of the topic. The pilot study highlights some challenges that New Zealand RSOs and new Asian migrants face in terms of PAS engagement. The interviews indicate that RSOs in New Zealand are aware of the problem that cultural diversity has brought to this country's sport management and operations. They are willing to accommodate the special requirements of new Asian migrants; however, making strategic plans to encourage PAS engagement of these migrants has yet to be implemented. The difficulty mainly

stems from a lack of full commitment and available resources to understand the needs of new Asian migrant communities.

Auckland is the biggest city in New Zealand where rapid demographic change and increasing cultural diversity are ongoing (Auckland Council, 2021). The capacity and willingness to respond to cultural diversity hold the key to ensuring New Zealand's RSOs and new Asian migrant communities succeed in PAS participation. The assimilated success from both groups is important for New Zealand since new Asian migrants may have the potential to enhance this country's sports profile. It is also important for new Asian migrant communities, as PAS has been shown as an efficient way to pave successful integration into the host society.

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Notes

¹New Asian migrant in the New Zealand context usually refers to people who migrated to New Zealand from an Asian region after the introduction of the Immigration Act 1987.

²PAS in this research refers to exercise that is planned and structured. Examples include resistance training, aerobic- and anaerobic-based group fitness classes and participating in sporting events. Leisure-based exercises such as walking, hiking, gardening or dancing are not included.

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