

# PROBLEMATIZING THE “POWER OF SPORT”

*A semi-systematic literature review on the capacity of sport to overcome the migrant's social exclusion in critical areas*

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

The SIMCAS project aims to develop a method of social inclusion through sport, aimed at migrant citizens who live in critical areas, characterized by spatial, social and cultural segregation, specifically, prison, accommodation camps, marginalized or isolated areas. This paper presents the results of a semi-systematic review of the scientific literature on the subject. As a preliminary, it is necessary to specify that the field of intervention of the project is relatively new, since it is at the intersection of different disciplinary sectors (sociology of sport, developmental psychology and youth studies, social work methodology, migration and ethnic studies), analyzing the general theme of social inclusion through sport within a very particular context, that is, segregated "social circles".

Despite disciplinary heterogeneity, the potential of sport and physical activities in facilitating interactions between people with different backgrounds, as well its role in supporting over time the establishment of overarching social ties, is a consolidated research area [Long, Sanderson 2001; Coalter 2008; Collins, Kay 2014; Spaaij, Magee, Jeanes 2014; Haudenhuyse 2017]. In particular, the implications in terms of social inclusion and socialization with community's institutions, norms, and ideas has fostered discussions within the research field of migration and ethnic studies [Maguire 2013; Spaaij *et al.* 2019; Smith, Spaaij, McDonald 2019]. It has been argued that physical and, in general, leisure activities, , provide an opportunity to develop different forms and types of social and cultural capital of which people with a migratory past are often impoverished because of their departure from their country of origin. Thus, sport is intended as a potential means for integration into the host society [Gasparini 2008; Hatzigeorgiadis 2013; O' Discroll *et al.* 2014; Spracklen, Long, Hylton 2015; Agergaard 2018]. However, the issue at hand has raised opposing opinions regarding the effective role of sport in defining ethnic and cultural boundaries; leisure and physical activities can be, at the same time, a way to – at least temporarily – reduce the relevance of sociocultural boundaries and a vehicle that reproduces such boundaries [Blackshaw, Crabbe 2004; Jarvie 2006: 295-380]. Sport and leisure as a manifestation of a community's ethos and culture might reinforce already-established identities and thus reinstate a differentiation between groups.

In the following pages we will try to delimit the field of intervention of the SIMCAS project within the scientific literature: alongside the review of the research results and theoretical positions expressed by the international scientific community, we will try to identify some concepts and themes relevant for the subsequent phases of the SIMCAS project.

The paper is organized into four sections: in section 1 the study's cognitive objectives are detailed; the second section presents the research methodology adopted in the review; in section 3, on the other hand, the results of the bibliographic review are described, organized by thematic areas; Finally, in section 4, the results of the review are discussed, identifying both the crucial themes for the continuation of the SIMCAS project, and the elements that have been poorly understood.

## 1. STUDY AIM: PROBLEMATIZING THE "POWER OF SPORT"

To cope with the growth of inequalities and the negative effects of globalization processes, national and supranational governments have focused heavily on sport, intended as a tool to compensate and reduce social exclusion [Spaaij, Magee, Jeanes 2014]. Sports institutions, as well as companies, have also made major investments in social inclusion programs through sport. In this scenario, sport has become a tool for solving a wide range of social problems. But is sport's ability to reduce inequalities really that powerful?

Jonathan Long and Ian Sanderson [2001: 187-203], already in the early 2000s, wondered where the proof of the social benefits of sport was. Even one of the leading sports studies experts, Fred Coalter [2015], is skeptical about the ability of sport to have such wide effects on society. It therefore seems necessary to problematize and critically expose the assumptions, ideologies and conceptions surrounding sport as a means of social inclusion. Without this problematization, sports-based social inclusion policies and programs risk being inadequate with respect to the exclusionary forces and mechanisms that these measures seek to combat.

The main objective of the bibliographic review presented in these pages is to understand if the available scientific evidence justifies this trust in the power of sport. In particular, one wonders if sport is able to favor the social inclusion of some particularly penalized segments of the population. Migrants in detention, who live in reception camps or in segregated neighborhoods, experience different forms of exclusion (spatial, socio-economic, cultural): how does sport manage to compensate for the social penalties suffered by these people? What opportunities for personal and community development does it offer? What resources does it produce and carry within the most marginal environments? Is sport really capable of breaking the barriers that separate outsiders from insiders?

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## 2. A THEORY ORIENTED SEMI-SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review, in terms of methodology and contents, is informed both by procedures typical of (semi-)systematic reviews and by processes usually employed in theoretical literature reviews (Synder, 2019).

As part of a social intervention project, the present study intended to provide useful knowledge about the most important acquisitions in the field of social inclusion of people in critical contexts through sport. In order to do so, we took an integrative review method, which encompasses both theoretical and empirical, qualitative and quantitative works. According to Whittmore and Knafl (2005), integrative literature reviews consist of five steps: (a) problem identification, (b) literature search, (c) data evaluation, (d) data analysis, and (e) presentation.

Research questions were deduced from the SIMCAS project, as already discussed in the previous sections.

## 2.1 Methodology

In order to stay close to the project's assumptions and objectives, a semantic analysis of the project proposal was conducted. We identified 30 keywords throughout the text and classified them by 4 semantic fields: "migrants"; "critical areas"; "sport"; and "inclusion". Other semantically close words or expressions were later added to the fields. This structure informed the syntax of the search algorithm, as follows:

("social inclusion" OR integration OR socialization OR cohesion OR belonging OR "social capital" OR "intercultural exchange" OR "well-being") AND (migrant\* OR refugee\* OR detainee\* OR ethnic minorit\* OR "disadvantaged groups" OR "disadvantaged group" OR "socially excluded group" OR "socially excluded groups" OR "asylum seeker" OR "asylum seekers" OR marginal\* OR LGBT\*) AND (sport\* OR "sport participation" OR "sport-related activity" OR "sport-related activities" OR "physical activity" OR "physical activities" OR "physical recreation" OR game\* OR leisure) AND (peripher\* OR liminal\* OR ghetto\* OR suburb\* OR prison\* OR poor \* OR marginal \* OR jail OR critical \* OR reception \* OR migrant \*).

To make it simple, this string queries online repositories (namely: EBSCO, Web Of Science) about bibliographic records which include *at least one* of the words/expressions in each of the four fields above-mentioned.

The search query has been designed in order to be the most comprehensive possible, using "\*" operator to include terms declinations and missing words and "OR" Boolean operator to widen search results. "Apply related words" and "Apply equivalent subjects" options, where provided by the software, were also used for the same reason. According to the research team's language skills, search results were restricted to English, French, Spanish and Italian languages.

Since algorithms cannot interpret complex cognitive requests, thus generating also uninteresting results, we settled two selection criteria, depending on researchers' evaluations: pertinence and relevance. They were applied in two distinct phases: in the first one we excluded results according to publications' subjects and topics; in the latter we selected, among pertinent results, only those *relevant* to our research aims by reading publications' abstracts.

To further widen our search, other non-systematic sources were consulted: Google Scholar was used as a cross-reference; experts were asked to contribute with relevant publications - even books; project's partners were asked to provide grey literature and relevant publications, even in their own language; additional manual searches in specialised academic journals websites were conducted.

## 2.2 Limitations

As recalled by Mallett and colleagues (2012), systematic literature reviews hold some limitations. Among them, the exclusive focus on academic peer-reviewed articles is a major issue. In this case, we benefited from the project's network, asking Tommaso Vitale and Simone Digennaro to provide consultations as experts in social inclusion, urban issues and sociology of sport. They recommended essays, books, and dissertations which did not result in our first search. SIMCAS partner organisations also provided grey literature and publications in their own country languages.

The risk of reproducing ethnocentric and disciplinary biases (Smith et al. 2018) was partially avoided by including three languages other than English - though European (French, Spanish, Italian) - and thanks to partners' contributions. Nevertheless, this strategy did not produce many results, quantitatively speaking. This could be due to the fact that most of the scientific literature in this area of study is produced in Anglo-saxon countries, but we can't be sure of that since we did not follow a systematic approach to address this issue. Still, it has to be said that since English is the *koiné* - shared language - of the international scientific community, it is not entirely true that a considerable amount of English-written texts is a proxy of ethnocentrism. In fact, we found many non-English native researchers and scholars publications in international journals.

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## 2.3 Eligibility

EBSCO showed 1587 results (without duplicates) for the above-mentioned query. Since too many of these did not respond to the criterion of pertinence, we decided to restrict the search. Searching by abstract (AB) with the same limiters and expanders resulted in 501 records. Non-pertinent results were excluded by researchers according to publications' subjects and journals in which they were published (e.g. papers from "The Journal Of Orthopaedic And Sports Physical Therapy" were not considered, as well as Economics publications about game theory, Public Health issues, etc.). Resulting records were further selected reviewing papers' abstracts, to assure that the record's content was relevant. Some of these papers were excluded too, where the content did not address our research questions substantially. 44 papers were selected in the end. Same procedure was applied to the search by Web Of Knowledge, which led to 454 records in the first place. At the end of the review process, 50 papers were selected, some of which coincided with EBSCO results.

### 3. RESULTS

The review of the scientific literature has made possible to identify well-defined thematic and disciplinary groups. The first is a sub-area of migration and refugees' studies and concerns the social integration processes of migrants. It is a corpus of literature that analyzes the different dimensions of social integration, highlighting the demands of social systems towards people from other countries, also coming to question the very concept of "integration". The studies relating to this thematic area have a very high level of generality and often pursue objectives of definition, classification and systematization. Sport, where it is considered, is only one of the different dimensions of integration and is not the subject of specific or particularly in-depth analysis. Another specificity is given by the interest in the early stages of the settlement process of migrants: many studies in fact concern the newcomers. In section 3.1 we propose a reconstruction (as synthetic as possible) of the literature on social integration.

Section 3.2 discusses the results of those studies that explicitly try to answer the question: "can sport contribute to social inclusion?" and in particular "can sport contribute to the social inclusion of migrants and refugees?". This thematic area is made up of two main strands: on the one hand, the studies that starting from the concept of wellbeing and positive development explore the correlates of sports practice for people, adopting a mostly individual or interpersonal level of analysis and focusing mainly on young people. On the other hand, there is a strand of critical studies that calls into question the "power of sport", highlighting its limits, especially with respect to the interaction between majority and minority cultures. These latter studies have clear links with the reflections developed within the so-called cultural studies.

Section 3.3 considers a particularly extensive thematic area: sport strengthen social capital, a fundamental resource to feed a multiplicity of inclusion processes. The literature concerned with social capital focuses on the distinction introduced by Putnam [2000] between bridging and bonding social capital, articulating different theories of construction and circulation of social capital mediated by sport. A second group of studies, a minority compared to the previous one, is instead interested in the creation of cultural capital through sport. The results of these studies are very convergent, even if they show an interest more for theory-building than for the analysis of concrete relational processes within sports environments.

The need to take into account sports practices is satisfied in section 3.4, within which there is an in-depth line of thinking that examines the enabling conditions of sport: i.e. those elements internal to sport that can facilitate socialization processes. Three thematic areas emerge from the literature: reflexive coaching, sport model and gender sensitivity.

The present review is closed by a section in which the main results are summarized and discussed (section 4) and by some final remarks relating to the implementation of the SIMCAS project (section 5).

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### 3.1 The social inclusion and integration of ethnic minorities

The integration of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, in particular migrants and refugees, has traditionally been one of the main policy objectives and public topics in western societies. The scientific debate about the causes and the consequences of migrants' integration into the society of destination has seen various developments in the last decades, stimulated in particular by the acceleration of the globalization process [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002]. Specifically, the debate has been focused on theoretical and methodological issues regarding the definition of 'integration' [Ager and Strang 2008; Bosswick and Heckmann 2006] and on the comparative analysis of western countries strategies of inclusion [Ambrosini 2011; Castles et al. 2014]. Although, as noted by Ager and Strang [2008], the convergence toward a consensus concerning the meaning and definition of 'integration' has yet to be reached. On top of that, attempts at operationalizing the proposed theoretical frameworks constitute an entirely different issue to be addressed.

In order to introduce the debate on the topic, some considerations have to be made. First, integration is a research subject that lifts sociological and psychological considerations because it is a phenomenon by which we define the interaction between social institutions and a subject, interactions between individual actors within society, and also intrapersonal interactions within each subject. In fact, among the main issues related to migration and forced or voluntary displacement, we can identify (O'Driscoll et al., 2014; Bloch and Gibbs, 2017):

- I. the psycho-social consequences of the disruption from the original community;
- II. the socialization in a foreign community with the relative tension between the restoration of the past and the familiarization with the present (and the imagination of the future);
- III. the possibility of marginalization within the foreign community and the relative consequences.

The migrant condition can be interpreted as that of the 'marginal man', at the same time a stranger to the new, unfamiliar, group and to the distant community of origin [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002: 24]<sup>1</sup>.

Integration, in the broadest terms possible, is intended as the adaptation of one's cultural identity to a foreign country's social life (Spaij, 2012) and, specifically, the acquisition of the means necessary to being an active member of society (Dukic, McDonald, and Spaij, 2017; Ager and Strang, 2008). Being a political concept and a policy objective, the concept is often

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, integration has been associated with a person's feeling of belonging [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002], relatively to a inter and intra-subjective statements (i.e. discourses about 'being part of a community', and with inclusion within a society's institutions and life spheres, in this case relative to an external evaluation of objective indicators of integration (i.e. access to employment).

employed to characterize, in ideologically-oriented discourses, what instead are specific processes of interaction between autochthonous groups and foreign populations (e.g. assimilation into the dominant culture). In particular, integration is a term often a synonym of a migrant's partial identification with the predominant ideological and moral order (Anger and Strang, 2008), or a complete individuation within a new social order. Moreover, the debate regarding migrants' social inclusion is often framed by implicit negative evaluations, as integration is presented as a means to avoid the disruption that new cultural and political instances coming along with foreign people might originate within the established social order. Thus, social inclusion and integration are processes intended to preserve a society's moral cohesion and its members' feeling of security [Pittaway, 2013]. In other terms, migration is addressed in negative terms, as having a disruptive potential on the constituted social order [Lewis 2010].

Integration, at least in those countries where multiculturalism is presented as the political framework of reference - European and Anglo-Saxon countries - is considered as the individual adoption of a community's interpretation of the social world into its own. The prerequisite to a successful inclusion into a foreign society is the conformity to a set of values and norms deemed essential for society's conservation [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002]. This often translates into the idea that migrants and refugees are required to have to have a basic knowledge of the foreign country's language, history, institutions and culture [Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, 2009; Silke 2016], implying unilaterality in the integration process rather than reciprocity. Implicitly, the extent of the adoption of core values goes as far as becoming, de facto, an assimilation and dispersion of foreign cultural instances into the dominant ideology [Bosswick and Heckmann 2006; Stone 2017]. On the other hand though, integration is often described as an - ideally - interactive process between the migrant and the foreign country's community, a two way process where both the foreign society and the migrant discuss their identities and what pertains to them (values, ideas, practices, and so on) [Castles et al., 2002; Heckmann and Bosswick, 2006].

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Different theoretical models, or rather taxonomies and typologies, have been formulated in the last decades. Without going too far into classic theorists' understanding of individuals' and foreigners integration [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002; Bosswick and Heckmann 2006], we are going to briefly introduce some of the main contributions to the debate [Ambrosini 2011; Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002; Castles et al. 2014; Bosswick and Heckmann 2006; Anger and Strang 2008].

Social integration, according to Esser [2000; in Bosswick and Heckmann 2006: 3] can be understood by referring to four modalities: acculturation, or the acquisition of the elements of a group's culture (symbols, practices, representations); placement, or the acquisition of a position within the group's economic and political sphere (becoming a citizen or a professional); interaction, or involvement in social networks; and identification, or feeling of belonging to the collectivity. These categories can, respectively, be reinterpreted as cultural integration

(acculturation), structural integration (placement), interactive integration (interaction), and identificational integration (identification) [Bosswick and Heckmann 2006: 3-9]. In these terms, "social integration can be defined as the inclusion and acceptance of immigrants into the core institutions, relationships and positions of a host society" [Bosswick and Heckmann 2006: 11]. Integration as an abstract category describing a social phenomenon is thus identified with a full participation "in the economic, social, cultural and political life of a society, while also being able to retain their own identity" (Vallonen, 2008: 42), participation that can be empirically observed upon proper operationalization.<sup>2</sup>

The main indicators of migrants' integration have been identified with labour market positioning, housing, access to health care and education, conditions to the acquisition of citizenship, political participation, and social mobility opportunities for second generations [Pittaway, 2013; Ager and Strang, 2008; Ambrosini 2011; Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014]. In particular, Ager and Strang [2008] proposed a hierarchical classification of the domains of social integration processes. At the basis of the hierarchy, there are the main indicators of social inclusion pertaining to an individual's structural integration [Bosswick and Heckmann 2006]. As 'public outcomes' [Ager and Strang 2008: 169] and preconditions to further participation in a community, they must be interpreted as indicators as well as means. These 'markers' or 'conditions' are: access to employment, to housing, to education, and to health. A feeling of security and the possibility of well-being have as a necessary condition the achievement of a state of things where access to these is guaranteed. The second order is social connectedness and interactions with a community's immaterial structures and members; in Ager and Strang's (2008) terms: 'social links', 'social bridges', and 'social bonds'<sup>3</sup>. The last order is related to the psychosocial dimension of integration: identity and feeling of belonging to the community. An individual's identification is possible when conditions from previous orders are met. However, social connection and the achievement of material security are necessary but not sufficient conditions to an individual's integration<sup>4</sup>. By reframing Ager and Strang's (2008) contribution with Bosswick and Heckmann's [2006] analytical categories, it is evident how the main indicators pertain to the dimension of structural integration while social connectedness is the interactive integration dimension; while other conditions are indeed acculturation, or cultural integration, and identification, or identificational integration.

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While the dimensions of social integration, as we have discussed, have been usually debated in similar terms, a theory regarding the interrelations and mutual influences between those different life domains is an entirely different matter. On one hand, the essential markers of social inclusion [Ager and Strang 2008] are not sufficient conditions to a further integration

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting reflection on the application of these categories to the sport sector see Henry [2005].

<sup>3</sup> Respectively, these terms are referred to links with social institutions, ties within the ethnic community (bonding), and ties across ethnic communities (bridging).

<sup>4</sup> Ager and Strang [2008] indeed define a set of facilitators/inhibitors that, together with that sense of safety and stability that the achievement of material security provides, can be considered equally essential: the institutional context (rights and citizenship access) and language proficiency and culture knowledge (cultural capital).

into a community's social networks; to be structurally integrated does not rule out the possibility of social isolation and cultural marginality. Indeed, cultural minorities are quite often integrated into the most marginal areas of society, both in material and symbolic terms. In some cases, to share a country's core values and have access to full citizenship does not rule out the possibility of being in a disadvantaged condition due to the deprivation of any possibility to participate in a country's cultural, political, economic life.

While understanding the process of integration just in terms of accomplishment of material security is clearly a reductionist approach [Ager and Strang 2008], to further investigate the relationship between actor-structure in the context of intercultural interactions adds to the complexity of the topic. The interaction of different cultural-symbolic systems, embodied by incoming populations and autochthonous groups, can lead to different outcomes. In investigating the phenomenon, it must be accounted for, on one hand, the actor-structure interaction within the receiving society and, on the other, the actor-structure interaction within the original society [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002]; moreover, two or more cultural systems, with their internal actor-structure dynamics, come in contact through migratory movements. In this regard, Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen [2002: 60] discussed the sociological approach to the study of migration and integration as 'systemic-relational'. This perspective suggests the relevance of the psychological domain and of individuals' agency in integrative processes, since it is the engagement of a migrant with two or more different cultural systems that raises the issue of conflicting identities and belongings. The integration of foreign people is a process that can be understood in terms of participation, or interdependence, and in terms of belonging, respectively an enactive and a reflexive predisposition<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the main issue regarding integrative processes is how to balance between the preservation of foreign populations' (and individuals') desired degree of cultural integrity and autonomy and the receiving society's demands for participation under specific criteria. Or, more precisely, the coexistence of different belongings, identities, and the symbolic-performative frameworks.

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As we suggested above, the term 'typology' can be more appropriate in the case of these contributions we tried to synthesize, as in fact it is the phenomenon in its constituent elements that is analytically described; however, classifications and typologies are preliminary steps to further efforts at the theoretical understanding and empirical observation of social integration [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002: 61]. It follows the necessity of a description of the dynamics and possible outcomes of this contact between different groups. Regarding this issue, there have been many contributions. Among those we reviewed, Ambrosini [2011: 222-223] distinguishes between three regimes of migrants' inclusion into western societies: temporary, assimilative, and pluralistic<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The sense of being part of a community is indeed a feeling associated with the perception, awareness and acceptance of being a part of a community, but it is also understandable in terms of taking part in the rituals of ordinary life [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002].

<sup>6</sup> These three models are drawn from the analysis of policy frameworks of Western societies [for instance, Geddes and Scholten 2016]. The first is typical of countries actively attracting foreign people in order to supply their economies with the required labour

Instead, DeLuca [2013] defines between four modalities of migrant's inclusion into society: normative (or assimilation), integrative (or cultural dualism), dialogical (or active interaction) and transgressive (or disruption of cultural dominance). These outcomes are in relation with the configuration of social context where integration takes place. This analytical framework includes: the migrant's original society's social structures and his/her orientations and attitudes toward the receiving society's members and institutions; the receiving society's social structures and its members' orientations and attitudes toward the migrants community [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002: 62-64]. For instance, a similarity between the community of origin's social life and the receiving society's can support a dialogical inclusion and cultural interaction on equal terms, depending on the community's members' attitudes toward each other.

As a matter of fact, any understanding of a people's social integration into a community must be contextualised and interpreted by accounting for existing power relations and social structures, which configure the possibility of each outcome to occur. Social inclusion/exclusion is intended as a condition of centrality/marginality in respect to the core areas of a society's field, where significant relationships are established, and resources distributed. In this sense, exclusion is identifiable by a differential in opportunities and status, in Bourdieu's terms, a lack of capital [Bourdieu 1984; 1986; Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992], or the inability to employ social resources to access and influence the definition of power structures. For instance, assimilation is likely to occur in a society where culture is held by traditional elites that act as gatekeepers to any introduction of foreign cultural elements. Multiculturalism and mutual influencing between cultures is dependent on the degree of openness of the receiving society's elites and influential groups.

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It is in this sense that theoretical contributions about migrants' integration have been informed by social and cultural capital theories [Ager and Strang 2008]. As discussed above, any form of relational capital is a facilitator of integration. Interpersonal interactions provide the opportunity of getting familiar with a foreign country's social and cultural life, a knowledge that is crucial for migrants' identification with the foreign community and the possibility of feeling to belong to it. Moreover, an individual's opportunities of accessing employment, housing, health care, education are inherent to a person's connectedness and inclusion in social networks, as well as to his/her understanding of the foreign culture<sup>7</sup>.

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force; historically, it has been associated with a partial integration of migrants into the community, limiting their participation to the economic sphere and the labour market while excluding them from politics and civic life. The second model is associated with the american ideal of a melting pot society where everyone has to conform to a set of core values and rules (an ethos) in order to be part of the community. The last one is associated with multiculturalism and the formal acceptance of cultural diversity within the community and, in particular, in the political sphere.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, the availability of social and cultural capital can moderate the effects of unilateral assimilation and encourage more equal cultural dialogues by providing a common ground where to communicate. Therefore, the concept of social and cultural capital as indicators of social integration have been widely employed in various fields as social participation, job searching, network analysis, ecc.

It is within the theoretical framework defined so far that the role of sport in supporting the social inclusion of migrants and refugees must be understood. Sport is recognized as a privileged activity with the potential of providing opportunities of intercultural interactions, which in turn is indicated as relevant for the development of specific forms of relational capital and, thus, the structuring of inter-ethnic ties and identities [Henry 2005; Zoletto 2007]; Anger and Strang 2008; Krouwel et al. 2006]. Sport is also expected to encourage migrants' involvement in civic life and to familiarize with the receiving society's customs, habits, and codes; in particular, it can contribute to migrants' cultural, interactive and identification integration [Heckmann and Bosswick 2006]. However, as social integration has been extensively debated within humanities and social sciences, its complexity as a psycho-social phenomenon has been made evident. As we have seen, the concept of social integration is often employed in ideological and political terms which often oversimplify and present in narrative (rather than theoretical) terms the phenomenon. As a result, the ecological conditions and the perspective of the actor (him/her who has migrated) is minimized or implicitly included in the discourse. The issue persists, to some extent, also in the body of research we are going to analyze. The mixed evidence about sport's contribution to ethnic minorities social integration is associated as much to methodological difficulties as it is to a partial specification of the contextual factors and of migrants' conditions.

## **3.2 Can sport contribute to social inclusion?**

In order to provide a complete overview on sport's capacity to influence foreign people's integration into society, it is advisable to reconstruct the debate starting from its origins. As we are going to illustrate further into the discussion, it is possible to identify a, often implicit, reference to a theoretical framework that associates the psycho-physical benefits of sport to its potential to support an individual's social inclusion.

### **3.2.1 *The correlates of sport activities***

It is commonly acknowledged that sport has positive effects on health and physical and psychological well-being. This can be considered as the most basic assumption regarding physical and activities<sup>8</sup>. Evidence regarding this idea is widely supported: both generically [Holt *et al.* 2017; Eime *et al.* 2013] and for specific groups in disadvantaged conditions like refugees

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<sup>8</sup> Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty (TFEU) for the first time accords the European Union a formal competence in the field of sport (see Box 1). The Treaty provides for the EU to support, coordinate and complement the efforts of Member States but does not allow it to adopt legislation specifically relating to sport. The EU uses the definition of sport established by the Council of Europe which encompasses "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.

and youth or migrants in deprived contexts [Hermens, Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen 2017; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020], it has been demonstrated that sport can provide the benefits commonly attributed to its practice. However, the debate regarding the impact of sport and leisure activities on social inclusion and cultural integration processes is still ongoing [Burrmann, Mutz, Zender 2015; Gerber, Pühse 2017]. It is observable a tendency, both in empirical and theoretical contributions, to converge toward specific positions. It is the aim of this chapter of the review to synthesize and reconstruct the debate on the role of sport in supporting migrants and refugee's inclusion into society. In order to do so, the intent is, starting from scholars' arguments and research on the subject, to attempt to define these theoretical positions and further discuss the related issues.

The first theoretical position that can be drawn includes in the same category those who argue about sport facilitating the emergence of the conditions for the inclusion of vulnerable people and groups. As introduced above, evidence about the positive effects of physical activities on individuals' health and psychological and emotional well-being is widely supported by a consistent body of empirical and meta-empirical research [Lancet 2012; Eime et al. 2013; O' Driscoll et al. 2014; Schailée, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019]. As suggested in Hermes et al.'s [2017] systematic review of the evidence regarding the role of sport in the development of disadvantaged youth life skills, physical activities consistently contributed to the strengthening of individuals' emotional, cognitive, and social life skills. Despite evidence regarding the quality of the effect of sport on those skills being mixed due to a relevant methodological heterogeneity in the studies considered, some insights can be drawn from Hermes et al. [2017] contribution. First, there is evidence of a positive impact of sport on cognitive life skills - self-perception, self-esteem, and identity [especially in sport like boxing, where negative narratives of oneself can be mitigated; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]. Likewise, social life skills seem to be susceptible to strengthening through the practice of sport and leisure activities; in particular: social responsibility, communications skills, and conflict resolution skills, but also intrapersonal skills such as optimism, resilience and a goal-oriented attitude [see also Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]<sup>9</sup>. Lastly, the heterogeneity of the contexts where research was carried out seemed to mitigate but not significantly alter the general picture: sport positively impacts on individuals' life skills development across different spatial and temporal contexts.

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The underlying theoretical framework on which arguments on the positive effect of sport on social inclusion and integration are supported can be summarized in these terms [Hermes et al. 2017; Van der Veken, Lauwerier, and Willems 2020; Waring and Mason, 2010; O' Driscoll et al. 2014; Schailée, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]:

- I. socially disadvantaged people daily face stressors due to external conditions;

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<sup>9</sup> For a classical reference see Loy, Kenyon, McPherson [1981]

- II. stressors may facilitate the development of feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, lack of ambition, and detachment for meaningful activities;
- III. these feelings deprive an individual of the possibility to react to these external conditions;
- IV. sport and leisure activities provide an opportunity to contrast such tendencies and feelings and, thus, can contribute to socially disadvantaged people's empowerment;
- V. disadvantaged people empowerment supports their emancipation from ecological disadvantages

Within this framework, sport is identified as an informal space that, accompanied with an inclusive social climate and other mechanisms, might facilitate to positive emotional responses (sense of safety), which in turn correlate with attitudinal changes (a sense of belonging), and, lastly, might contribute to broader psychosocial and behavioural changes (diffuse wellbeing) [Van der Veken et al. 2020; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020; Schailleé, Haudenhuyse and Bradt 2019; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]. Therefore, sport might have the role of supporting individuals' psychological well-being and self-awareness, which is a necessary condition and indirectly affects their ability to overcome their vulnerable condition [Van der Veken et al. 2020; Waring and Mason 2010]. In other words, what is learnt through sport and leisure activities is expected to spillover to other life domains and to enrich an individual's human capital, which facilitate further social inclusion by enhancing its chances to find an employment and have meaningful relationships [Schailleé, Haudenhuyse and Bradt 2019; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019].

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The argument above can be advanced for socially vulnerable people in general and specific groups at risk of exclusion as well - ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees. The hypothesis, as we have seen, is that sport activities provided an opportunity to engage in a meaningful interaction and participate in a place where identities and status quo are virtually suspended and rediscussed, or even altered [Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020]. Group physical activities have the potential of putting into perspective the ordinary and habitual perception that an individual has of itself; in doing so, each participant engages in a process of individualization that is shared with others. Indeed, to have taken part in a meaningful interaction is a participant's emotional state that is often inferable by their declaration of a sense of belonging to the group taking part in the activity [Hermes et al. 2017; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020]. In this sense, community sport activities for vulnerable groups might in fact be an opportunity to be part of an extraordinary state of things where identities, behaviours, linguistic codes, roles, and emotions alternative to those intrinsic to their ordinary lives can be found.

This perspective, usually referred to in different terms, 'sport for development', 'sport for all', or 'community sport', identifies sport as a means to address inequalities and involve marginal and disadvantaged groups and minorities with the intent of including them into the community's social life and [Schailleé, Haudenhuyse and Bradt 2019; Walseth 2008; Lyras and

Peachey 2011]<sup>10</sup>. Physical activities are associated with individuals' empowerment and resistance to the reiteration of disadvantaged conditions, resilience and development of life skills [Waring and Mason 2010; Spaaij 2012; Schailée, Haudenhuyse and Bradt 2019; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020; Dukic, McDonald and Spaaij 2017; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, and De Knop 2010; Stone 2017]. Consequently, sport initiatives involving disadvantaged communities have been a traditional policy issue in many Western countries - in particular, Belgium, the Netherlands, France Denmark, Australia and the United Kingdom - and a policy objective of the European Union [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009; Schailée, Haudenhuyse and Bradt 2019; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, and De Knop 2010]. Leisure and physical activities have been promoted as stages of social cohesion building processes and mediators of antisocial behaviours [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009; Bloch and Gibbs 2017; Hoyer, Nicholson, and Brown 2015], and sites for civic participation [Spaaij 2012; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, and De Knop 2010; Waring and Mason 2010; Schailée, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019; Tuchel et al 2020].

### **3.2.2 Sport as a panacea: debating the social benefits of sport**

However, some of the assumptions to this perspective have been debated. First of all, the potential of structural characteristics and of inter-relational dynamics that might define and affect the relationship between sport, and an individual's psychosocial development and social inclusion are seldom investigated [Hermens et al. 2017]. The benefits of sport on social inclusion are usually relying on psychological theories explicating intra-individual, but not inter-individual dynamics. The understanding and theoretical modelling of the association between sport, social inclusion and potential intervening factors has to be further developed, especially in a sociological perspective [Bloch and Gibbs 2015; Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015]. Moreover, as we are going to introduce later, the role of sport employees, including coaches and the volunteers, when considered, was reported to be crucial to participants' engagement and, thus, to their self-development [Hermens et al., 2017]. Although, the influential role of trainers is not systematically investigated (cfr. 3.4.1).

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A second aspect is the interrelation between opportunities to practice leisure activities and the gradual overcoming of a community's structural disadvantages, which has rarely been investigated. Though, about the issue, Morgan, Parker, and Roberts [2019] highlighted how individual empowerment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for social inclusion and active participation. In a sociological perspective, marginality is understood as a condition that is largely due to the distribution within a community of relational and material (not only economic) capital<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> For a concrete example see Jessop *et al.* 2019.

<sup>11</sup> However, as sport is thought to impact in particular on the development of human and social capital, structural (power) relations are potentially left uncontested by such interventions [Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]. Bloch and Gibbs [2015] argued

On another note, Dukic, McDonald and Spaaij [2017] pointed out that evidence on the positive effects of sport on social inclusion is often mixed with rhetoric and ideological premises rather than being supported by theoretical statements and empirically tested hypotheses. Moreover, it is assumed that, when provided with opportunities to practice sport, people in disadvantaged conditions will participate<sup>12</sup>.

Scepticism and criticism regarding sport potential to support a greater involvement of excluded groups to the majority's social, political, cultural, and economic life can be defined as the second body of research within the field. In particular, on top of the arguments presented beforehand, it is also contested the solidity of the evidence about the positive contribution of leisure and physical activities to social inclusion [Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020; Jeanes, O'Connor, and Alfrey 2015], or it has been highlighted the possibility of negative social encounters and the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries [Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020], the caducity of sport benefits in the medium and long term, and, lastly, the variance in the direction of the effects across social contexts [Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020]<sup>13</sup>.

According to Coalter [2007a; 2007b], the interest in the ability of sport to promote social cohesion must be seen in the political scenario of the so-called "third way", that is, the attempt to find a compromise between social justice and market economy, between liberalism and socialism. Although this political experiment can be considered outdated, the idea that sport as a sort of social panacea [Müller, van Zoonen, de Roode 2008] or a social vaccine [Coalter 2007b: 171-172] continues to be widespread. It is true that many sport disciplines, also thanks to institutional support, have become more open and able to include traditionally marginal people; in the same way, the creation of sports programs in vulnerable areas, characterised by the absence of sport facilities, has further widened the audience of people who have access to physical and leisure activities. However, this does not necessarily imply that sport automatically supports social integration [Elling, De Knop, and Knoppers 2001].

The International Olympic Committee has developed several campaigns and project with a specific focus on the role of sport as means of social intervention by linking the Olympic values with the development of the individuals and community. «The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity<sup>14</sup>».

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that the issue is widely acknowledged within the debate, though rarely addressed in empirical studies, potentially due to methodological difficulties.

<sup>12</sup> As discussed by Morgan, Parker, and Roberts [2019], the debate on empirical evidence on sport benefits to social inclusion usually does not consider the self-selection of participants to sport activities, which is associated, most evidently, with gender, family background, ethnicity, and education.

<sup>13</sup> Others have been debating about the mechanism by which social capital developed by means of sport can spill over and be transformed into other types of social capital [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009]. In general, sport capacity to encourage migrants' and refugees' social inclusion has been defined as not straightforward and rather complex to tackle down in analytical and empirical terms [McDonald, Spaaij, Dukic 2018; Vermeulen and Verweel 2009].

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.olympic.org/development-through-sport>.

Among others, football is probably the discipline where it is particularly evident the tendency to overestimate the capacity of sport as a means to social integration. In the past decades, there have been countless initiatives carried out by international organizations, such as UEFA and FIFA and by national and local governments with the intent of conveying the values of equality and non-discrimination through sport. To date though, empirical evidence supporting the belief regarding football capacity to support social integration has been limited. According to Coalter [2007a] the issue is due to the fact that most of these social inclusion programs centered on football, as well as on other sports, fall within the definition of Ray Pawson [2004: 105] "ill -defined interventions with hard to follow outcomes". In particular, it is often overlooked that: "Participation in sport, however defined and however provided, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to obtain any supposed benefits" [Coalter 2015: 20].

Another strand of criticism focuses, rather than on the methodological deficits in the evaluation of the interventions, on the social and political consequences of the interaction between dominant and minoritarian cultural groups. For instance, Müller, van Zoonen, de Roode [2008: 390], in light of a case study on a multi-ethnic football tournament held in Amsterdam, argued that "the dominant discourse about multicultural integration has been criticized for producing and essentializing cultural differences in society rather than merely reflecting them"; in other words, sport would build cultural diversity as a collection of homogeneous national – cultural communities<sup>15</sup>.

Although many initiatives are carried out with the best of intentions, in some cases they fail to question social, economic and racial tensions deeply embedded into the configuration of a community's social life. A similar criticism is also formulated by Spaaij [2009: 263], starting from the case of a sport program created in the city of Rotterdam:

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While several participants are enthusiastic about the program and feel that it enables them to develop their skills and perhaps even to climb higher up the meritocratic staircase, and while program staff are genuinely committed to assisting disadvantaged youth, it could be argued that within the wider context of political concern about social cohesion, immigration and crime, serving disadvantaged youth in not the ultimate goal of sport-based programs [...] Ultimately, they are a means through which governmental organizations and their partners seek to civilize and regulate these 'at risk' minority ethnic youth to normalize their behaviour [...], to make them meet their 'societal responsibilities' and to 'integrate' them into Dutch society. Rather than simply being a sign of 'individual freedom and opportunity', sport-based intervention programs of this kind also serve as a form of social control and regulation. Sport is increasingly becoming a substantial aspect of the neoliberal policy repertoire of cities like Rotterdam aimed at generating social order in disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods.

Beyond the single positions, there is a strand of criticism that places the risk of using sport as a means to mitigate structural disadvantages suffered by the most marginal segments

<sup>15</sup> Others instead discuss sport, in particular football, as a tool of social control [Parker et al. 2019: 231]; according to this perspective, sports programs aimed at young people would be used "as a means to categorize citizens on the basis of their ability to contribute to society economically, politically, and morally".

of society. In particular, a recurring trait in these analyses is the institutional dimension: sports programs implemented in top-down mode by public institutions often suffer from a lack of attention to non-sports components and end up, despite good intentions, to strengthen exclusionary phenomena. Crabbe [2007: 38-39] referring to "hard to reach" youth of English suburbs, adds that:

[...] sporting interventions are more popularly believed to work because they continue to be seen to provide relief from a criminogenic environment. [...] a romantic fiction of modernist sporting certainties is reproduced which is associated with the conventional functionalist interpretation of sports as inculcating a sense of self-discipline, routine and personal responsibility. Now enhanced by the seductive glamour and performativity of the celebrity version, sport represents a metaphor for the positively imbued social values that the 'healthy' majority claim as their own and which are wheeled out to the zones of exclusion in an effort to alter the behaviour and consciousness of 'risky' populations.

Another example of the tendency to consider the positive effects of sport uncritically comes from the literature on Positive Youth Development [Papacharisis et al. 2005; Fraser-Thomas, Côte, Deakin 2005, Holt 2008; Holt et al. 2017; Eime et al. 2013], especially for youth living in deprived socio-economic contexts. Sport programs have the potential of generating a positive effect on an individual's physical, psychological-emotional, and social development. As we discussed, research also supports that leisure activities can foster citizenship, social success, positive peer relationships, and leadership skills [Fraser-Thomas, Côte, and Deakin 2005]. However, the same authors note that there can also be negative effects (eating disorders, hyper-training, negative competition, excessive influence from adults: relatives and coaches)<sup>16</sup>.

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What is notable within the Positive Youth Development approach is a tendency in the scientific debate to redirect the research focus accordingly with the change in institutional policy indications. For what concerns the English case, Bailey [2008: 86] notes that, in a first phase, the interest was directed at the so-called "pro-social outcomes" of sport, that is, the development of the individual's personal and relational qualities. In a second phase, in coincidence, according to Bailey, with the mid-nineties social changes and New Labor, it occurred a shift from the individual to the community level: "policy-makers have tended to subsume traditional discourses of personal improvement through sport within wider notions of civic engagement and community regeneration" [2008: 86]<sup>17</sup>.

The preventive function of sport against social disorder, however it is not automatic [Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004; Jarvie 2006; Coalter 2007: 115-132]. The main critical voices on

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<sup>16</sup> The Positive Youth Development is therefore a concept that makes explicit the psycho-social dimension of integration and, although elaborated by having in mind youth growth, it can also be borrowed to people with a migration background, especially if consider that migration is frequently associated with serious emotional and psychological consequences. Indeed, it is no coincidence that a large part of the studies on the effectiveness of sport in the process of incorporation into the receiving society is focused on asylum seekers and refugees [Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2010; Whitley, Coble, and Jewell 2016, Spaaij 2015].

<sup>17</sup> The huge investments in sports programs in the risky neighborhoods of English cities aimed to contain the deviant behavior of the youth population, and this priority became even more pressing following the riots of August 2011.

this front point out that, first of all, there is a common sense interpreting sport in functional terms, emphasizing what sport does to people and how it contributes to society [Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004]. Secondly, methodological criticisms are replicated regarding the direct correlation between sports practice and propensity to deviance: the reasons why sport and, in general, leisure activities should influence criminal behaviour are not always clearly formulated in terms of cognitive objectives and operational definitions; and thus, any attempt at validating and comparing results remains an uncertain exercise [Crabbe 2007: 28].

A particularly interesting analysis has been provided by Blackshaw and Crabbe [2004]; while it is not possible to introduce the overall debate where their contribution is framed, it is sufficient to our cause to outline their argument. Starting from Foucault's analysis of power, they argued that the dominant discourse regarding sport tends to imply a "normalizing gaze" [2004: 42-45]. This expression refers to a complex network of social meanings, conveyed in the most disparate ways, which constitute a "sporting normality" characterized by very precise physical, psychological and social traits and, at the same time, excludes a wide range of social subjects [Degele 2013]. Thus, sport is interpreted, as in some other cases discussed so far, as an activity the impact of which has to be analysed by considering the power structure it is embedded into.

Another relevant body of criticism is composed by the contributions of cultural studies scholars to the analysis of sports discourse, which has been taken up also by those researchers who place sport within the framework of economic globalization and the consumer society [Jarvie 2006; Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes 2014]. These contributions are concerned, in addition to the forms of circulation and affirmation of dominant discourses, to the socio-economic consequences of leisure activities and to the complementary forms of social exclusion and segregation [Alisch 2017]. From this point of view, sport, and above all professional sports, contributes to "the exclusion and segregation of enclaves of losers and redundant sports populations separated from enclaves of winners, health enthusiasts and spectators in their guarded gyms, gated sports stadiums and modern sports villages is in itself a form of violence" [Jarvie 2006: 213]. Moreover, other authors have broadened the argument by affirming that dominant culture in competitive sport, even in its spectatorial and consumerist version, can be exclusive and reject particular groups of people for the simple fact that they do not comply with the standard physical-psychological and moral model:

sport continues to be one of the few domains within the Global North to celebrate and actively encourage hyper-masculinity by normalizing aggressive and misogynistic practices, and through valuing strength, muscularity, whiteness and physical ability. [Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes 2014: 65].

This perspective suggests that sport can have a role in strengthening the forms of discrimination and symbolic violence associated to the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, as well as worsening social stigma associated with certain personal conditions such as being an ex-convict or having a drug addiction.

### 3.3 Sport and the acquisition of social and cultural capital

We have tried to synthesize the logic behind the idea of sport contributing to vulnerable people's social inclusion and denoted that a consistent strand of criticism in this regard is active within the academic debate. As it is possible to infer from what has been discussed so far, the debate is centered around sport potential to provide individuals opportunities to develop crucial social and psychological skills. Within the field, this has been discussed in terms of access to social and cultural capital, which are relational resources considered as indicators of integration [Walseth 2008; Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015]. The body of literature here investigated consistently draws from Putnam's [2000] conceptualization of social capital, both in analytical terms - the division in bonding and bridging social capital - and in theoretical terms - social capital is a property of a community that identifies with trust, cooperation, civic engagement [Walseth 2008; Janssen and Verweel 2014], a property that is produced by participating in common activities [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009]. A minor, despite significant, attention has been attributed to Bourdieu's [1986] theoretical formulation of social capital, which within his discussion has to be intended as a resource to be associated to an individual's embeddedness into social networks, a resource that provides the capacity to influence (material and symbolic) resources allocation. According to many, evidence supporting the idea of sport's capacity to build social capital has been consistently growing [Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015; Theeboom, Schailleé, and Nols 2012; Walseth 2006]<sup>18</sup>.

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Going back to what has been argued in the introductory chapter on social integration (cfr. 3.1), migrants' identities are defined throughout individual-environment interactions. However, the individualization of a person displaced in another country is contended between the original community, a now-imaginary, past-but-forever-present reality, and the present of the reality of the receiving community. The condition of being a migrant or a refugee implies the disruption from their original social world, which in turn means the loss of one's position within the many social fields an individual is involved in: economic, political, cultural, religious. This condition can be conceptualized as a loss of relational capital. However, loss is often associated with remembrance of one's previous status and degree of involvement. Being a migrant, especially a forced migrant, means to experience a tension between the desire of restoration of what once was, the inability to express this will, and the implicit pressure to adapt to new ecological conditions. Integration, thus, cannot be intended just as an entirely new process of individuation taking place within a different social body. Our concern should be oriented toward the persistence of the traces of 'previous individuals' within the subject's intimate sphere. Integration means to conciliate the present state of things with expectations about the future in

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<sup>18</sup> In particular, Jarvie [2003] and Maguire et al. [2002] have highlighted the concept of "regenerating communities' social capital".

a new community and with desires of restoration of lost identities, practices, status, and social ties.

These things considered, it could be argued that, rather than a socialization with a foreign society's abstract institutions (ideas, symbols, practices), integration could be more effectively supported through voluntary pursued and 'momentary spaces of belonging' [Porro, 2001; Zoletto, 2007; Lewis 2010; Schailleé, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019]. In other terms, sport has the potential to encourage individuals' participation to a meaningful and active social life by providing a place where to develop relevant interactions with people from diverse social contexts. The expected change that sport can bring in the life of disadvantaged people has then to be sought after at the micro level rather than at the macro level. Indeed, ecological conditions defining some groups' disadvantaged positions are likely to persist regardless of those groups' willingness to overcome them and regardless of their taking part in sport programs. The field within social actors structure their identities, course of actions, and prospects for the future remains bound to the possibilities defined by contingent social structures.

The theoretical framework that, according to our interpretation of the literature, implicit recurs in research and policy initiatives in the field of sport for inclusion moves from the following assumptions:

- I. physical activities contribute to the feeling of belonging to something meaningful and pleasant;
- II. to belong means to wish to participate and interact with other members of the group;
- III. to participate is to develop relationships and ties with others, which in turn is an indicator of social and cultural resources (capital) being available to participants;
- IV. further participation to a community through leisure and sport activities might support a process of individuation (integration of the subject into the social environment).

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As we will see, there is evidence of sport contributing to feelings of belonging, to the availability of bonding and bridging social capital, and to migrants' acculturation. However, evidence about the benefits is mixed and far from being homogeneously gathered. Moreover, It is often unclear what links the different phases or processes we proposed above; in particular, it has to be further debated under which conditions the desired effects are in fact observable.

### **3.3.1 *Belonging***

The first element to consider, in analytical terms, is the concept of 'belonging'. Belonging is the projection of a subject into an imagined social body (being it a community, an abstract group,

or a place embodying otherness) [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002; Anderson, 1983]<sup>19</sup>. Associated with belonging is emotional resonance as well as a sense of security when located within the 'space', which, in the latter case of belonging to an ideal place, can be for example, feeling a member of a community.

Indeed, what concerns us in the current discussion is the feeling of belonging specific to a social body or to a group of people. To belong, in this case in particular, is associated with 'to identify with', a statement the subject infers by its sharing with others a language, practices, values and norms, concepts, and so on [Stone 2017]. Moreover, to belong is, implicitly and explicitly, to perform accordingly to the expectations of others and to commit to the place of belonging and to its members: it is to understand and comply with the symbolic-cultural system the group refers to [Pollini and Venturelli-Christensen 2002]

There is evidence about leisure activities potential to instill a sense of connectedness with a group and a feeling of belonging to a community or a place [Stone 2017; Spaaij 2012; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017; Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015). That is due to the fact that, it is argued, participation in leisure activities might become a part of an individual's life and develop into an habitus [McDonald, Spaaij, and Dukic 2018]. Since sport is a social activity that presupposes, in some cases, cooperation with team members and compliance to a 'play mood' and to a normative framework (rules and fairplay), these activities, due to the pursuit of the game's goal, engage participants in specific meaning making processes. Modern sports are, to some extent, rituals where participants display theirs, and experience others', identities and peculiarities. The habitus, that is the repetition of an activity(s), has the potential to structure into an ethos and into a mentality.

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On top of that, sport can help overcome individual isolation [McDonald, Spaaij, and Dukic 2018; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019] and develop emotional attachment to other people, places, or practices [Spaaij 2015]. However, a feeling of belonging seems to arise through repeated participation and emotional commitment to an activity that has a predictable occurrence [Stone 2017; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer 2020]. Thus, the temporal dimension, as much as the relational and spatial dimension, is a necessary condition for sport to contribute to individuals' social inclusion [Ceylan, Ottersbach, Wiedemann 2018]: the momentary suspension of ordinary life brought forth by leisure activities, when given a stable and regular framework, can create a common field where potential for individual and communitarian change can built.

Some argued about sport being a place for 'multiple belongings' to emerge [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009]. Regarding community events in refugees communities, a more generic category also including leisure activities, Lewis [2010] argued that these events have the potential to represent a group's identity by reproducing a sense of home and normality that is

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<sup>19</sup> In philosophical terms, it is an act or an event of transcendence that involves a subject in psychological, cognitive, emotional, and ethical terms: something external to me participates in my being. Belonging means being involved and feeling of being part of something external to us. This feeling implies an individual's philosophy (or, rather, a semi-reflexive narrative), in particular formulations regarding the nature and being of what is external to me. In other words, belonging means to know and be familiar with a 'place', being it physical (belong to somewhere or somewhen) or ideal (belong to someone or something).

partially directed, as a cultural statement, to the dominant society; in Lewis [2010: 16] words: "In creating a part of home as elsewhere here, events demonstrate adaptation to being in Britain, and provide a moment of location as a population in UK society"<sup>20</sup>.

However, the category of belonging is seldom sufficient to understand the interaction between people and the environment or, in other terms, the process of individualization and identity-building. Participants' agency is hardly predictable and accountable for and we do not clearly know what facilitates a person's involvement in an activity. Then, belonging is potentially problematic as a political objective as well as a scientific concept. Leisure activities, and in particular physical activities, are a field where different kinds and levels of belonging are possible [Walseth 2006], from the renewal of past forms of belonging, specific to some social situations, to new possibilities of feeling part of a community and establish a first, possibly positive, contact with its members and culture [Spaaij 2015; McDonal, Spaaij, and Dukic 2018].

Moreover, being it a phenomenon that pertains to an individual's cognition and emotional interpretation of the social world, it poses a series of methodological issues. As we discussed above, the main framing theory adopted within this field of research draws consistently from Putnam's, and partially Bourdieu's, theory of social capital. While the identification of belonging with an individual's position within a social network, even though intuitive, is not free of issues (note: my being at the centre of community does not imply that I want to belong there; if belonging is a manifestation of 'will' or 'desire to', then we cannot exclude that I feel I belong, or want to, to many other groups), it has established as one of the main frameworks of reference. According to Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald's [2019] contribution, social capital along with cultural capital theory have been defining the research agenda for the past decades. Therefore, in the following chapters we are going to discuss these contributions, with the intent of highlighting theoretical convergences and divergences, as well as issues to be addressed in future discussions.

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### ***3.3.2 Sport and bonding and bridging social capital***

Bonding social capital refers to a relational, or social, resource that is often found within a group of relatives or close friends, and, in general, in groups where frequent and repeated interactions are framed within a normative order [Putnam, 2000]. For instance, it can refer to groups where it has established a sense of mutuality and trust toward other members, which can be observed within ethnic and cultural minorities. Bonding social capital thus refers to a kind of resource that is inherent to closely-knit networks where relationships are either pre-existent to the individuals (relatives), abstract and transcendental (kinship), or strengthened by repeated interactions (friendship). This kind of social capital is both a consequence and a means for the reinforcement of group identities, that is, it is an outcome of in-group interactions but also the way the group

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<sup>20</sup> A similar argument has been advanced by those who suggest that bonding social capital and the reenactment of ethnic minorities' tradition is followed by a more stable and aware participation to the foreign society's social life.

continuously comes into being. At the same time, this kind of relational resource necessitates a consolidated frame for the interactions, as well as a memory of the tie. The stability of social networks where bonding social capital is accumulated by each subject implies that this resource can be mobilized in specific ways. For example, a close uncle can become my employer when I am having difficulties finding a job, only because I am his relative and our relationship guarantees my moral indebtedness and, consequently, my wish to return the favor; but a more loose tie, what defines bridging social capital, might not offer the same opportunity to me.

Thus, it must be taken into account that, while bonding social capital is often associated with the promotion and maintenance of inward-looking identities [Putnam 2000; Bloch and Gibbs 2017; Vermeulen and Verweel 2009], it also structures a relevant field of potential where individuals may seize life changing opportunities. On top of that, bonding social capital supports the re-establishment of a sense of belonging to a community to identify with. The closeness of peers with cultural traits similar to mine can exert a positive influence on individuals' feeling of security [Spaaij 2012]. However, on the other side, the structure of closely-knit networks can associate with limited contacts with other groups, or to cultural heterodoxy and the preservation of the in-group order, which hinders inclusion into the broader community [Bloch and Gibbs 2017].

In this regard, sport has been found to be a means to rebuild social networks disrupted by migration, a practice located in a separated space where migrants and refugees might have the opportunity to meet others with similar backgrounds [Spaaij 2012; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017]. Lewis [2010] suggested that integration into a foreign society can have as a precondition the reconstruction of a feeling of home, since the disruption associated to migration might require the renewal, or the recalling of, the past before any engagement with the present and the future. In this sense, sport, as a means for the rebuilding of a dispersed cultural unity, can indeed provide opportunities for the consolidation of ingroup solidarity and a bonding social capital; in turn, a solid ethnic or cultural identity, under facilitating conditions and policies, might provide solid grounds for a further interconnection with other parts of social body. On this line of thought, Janssens and Verweel's [2014] argued that bonding social capital can also be intended as a potential prerequisite for bridging social capital.

On the other hand, bridging social capital refers to a relational resource that is found in networks developed between people brought together within a specific context (e.g. the workplace, the neighbourhood), or due to the intersection of social networks (a friend of a friend), or within individuals' elective activities (someone usually met in a shop that I frequently visit). In this sense, sport, as a leisure activity, is seen as an opportunity to get in contact with other social groups and individuals with different backgrounds [Spaaij 2012; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017]. In this sense, sport and leisure activities might promote the building of overarching ties with socio-culturally distant communities. However, the inter-cultural connections that might be vehiculated within sport activities are often limited to such instances and do not spill over to other life domains [Spaaij 2012]. However, Janssens and Verweel [2014] argued about the

opportunities of mutual help within multiethnic sport clubs, providing evidence about the spillover to other life domains of relationships developed within the context of leisure activities. At the same time, sport and leisure activities might also be an opportunity for migrants and refugees to interact and develop ties with grassroots organizations and voluntary associations [Braun, Nobis 2011], which might act as intermediaries between foreign people and the society's institutions [Spaaij 2012].

### **3.3.3 On social capital theory**

However, sport capability to support the building of bridging or bonding capital has been contested [Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017]. A first issue is that social capital is not 'found' within a web of relationships, but rather it is a 'possibility' within that network. As a relational resource, it depends on the characteristics of the interindividual relationship as well as on the structure and content of the broader network. Thus, it is an overgeneralization to affirm that sport is a means for disadvantaged people to access social capital since this possibility depends on what kind of relationships might develop in that specific network.

Moreover, bridging social capital is not necessarily related to social cohesion because intergroup ties might develop into conflictual identities and highlight cultural antinomies [Spaaij 2012]. In opposition to the consistency of evidence about sport's positive impact on health and well-being, leisure activities' relationship with social inclusion and integration is more complicated to define and observe [Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015]. As argued beforehand, the underlying theoretical framework associates the achievement of psycho-physical health and well-being with a more active engagement into a community's life or, rather, it subordinates the latter phenomenon to the former: a subject's wellness is a necessary condition to civic participation. However, it has to be discussed whether that is also a sufficient condition. Furthermore, bridging social capital is not, per se, and indicator of cultural integration on equal grounds<sup>21</sup>.

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Concerning the Australian case, Pittaway [2013] claimed that refugees' most pressing concerns are related to the material dimensions discussed in terms of 'markers' by Anger and Strang [2008]: affordable housing, access to education, especially for their children, employment and the possibility of economic independence. A similar concern can be hypothesized to be observable among migrants in general. The improvement of disadvantaged conditions thus pertains to areas of political intervention hardly addressable through leisure activities alone. While sport can mitigate the consequences of traumas, feeling of loneliness and longing for distant family members and friends, as well as the loss of traditional roles and identities, it must

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<sup>21</sup> Discussing the context of multi-ethnic sport activities, Spaaij [2015] pointed out how refugee youth contacts with autochthonous culture might mean to be exposed to implicit assimilative instances - language learning, behavioural patterns, and so on.

be embedded into a broader policy framework aimed at tackling structural and objective social exclusion. On top of that, the cultural and political climate of the country providing asylum and hospitality to displaced persons must be accounted for. Endemic racism and xenophobia significantly shapes migrants' opportunities to integrate into a foreign community in a way suitable to their needs. Integration is often hetero-directed by ruling autochthonous political and cultural elites. Therefore, sport can be an opportunity to offer an informal, and possibly politically neutral field, where migrants and refugees have the opportunity to discuss their roles and futures in the foreign society; but it can also be the opposite, a place where political (and philosophical) orientations are expressed through seemingly-informal practices.

Furthermore, the availability of different types of social capital is context specific; there are differences regarding social interactions and intercultural dialogue between activities engaging mono-ethnic groups and activities addressed at multi-ethnic situations [Spaij 2015].

On an entirely different note, Krouwel et al. [2006] identified three categories of motivations in participating in leisure activities, each associated with a different social experience: 'sociability-dimension', 'individuality-dimension' and 'own-group dimension'; or respectively, personal, in-group, and out-group oriented motivations. Motivation supposedly interacts with the social and cultural climate of origin as well as with the environment where sport programs take place. For instance, those belonging to ethnic minorities might be more oriented toward the reinforcement of their identity and thus tend to interact with those from the same cultural group, or they might prefer a more solitary approach to sport, depending on the context.

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### ***3.3.4 Sport and cultural capital***

Beside the debated benefits of sport in building social capital and in supporting ethnic minorities' deeper engagement into diverse social networks, research has focused on the acquisition of cultural capital through leisure activities. Of course, cultural capital, as it is deeply embedded into social networks, must be considered in association with social capital. For instance, in the context of a closely-knit group, where relationships can be interpreted in terms of bonding social capital, an individual's cultural capital pertains to the need for the maintenance of a group's heritage - traditional practices, roles, institutions [Smith, Spaij, and McDonald 2019]. An elevated social status and a privileged position within the group's power structure is conditional to an individual's heterodoxy and to his/her knowledge and conformity to the group's tradition. Within this context, cultural capital is clearly an expression of mastery and memory of a single body of culture. On the opposite side, in a globalized community where interpersonal ties are much looser, diverse, and defined by bridging social capital, cultural capital can be indicated by an individual's cultural voracity and multiple cultural proficiencies; privileged statuses are available to those who are capable of mastering different languages, habits, practices,

necessary for the maintenance of large and much culturally diverse social networks. Thus, it is clear how cultural capital, as other forms of relational capital in Bourdieu's theory, is a sociological category or, rather, a sociological object of which we define the shape rather than the contents.

What concerns us here, however, is the access to cultural capital in the context of migrants' integration into a foreign society and, specifically, how sport can contribute to it. In other terms, we have to understand how a person, partially or completely, socialised in a different culture can acquire the necessary relational resources for its social inclusion into a foreign community. For those born within the symbolic boundaries of a community, the processes defined as primary (parental) and secondary (institutional) socialization are usually able to provide them what is needed to understand and enact that community's culture. Migrants instead have to gradually get familiar with the new society's cultural life in order to be actively included in it, which means, in analytical terms, to acquire that community' cultural capital, consisting of material and symbolic goods, habits, ways of life, languages, dietary and aesthetical practices, and so on. The acquisition of a certain degree of 'proficiency' with a foreign culture is a necessary condition (without implying causation) for further and deeper engagements with a society's economic, political, and civic life<sup>22</sup>.

The same reflections can be applied by considering sport as a cultural practice and by considering the variations among the cultural representation of sport. Renson [2004] describes these cultural differences with the term «ludodiversity» that refers to the variation among all movement cultures and movement expressions and their respective subfields such as: games, sports, physical exercises, dance and acrobatic performances.

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The process of individuals' acquisition of traits from a culture different from that of origin has been defined, at least within this strand of research, mainly in terms of 'acculturation' [O'Driscoll et al., 2014; Anger and Stran, 2008; Spaaij, 2012; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer, 2020], identified as a "process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact" [Elbe et al. 2016: 2] between autonomous cultural systems [Lee and Funk 2011]. Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald [2019] showed how this theoretical framework is commonly employed in the field. Different contributions, drawing from Berry's [1997] argument, have synthesized the main outcomes of an individual's acculturation into four modes [Lee and Funk 2011; Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019: 8]: assimilation, or the absorption of a foreign culture at the cost of heritage; integration, or the maintenance of heritage and the acquisition of a foreign culture's traits; separation, or the maintenance of heritage at the cost of a marginal condition in a foreign country's cultural life; and marginalisation, the loss of one's cultural heritage and a condition of marginality within the foreign culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Leisure activities embody and enact a society's philosophical, moral, and aesthetical order [which has been argued at least since Huizinga's contribution; 1938]. It is then to expect leisure and physical activities such as sports to be places for migrants' understanding of a foreign's country cultural life and, therefore, for the development of the species of cultural capital necessary to live in that community [Lee and Funk 2011]. For this reason, sport is frequently associated with acculturation in particular integration and, on the other hand, assimilation [Checa et al. 2013].

Integration is then one of the possible results of intercultural contact, a modality that has to be associated with multiple belongings and complex identities due to the participation of a subject to many cultural spheres<sup>23</sup>. A migrant, not considering rare cases of total and selective removal of the past, will always remember what life once was in his/her country of origin. We can expect, then, that an everlasting tension is going to persist between the past and the ongoing present in the new community. It follows that integration is never accomplished but it is forever desired. Leisure, and play time in general, can be seen, due to its separateness from the ordinary life course, as a privileged field where to manage inner tensions originating from contrasting feelings of belonging [Lee and Funk 2011].

First of all, recreational activities are seen as most immediate means to introduce cultural minorities into the dynamics of the broader social life [Lee and Funk 2011; Tuchel et al 2020] or, under different conditions, by becoming spaces for the enactment of their original culture, have the potential to offer a temporary suspension from the cultural tension experienced by being in a foreign country [Lewis 2010]. Sport is usually presented as a place for intercultural dialogue and the mutual recognition of diversity [Tuchel et al. 2020]<sup>24</sup>.

However, preexistent cultural capital can be a factor of exclusion from sport, since the body and its expressivity (especially females') is differently interpreted across cultures [Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019]. Physical activities can also be associated with the foreign culture and, thus, avoided as threats to a person's identity and heritage, in some cases, more valued than the desire to become part of a new country [Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019; Lee and Funk 2011]. Because of this inhibiting potential of sport, it is particularly relevant to understand participants' cultural needs and adapt leisure activities accordingly.

In the field of physical and leisure activities there is potential for both the re-enactment of migrant-specific cultural capitals and the establishment of new, integrative, forms of culture originating from the interaction between autochthonous and foreign traditions [Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019]. In particular, Lewis [2010], discussing refugees community events, stated that the reproduction of traditional cultural practices in a different context is a stage where familiar and novel forms blend. Thus, even if the reproduction of ethnic minority cultural capital might appear as a prelude to the constitution of parallel cultures within a society, it is likely that a foreign country's cultural traits and peculiarities are often included into these processes and events. If we understand cultural practices as performative acts, it can be hypothesized that their enactment is modulated in regards to those who witness it - i.e. the dominant culture

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<sup>23</sup> As we have discussed above (cfr. 3.1), integration is a long-term event which, more than an outcome or a state of things toward which we can progress, should be intended as an ever-ongoing process that has no end.

<sup>24</sup> In particular, sport has proved to be a privileged means for the acquisition of verbal and paraverbal linguistic codes because leisure activities have the capacity to bring together participants from different social strata and ethnicities [Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer, 2020; Schailée, Haudenhuyse and Bradt, 2019; Elbe et al., 2016; Bloch and Gibbs 2017; Lewis 2010]. For instance, Elbe et al. [2016], drawing from empirical evidence, argued about sport capacity to cultivate integration by mediating cultural minorities' contacts with the dominant culture. It has also been discussed that physical activities can facilitate a deeper interconnection between distant groups by providing a fictional and limited in time, common goal capable of bonding together different people [Tuchel et al. 2020; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019].

members. Thus, the reproduction of cultural practices can indirectly promote integration [Lewis 2010; Krouwel et al. 2006]. By reinforcing ethnic identities there is the possibility of more equal and aware cultural exchanges which are the prerequisites of integration and multi-ethnic identities and societies [Anger and Stran 2008].

As Vermeulen and Verweel [2009] argued, sport can also become an opportunity to display and enact an individual's belonging to a different group and cultural identity. Games and leisure activities in general have to be intended as ritualized practices where there is a margin for a participant's free initiative and creativity. Within the institutionalized framework of sport (that is, rules and expectations about behaviours), participants can, and will, interpret a part and show others, intentionally or not, their specific traits and peculiarities. Thus, physical activities can be a privileged field where to show an otherwise-hidden cultural identity, or to valorize an aspect of one's culture. Of course, the opposite is also implied. Sport, particularly in multiethnic contexts, can be informed by stereotypes and prejudices, a manifestation of latent imagined boundaries between confronting cultures [Vermeulen and Verweel 2009]. Physical and leisure activities, and in general any kind of human activity, is a stage for the representation of a community's moral, metaphysical and political order. Therefore, sport can be a means to reinstate identitarian borders and conflictual inter-group relationships. Discrimination and various degrees of tension, from symbolic to physical aggression, are legitimated in sports and leisure activities, and thus such events might become means for the social exclusion or the reinforcement of material and symbolical cleavages [Spaaij, 2012; Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer, 2020; Krouwel et al., 2006; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij, 2017]. On the same negative note, there is also the possibility of the removal and substitution of original cultural practices and resources with foreign ones. Sport can be a means for assimilation instead of integration [Lee and Funk 2011].

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There are of course a series of methodological and theoretical issues regarding sport's potential to benefit migrants' and refugees' integration. In particular, it appears to be lacking a more systematic understanding of how leisure activities can indeed contribute to a complex and gradual process such as integration, which involves many spheres of an individual's life, starting from its interior life [Elbe et al. 2016]. On top of that, integration remains a sociological category and thus it must always be specified within what social network or context a subject is being integrated into. Moreover, integration can be partial (to be successfully included within the economic life but not in other fields), temporary (to be successfully included within the community as long as I participate in the economic life), and locally defined (to be successfully included within the community because of that community's predisposition). It is then complicated to frame it exclusively as an outcome or a state of things. Therefore, sport per se is not univocally a means for social integration and cross-cultural dialogue, but rather a neutral field that might constitute a possibility to have otherwise-limited contacts (Nowy, Feiler, and Breuer, 2020).

### 3.4 Enabling conditions to support social inclusion via sport

A non-majority part of the literature examined focuses not so much on the social effects of sport, as on the conditions necessary for these effects to unfold. This in-depth line seems to give an answer to Coalter's objection [2008: 25] "But if it works, how does it work?". According to the English scholar, it is necessary to open the black box of social interventions based on sport, looking for its functioning mechanisms. It is an explicitly indebted perspective of analysis of the elaborations of Ray Pawson and Carol Weiss with respect to realistic evaluation and theory driven evaluation. In practice, the attention shifts from "why" an intervention works, to "how" it works. As Coalter himself points out [2008: 164-169] it is not a question of changing the study methodology but of applying a logic of inquiry that is interested in the procedural dimension of social dynamics and not in a comparison between two snapshots. By analogy, it is therefore necessary to switch "from fuzzy snapshots to clear videos".

#### 3.4.1 *Reflexive coaching*

The ability of coaches and volunteers in establishing positive and supportive relationships with participants is deemed as one of the main critical factors contributing to those improvements [Hermes *et al.* 2017]. In particular, Van der Veken, Lauwerier, and Willems [2020] argued about the benefits to the feeling of self-efficacy that 'motivational coaching' (i.e. to develop a non-competitive environment and to encourage participants) brings forth; coaching attitudes contribute to provide a positive climate for vulnerable people to feel successful in a meaningful activity [Haudenhuyse, Theeboom Skille 2014; Morgan, Parker, and Roberts 2019]. Specifically, a supportive style was characterized by coaches' non-controlling behaviours and their predisposition to allow participants to autonomously decide how to take part in the activities [Elbe *et al.* 2016]. Reflexive and supportive coaching is even more relevant in an informal context where participants drop-outs are frequent, and it is thus complicated to establish other types of coach-player relations [Tuchel *et al.* 2020]. On top of that, in situations where people are not necessarily familiar with the local language or with a sport's rules, more structured and normative coaching styles might discourage instances of self-organization and creativity that might have as a result the constitution of a concerted communicative framework.

These general indications can be deepened by examining more in detail some empirical contributions that address the theme of styles of coaching in a specific way. The assumption adopted by these studies is that the coach is a key player in suggesting a motivational environment where positive experiences are made. Tim Crabbe [2007], referring to a case study carried out within the sporting interventions of the Positive Future Foundation in Liverpool, argues that there is no archetype of 'community sports coach', but a series of roles embodying certain characters that are to be used according to the context: the 'boss', 'buddy', 'teacher', 'joker', 'cool dude', 'geezer' and 'expert' are characters that recall precise personal characteristics,

so that the corresponding style of coaching must be implemented by subjects with personal characteristics consistent with the chosen character: for example, the geezer, in the collective imagination, is a middle-age working class man. While affirming the situational connotation of coaching, Crabbe identifies some elements that, in a transversal way, favor the creation of stable and effective support relationships.

The first element is authority. In addition to reiterating the need to avoid coercive power and a manipulative authority relationship, the author focuses on the cultural capital of the coach, that is, on the credibility and authenticity of the person. The role of cultural capital is also highlighted by other scholars. Haudenhuyse, Theeboom and Coalter [2012], during the analysis of a boxing program aimed at young people from the Limburg region in Belgium, report that the head coach in charge of managing the program was of immigrant descent, from one of the former mine areas and an Olympic boxer. This gave him both authenticity and authority, which in turn also transferred to other coaches who had trained under him. The credibility of a sports background, according to Crabbe, is reinforced by the styles of delivery of the project operators and the coach himself. A passage from the author's ethnographic notes helps to understand the question [Crabbe 2007: 33-34]:

Dressed in her usual kit of tracksuit bottoms and hoodie, Gemma who has just turned 21, is keen to show off her 'dead cool' new trainers. She bounces around, calling everyone 'dude', telling people that they are 'gnarly'. Much to the group's delight, sharing transport with her means having to listen to Britney and as they get off the bus and wait for the session to begin, they chat with her about their plans for the evening, some give her a hug and urge her to play.

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Gemma's coaching style is effective in several aspects: she is dressed and behaves and speaks like any other girl in the group, she thinks like everyone about what to do on Saturday evening. As stated by Haudenhuyse, Theeboom and Coalter [2012: 450]: "coaching practice that is not based on abstract ideas about pro-social or positive development through sports, but rather starts from young people's concrete needs and life situations". The sport coach must also be a youth worker [Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, Skille 2014] since the use of different social roles facilitates the reduction of the distance between professionals and participants. Crabbe [2007: 34] goes even further by noting the need for no fixed disciplinary regimes and, more generally, for non-judgmental frameworks. The coach and his collaborators must be able to read and adapt their behavior to the different social realities of participants. The main challenge of reflexive coaching with vulnerable people is to "translate" their ways of living and thinking into their "own" language.

However, there is another level of interaction that a sport professional must manage: as indicated by Haudenhuyse, Theeboom Coalter [2012]: the coach must not only be aware of the dynamics of the group (passive role), but must also be able to put in motion positive group processes (active role). As Crabbe states [2007: 36], when the coach manages to understand people's needs using their language and their socio-cultural reference system, he acts as a sort

of cultural intermediary; s/he translates indications expressed by the promoters of the sports program within a context in which actors do not speak the programming language. However, this operation is not without problems and misunderstandings, since there may be a reality gap between project managers who drive initiatives at the local level, and those who deliver and are the 'subjects' of them. This is what one of the coaches interviewed by Crabbe says in his study [2007: 37]:

They [*Managers*] want sessions that meet targets. We try to explain to the kids that doing this and that will get them a certificate, but it's impossible to do some of the stuff they ask us to... Some of them have done the minimum amounts of practical work and then they're making policy, setting targets.

This summary examines the implications of coaching in problematic social contexts and highlights the interdependence of different dimensions: the coach, in addition to technical work, needs to keep under control inter-personal dynamics, organizational aspects, and the extra-sporting dimension<sup>25</sup>. The reflexive coaching category tries to capture the multiplicity of situations and social dynamics with which sports professionals must confront. The continuous problematization of one's approach to people and the retrospective analysis of one's choices and behaviors are necessary and crucial practices for those who operate in socially problematic sports contexts<sup>26</sup>.

### **3.4.2 *Creating a welcoming environment and choosing the right sport model***

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Directly related to the role of trainers and coaches is the ecological climate where sport activities take place. It is often suggested that the environment must be 'welcoming'. A welcoming environment is not characterized only by obvious connotations of hospitality, listening ability and respect. With this specification, some authors indicate the need to "generate a climate in which socially vulnerable youth have a chance to experience feelings of success" [Haudenhuysse, Theeboom, Coalter 2012: 443]. As already mentioned, people who live in conditions of social vulnerability (more or less young, natives or immigrants) can be subject to the pressure of an environment in which they are asked to compete<sup>27</sup>: the fear of failure, the sense of physical inadequacy and psychological factors can be stressors that affect the effectiveness of the sports intervention. This is not the same as saying that competition must be completely

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<sup>25</sup> In addition to balancing the general needs of the sports program with attention to the needs of participants, the most complex challenge for a coach who is also a social worker is teaching to athletes how life skills transfer to non-sport settings [Camiré et al. 2011]. If sport is to have a broad social impact, the coach must take into consideration the social context in which he operates, trying to support vulnerable people also in their extra-sport life.

<sup>26</sup> Recently, the scientific debate on reflexive coaching has become wider, to the point that a monographic volume of the magazine *Sport Management Review* has also been dedicated to reflective methodologies in sports management [Rich, Misener 2017; Cooper, Grenier, Macaulay 2017; Sherry et al. 2017].

<sup>27</sup> Korisk et al. [2013] propose guidelines on how to implement sport in refugee camps, see also Ha, Lyras, 2013; DKJS 2017 and 2019.

excluded, but that it should be reserved for subjects who appear capable of supporting its implications. In the analysis of a boxing youth sports program, Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, Coalter [2012: 446] formulate some considerations that problematise, but do not exclude, the creation of a competitive sports environment:

Competition was of secondary importance in the boxing initiative. The coaches viewed competition as an inevitable spill-over-effect that required a proper place within the organisation. The head coach expressed that the perception of having the possibility to become a competitive boxer, without necessarily pursuing this, provided an important drive for participating youth. Furthermore, the head coach felt that competition has a specific role in building competitive boxers who then function as role models and peer leaders. Talented and dedicated boxers needed to be given opportunities to pursue their ambitions. If such opportunities were not provided, it was felt that good boxers would leave and this would be to the detriment of the programme.

In defining the sport model, the characteristics of the coach and his "sporting capital" must also be taken into account. Crabbe [2007], in fact, says that the professional sportsman's background communicates a strong sporting expertise. However, this does not translate into a demand towards participants of a high level of technical or athletic performance, but in the search for recreational and sporting situations in which fun and involvement prevail. At least at an early stage, when participants have not yet had the opportunity to find out if they prefer competitive sport, it is preferable to encourage the willingness to play for the sake of it rather than for competition:

young people are not viewed as assets to be developed into sports talents, but as young people who need to be supported in their broad development via their voluntary engagement. In other words, there is no fixed normative trajectory from recreational participation to professional competition. Because of the primary focus is on working with youth the path towards developing sports specific skill inevitably took longer.

In this respect, a distinction is made between mastery and performance motivational climate [Elbe *et al.*, 2016; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, Skille 2014; Schailleé, Theeboom, Van Cauwenberg 2017]. In a mastery motivational climate, where the focus is on individual skills development, participants take themselves as a point of reference to compare their performances over time. In a performance motivational climate, where the focus is on individual ability, participants use fellow participants as reference to compare their own performances [Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014]. The former was found to support learning and participants' sociability and engagement [Elbe *et al.*, 2016] while the latter can be behind episodes of competition and aggression [Spaaij 2012], enactment of stereotypes and even various degrees of racism [Kilvington 2013].

Always deepening the role of the sport model, it should be noted that in literature there is no agreement with respect to the alleged contrast between traditional sports activities (with their rules and conventions) and alternative sports activities (aimed at promoting positive

psycho-social dynamics). The choice between one and the other depends on the context and the type of people with whom you are working: for homeless people playing a football tournament can be stressful; among young people, organizing activities that are not supervised by adults can replicate the oppression and exclusion of children and girls. As specified by Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, Skille [2014: 147]:

traditional organized sport provision models will not necessarily, by definition, instigate processes of exclusion or aggravate social vulnerability. Neither do alternative sport programmes automatically provide inclusion mechanisms. The direct outcome of this non-traditional sport provision system was that girls and younger boys were largely being excluded from the self-organized activities. As lack of adult control was the main culprit, activities primarily comprising peer participants, compared to those involving family members or other adults, may have negative effect on social bonding processes for socially vulnerable youth

An integral part of the sport model are also the organizational methods, the duration and intensity of the activities [Bloch, Gibbs 2017]. Sport activities aimed at supporting vulnerable groups in terms of social inclusion are implemented in different manners for what concerns their duration, continuity in time, contents, and follow-ups. For instance, McDonald, Spaaij, and Dukic [2018: 2] noted how usual modes of participation ranged from short-term programs to the integration into professional sport clubs. Evaluating several sport-for-development programmes, Coalter [2013] concluded that the critical success factors are the long-term, intense and in-depth relationships between participants and staff, and the provision of a safe and supportive environment. Similarly, Hermens *et al.* [2015] highlight that short-term activities may not create significant and lasting inter-personal relationships.

Another relevant condition is, according to Tuchel et al. [2020]: the structure, vocation, and potential of voluntary sport organizations, which are the most common actors active in the field of sport for development and social inclusion. Their contribution provided a synthesis of the main factors to be observed for the diversification of these programs. For instance, sport practices can be divided according to six categories [Tuchel et al. 2020: 18]: occurrence; distance; goal of the training; participants' commitment to the organization; bonding between participant and trainer; engagement of social workers; interaction with regular club members; a difference is also made between activities outside and inside the organization's facilities. Various sport programs can be interpreted by these characteristics, ranging from rotating sport activities hosted in different places and addressed at a mixed audience, to mono-ethnicity football training to be experienced in a fixed place. What seems to be especially relevant, in light of what we discussed so far, is the goal of the training and the trainer involvement. The former characteristic has to be understood as a spectrum measuring intensity: casual playing and sport for fun; sport basics; structured training; regular training. The latter instead is associated with what we analyzed above, in particular a coach's sportive capital, charisma, teaching style, and attitude.

By concluding the examination of the factors relating to the climate and the sport model, one cannot help recalling what has already been set out above (see 3.3) with respect to the distinction between ethnically mixed and separate, mono-ethnic, clubs and sport programs. As previously stated, the distinction between ethnically mixed and mono-ethnic environments is relevant in the context of the analysis of the forms of social capital (bridging or bonding) created through sports. Studies show that the ethnic composition of the sports environment is not particularly relevant as migrants accumulate both forms of social capital in one as in the other context [Vermeulen, Verweel 2009; Theeboom, Schailleé, Nols 2012]. Compared to how to build a welcoming sports environment, however, it must be remembered that people do sports not to accumulate social capital:

Social integration is not a motive for people to join a sports club. If people are asked why they have joined, they list such motivations as physical relaxation, social contact, sporting achievement, condition, fitness and so forth. The fact that their club membership may contribute to social integration is a pleasant circumstance: a side-effect that is unintended, though nonetheless positive. [Janssens, Verweel 2014: 54]

In terms of creating a sports environment and adopting a sport model appropriate to people's needs, it is important that inter-ethnic relations do not negatively influence people's experience. The more or less explicit forms of racism, as well as micro-aggressions with an ethnic background, must be carefully controlled and discouraged. In this respect, it should not be overlooked the overall societal climate regarding migrants and their inclusion into a community's life [Elbe *et al.* 2016; Smith, Spaaij, McDonald 2019]. As already stated, sports environments are not separate spaces from external society, but on the contrary they can be places where the forms of discrimination and prejudice experienced by people in the extra-sporting social space are replicated and reinforced. In particular, it appears relevant to avoid a "normalizing gaze" in sports environments [Blackshaw, Crabbe 2004] which violates the color-blind code.

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### **3.4.3 Gender sensitivity**

Leisure activities, in particular sport activities, play a double role within social inclusion policy. On the one hand sport participation have been considered like a mean of inclusion for marginalized groups like ethnic minority groups who live in segregated neighborhood: through involvement and participation of those groups in physical activities it becomes possible to improve not only individual psychophysical wellbeing, but also to broaden bridging and bonding social connections. At the same time though, many studies criticize the supposed "neutrality" of sport and highlight the role it may play in the reproduction of discrimination and differences. Sport is often been considered as a neutral mean free of any symbolic or cultural meaning, instead it may strengthen mechanism of social exclusion.

Within this framework, some scholars describe female participation in sport as a critical issue that represents a challenge also for policy makers which activate sport-based programs for inclusion. In particular, one of the main problems related to sport-based programs for refugees, asylum seekers and people with migrant backgrounds is the lack of women's involvement in sport activities. In fact, many studies trace this absence as one of the most evident difficulties of sport-based inclusion programs and identify the primary causes of these difficulties in some intrapersonal factors like cultural issues [Anderson et al. 2019]. An explanation can be found in considering gender relations within sports sphere as power relations that are connected with practices from other social spheres, such as the home or school environment, and that can influence the structure and the culture of sports organizations [Hargreaves, 1994].

It is possible to identify two main ways in which cultural factors affect women's participation in sports [Spaaij *et al.* 2014]. First, some cultural characteristics that distinguish competitive sports can lead to the exclusion of groups that do not reflect these standards. The dominant sporting culture tends to exclude all those who do not fall within the physical and character parameters recognized as "normal" considering normative social images. Sport-based activities in social inclusion programs are designed thinking on the participation of men, young, physically able, Western and heterosexuals, reflecting the male dominant culture in sport and excluding those who doesn't fit in that standard [Elling and Knoppers, 2005]. In this sense, women are seen as weaker and not suitable for some types of "male" sports, for example.

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The second type of obstacle can instead be found in the cultural customs of some social groups, which evaluate women's sport participation as inadequate for their members. In fact, a further element that emerges from the analysis of the relationship between gender and sport concerns the lower participation in sports activities of women belonging to ethnic minority groups. Gender asymmetries in sport are further complicated by the belonging of individuals to ethnic groups and, at the same time, the risk is to simplify and attribute stereotyped behaviors based on gender, age and ethno-cultural background to individual members of marginalized groups and to construct policies on the basis of these assumptions. The racialized girls/women undergo a double stereotyping based on gender and cultural/ethnic belonging and end up being "portrayed as subjugated by cultural norms and rules as well as by gendered notions of introversion and passivity" [Ekholm *et al.* 2019].

To avoid this risk, it is necessary to analyze the multiple realities of women's lives [Hargreaves, 1994], taking into account the "intersecting social relations, social cultural norms and images, and, the complexity and paradoxical nature of processes and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion" [Elling and Knoppers, 2005].

## 4. DISCUSSION

The review of the scientific documentation presented in these pages raises some relevant questions both in terms of analysis of the forms of social inclusion of migrants, in conditions of spatial and relational confinement, and with respect to the implementation methods of the SIMCAS project. In this final section of the report we will try to connect the acquisitions of the scientific literature with some indications relating to the subsequent phases of the project. First of all, it is necessary to summarize the main areas on which recent scientific production focuses, also highlighting some gaps with respect to the conceptualization needs of the SIMCAS objectives.

### **Integration as a too fuzzy concept**

The literature review allowed to show a rich heterogeneity of theoretical frameworks, approaches, definitions, dimensions, and classifications. Social integration of migrants is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which can be analysed on different levels. Migration studies favour general reconstructions, looking for systematization and classification. Refugee studies are a sub-field of study which keeps a structural approach, although oriented towards micro-dynamics of social integration. Generally speaking, it stands out that not much attention is paid to the processual dimension: integration unfolds during time, it is made of phases, stages, turning points. With regard to SIMCAS project objectives, it has to be noted that sport, leisure activities, and in general informal spaces of socialisation are important factors, especially in the first phase, when migrant people need to establish new social ties (friendship, professional, sentimental). Narrow sociality, which mostly takes place in family or ethnic networks, can affect the capacity of starting well-structured paths of social inclusion: the functionalist idea according to which immigrants fulfil their migratory project through economic integration, finding a job, is quite simplistic and limited. These considerations are even more valuable if referred to people living in segregated environments, socially separated, in which socialisation opportunities are limited. Inside the SIMCAS project framework, it appears necessary to define sport as a minimal form of social inclusion, just the first step of a path which needs to encompass other stages.

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### **The missing nexus between social capital circulation and social inclusion**

The scientific literature taken into account emphasizes the capacity of sport to produce social capital. Most of the essays analysed refer to Putnam's [2000] framework, based on the opposition between bridging and bonding social capital. Many studies highlight that the traditional social capital theory only works partially when applied to sport environments. Ethnically mixed environments, in which mostly bridging social capital

should circulate, not always carry out this function; on the contrary, ethnic sport environments not always act as bonding, as expected by the social capital theory applied to dynamics of social integration of migrants. Anyway, these contradictory results do not undermine the theoretical assumption by which sport is a vehicle of social inclusion. This tendency shows a one-dimensional analysis, stemming from an exclusively descriptive approach to social capital. It is symptomatic that few of the essays we examined cite the influential Alejandro Portes' [1998] article about the use of the concept in contemporary sociology, and just two of them took into account another often-cited work by Portes and Landolt [2000]. Portes introduces a crucial distinction in order to comprehend how social capital functions, in every context it originates and circulates. It is possible to distinguish between two forms of social capital, both useful for getting benefits through networks [Portes, Landolt 2000: 534]. The first one is of an altruistic nature, based on the introjection of values and limited solidarity; the second one is instrumental, composed of simple reciprocity and enforceable trust. Altruistic social capital acts at the inter-individual level, while instrumental social capital acts at the collective level - that of institutions and local communities. This last clarification is crucial since it stresses the fact that social ties created in sport environments, however they may be strongly altruistic, do not necessarily favour social inclusion, especially if we are talking about people living in serious conditions of marginality. This is due to the fact that social capital can mobilise existing resources inside networks, but it cannot produce new resources [Portes, Landolt 2000: 546-547]:

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it [*social capital*] consists of the ability to marshal resources through social networks, not the resources themselves. When the latter are poor and scarce, the goal achievement capacity of a collectivity is restricted, no matter how strong its internal bonds. This is another way of saying that, contrary to the expectations of some policy-makers, social capital is not a substitute for the provision of credit, material infrastructure, and education. What social capital can do is to increase the 'yield' of such resources by reinforcing them with the voluntary efforts of participants and their monitoring capacity to prevent malfeasance.

According to another well known conceptualisation of social capital [Granovetter 1973; 1983], strong ties are not able to modify the conditions of social exclusion when available resources are scarce. More extended networks are needed to come out from social marginality - those based on weak ties which can access resources that are necessary to favour social inclusion.

### **Over-determination of social effects of sport**

Sport surely is a powerful vehicle of socialisation. However, the literature shows a transverse tendency, compared to other disciplines, in overestimating social effects directly caused by sport. This tendency is especially evident in studies regarding sport

as a means of social inclusion: basically, sport would be able to contrast a wide range of exclusion situations, giving people opportunities for autonomy and emancipation. This perspective is simplistic, mainly because sport is a socialisation environment where positive interpersonal dynamics can be favoured and supported; but this entirely different from saying that sport per se produces socialisation outcomes. Jay Coakley explains this very clearly [2017: 68]:

Today most of us in the sociology of sport view sports as sites for socialization experiences, rather than the causes of specific socialization outcomes. This is an important distinction that highlights two things. First, sports are social locations rich in their potential for providing memorable and meaningful personal, social, and cultural experiences. Second, sports by themselves do not cause particular changes in the character traits, attitudes, and actions of athletes or spectators. Therefore, when positive or negative socialization outcomes occur in connection with sports, we don't simply say that sports caused them. Instead, we view sports as sites where people have potentially influential experiences and then we look for and try to understand the relationships and social processes through which particular forms of socialization occur.

In the second place, thinking that sport autonomously produces social effects (both positive or negative ones), implies imaging that sport environments are independent from the extra-sport dimension and that social structures, institutional, political and economical factors, culture and common sense do not influence its internal dynamics. On the contrary, sport is an open environment in which most social dynamics can be replicated. Taking these general critics into the context of social inclusion processes of marginalised people, we can agree with Haudenhuyse, Theeboom and Coalter's point of view [2012: 450]. They state that if individual agency is too much emphasized there's a risk of de-socialising their vulnerability. In sport environments people can have valuable and significant experiences, but it is not conceivable that they would overcome the socio-economic barriers in which they are confined thanks to sport. A vulnerable person's agency, however, revitalised by sport, inevitably lacks resources [Coalter, Taylor 2010]. There is, finally, the fact that for many sport-based projects the definition of the expected objectives is vague or too general. This vagueness makes difficult to assess the real impact of the interventions against specific and informative criteria of evaluation. In addition, there is also a problem with the monitoring and evaluation systems that, often, are not evidence-based and theory-driven.

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### **The under-specification of enabling factors role**

Following some influential critical studies on the power of sport (above all those by Fred Coalter), a new field of research has recently been created which addresses the factors favouring positive effects of sport on social marginality situations. In the current study we identified three main areas of interest (cfr. 3.6):

- the coach as a cultural intermediary which, thanks to a continuous problematization of his/her role, adopts vulnerable people's perspective and creates the conditions necessary to positive social outcomes;
- the making of welcoming, non-normative and sensitive to cultural and social diversity sport environments; at the same time, these should be able to canalise sport activities into stable interventions which adopt a sport model fitting people's real needs;
- a specific attention to gender issues, at every organisational level, able to deconstruct the mainstream male-oriented sport culture, also considering intersectional discriminations.

The reflection about enabling factors, however advanced, is not yet adequately widespread: most of the scientific research in this field comes from specific areas, especially British sociology of sport, with some significant examples from Belgium and The Netherlands. Besides the substantial value of studies on enabling factors, it has to be said that when these factors are adequately taken care of, they succeed in creating the basic conditions for starting effective social inclusion processes. Even the best sport program cannot eliminate structural factors of marginality: once again, individual agency and empowerment may not be sufficient without structural interventions addressing socio-economical barriers.

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Besides already discussed issues, the literature analysis shows two serious thematic gaps, in our view. The first one is the scarce academic attention paid to sport programs in prisons. The systematic research did not lead to pertinent results and throughout the literature reviewed detainees were not even mentioned in passing.

Likewise, no studies were found about Roma communities, probably the social group suffering the most harsh forms of social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination [FRA 2017]. We made an extra research focused on this last topic on Google Scholar, using quite general keywords ("Roma people" + "Sport"). Few results were relevant, and limiting the search to the last 10 years we found just two articles specifically addressing the issue of social inclusion of Roma people through sport [Földesi 2010; Faragó, Béki 2015]. We also found some documents in which sport is considered just one among various other measures of social inclusion, but with an ancillary role in relation to education and work. Anyway it was mostly grey literature (best practices collections, intervention toolkits, policy papers), not always in English.

It is clear that, at the academic level, social inclusion of Roma via sport is not a relevant topic. This is due to the fact that romani studies is an autonomous research field, mostly focused on identity and discriminations. A most recent bibliometric study [Ioannoni et al. 2020] analysed the scientific literature since 1998 about Roma people and travelers, identifying three thematic clusters: "History and Culture", "Education", "Discrimination and Policy". In the last two, those more semantically close to our interests, the keyword "sport" never appears.

A focused literature research on social inclusion of detainees through sport led to wider results. In particular, Rosie Meek's studies [2014; 2020; Meek, Lewis 2014; Baumer, Meek 2018] are quite relevant. In one of the few books explicitly addressing sport in prisons [Meek 2014], she argues that, in general, sport can provide detainees with skills and knowledge to help them desist from crime, even developing social networks outside the prison (e.g. with volunteers and coaches). Nevertheless, Meek points out that physical activities in prison may be dangerous, especially if poorly delivered or supervised. Following Meek's perspective, other scholars [Gallant, Sherry, Nicholson 2015] observed that sport programs in prisons have two functions: on one side, recreation, stress reduction and internal conflict management; on the other, rehabilitation and prevention of recidivism. In some contexts, however, especially in overcrowded ones, the necessity of managing the climate of the prison may prevail, so putting aside rehabilitative aims.

Although Roma people and inmates are not particularly relevant subjects to this bibliographic review, we believe that this result is due to separations between disciplinary fields and specialisation of some sectors of sport and migration studies. Among the objectives of the SIMCAS project there is the construction of a methodology for social inclusion of people with a migrant background living in conditions of spatial and socio-economic exclusion. In prisons, as is known, the prevalence of migrants is very high. Likewise, formal or informal settlements where Roma people live are strongly mono-ethnic and segregated environments. To our view, it is necessary to consider critical areas as a continuum of social exclusion, encompassing prisons as much as "Roma camps". We believe that sport, however non determinant with regard to marginality conditions in these contexts, can offer a basic support to the social inclusion of people living there.

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## 5. TAKING SPORT SERIOUSLY: FINAL REMARKS

A substantial part of the consulted literature places sport within a wide theoretical framework: the dynamics of social inclusion, the cultural change impressed by migratory flows, the circulation of social capital. In doing so, sport tends to lose its specificity: it is no coincidence that many studies place sport and leisure on the same level. Sports environments, however, are not only socializing spaces, but have specific characteristics, only partially considered in the literature. For example, there is little attention to different disciplines: in particular, the distinction between team sports and individual sports does not appear sufficiently focused. Furthermore, only a few studies consider the organizational dimension of sports environments and the role of the staff: reflexive coaching is only one component of training techniques and social animation through sport. For example, only in rare cases is reference to issues of sports technique. Finally, one of the major limitations is the attention to the socio-cultural context. In many studies, reference to the context is limited or superficial: many scholars analyze sports

programs carried out in deprived neighborhoods of large cities; however the social context is often presented in a summary way, without delving into its fundamental components. Sport therefore becomes a sort of separate environment, impervious to the context. This is a great limit for the SIMCAS project, since the design idea involves the development of a model of intervention calibrated on the context: critical areas are generic social environments, but also contexts with peculiar characteristics that need to be clarified.

For the SIMCAS project it is necessary to overcome these limits in the next research actions. In other words, it is necessary to *take sport seriously* and enter into the social mechanisms that are activated within a sporting environment. In particular, the elements to be studied are:

- specific characteristics of the main sports disciplines practiced in social inclusion programs through sport;
- psychological, relational and social implications of the various sport models, in particular by articulating the contrast between traditional and alternative sport models;
- the function of the coach and in general of the staff involved in the intervention, trying to connect the dimension of the sports technique with the sensitivity towards social and cultural dynamics experienced by participants;
- the role of contextual and environmental factors, highlighting how the extra-sporting dimension affects internal dynamics and especially considering environments such as prison and Roma camps.

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