Escaping the position as ‘other’

a postcolonial perspective on refugees’ trajectories into volunteering in Danish sports clubs

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The influx of refugees into Europe around 2015 has led to increasingly restrictive immigration policies and a rising political interest in using sport to promote such newcomers' state of health and integration into European communities. This perspective is echoed in both research and programmes that are often one-sided in focusing on refugees' sports participation in the receiving context, while their former experiences and specific interests in sport and physical activity are often neglected. Contributing with transnational and postcolonial perspectives, this article is based on a series of life history interviews with four newly arrived refugees who have taken up roles as volunteers in sports clubs in Denmark. Such trajectories are identified as bearing on their homeland experiences, while taking up volunteering also appears as an escape from their current position as 'Others'. Further, we discuss how newcomers may challenge dominant discourses on sports-specific volunteering and develop new hybrid forms of civic involvement.

Keywords: migration; refugees; physical activity, life history; narrative analysis

Introduction

In the wake of the influx of refugees and migrants into Europe in the years around 2015, West European countries began not only to develop more restrictive immigration policies but also to introduce more elaborate civic integration policies for those who did manage to gain asylum (Mouritsen, Jensen and Larin 2019). In Denmark, a so-called paradigm shift in immigration policy has led to a greater focus on making asylum seekers self-supporting through language acquisition as well as job training and internships. At present, refugees who gain asylum are equipped with residence permits that are temporary and must be renewed every 1-2 years. To gain permanent residence in Denmark, a number of requirements must be fulfilled, among others legal stay in the

country for eight years, employment for three and a half years and no receiving of certain types of public support within the last four years before applying.[1] Furthermore, refugees must meet two out of four supplementary requirements, and if all four supplementary requirements are fulfilled, they can gain permanent residence after four years rather than eight years. These supplementary requirements include having passed a test in citizenship or having demonstrated active civic participation throughout one year, for instance as a coach, volunteer or board member in local sports clubs.

This novel dimension in Danish immigration policy may be seen to expand the political and public attention to sports participation as a means of becoming integrated into the receiving society (Agergaard 2011, 2018a). New programmes organized by, among others, the Danish Refugee Council are supporting refugees in their efforts to become volunteers in sports clubs. This is novel since many sports programmes involving refugees and migrants have been found to follow the deficit model in which active sports participation is seen as a road to integration while the potential of taking up other roles in sport such as those of volunteers (or fans, managers and reporters) is excluded (Toffoletti and Palmer 2017). However, this novel focus on refugees as volunteers may remain restricted to processes of integrating into sports clubs in the receiving context if attention is not paid to the specific groups of newcomers' former experiences with sport and leisure time physical activity as well as their current interests in and resources for civic engagement.

Elsewhere we have pointed to the relevance of transnational migration theory to not merely focus on sport as a means of furthering immigrants' integration and adaptation processes but also to depart from an understanding of newcomers as transmigrants whose experiences are shaped across nation-state borders (Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995). Hence, transnational perspectives may help us pay attention to the experiences that various types of migrants carry with them and to

the variety of meanings that sport and leisure time physical activity may hold for migrants and their descendants (Agergaard 2018a).

In this article we aim to contribute to the theoretical and methodological development of research in forced migration and sports. We will utilize postcolonial theory as a framework for critically exploring how refugees may be taking up roles as volunteers in sports clubs in Denmark in order to escape initial roles upon arrival as undesired 'Others'. Also continuously informed by transnational migration theory, we will point out how refugees' former experiences have an impact on their roles as volunteers and may eventually result in new hybrid forms of civic involvement. Furthermore, in order to contribute to the methodological development of research into forced migration and sport, we will utilize a research design which may provide insight into refugees' experiences of sport and leisure time physical activity not only in their host societies but also in their homelands. To be more specific, we have conducted a series of life history interviews with four refugees who have gained asylum and a temporary residence permit in Denmark within the last five years. In this period our interviewees have taken up roles as volunteers in sports clubs. We will interpret these unique trajectories with attention being paid not only to the later years, but also to childhood and youth experiences with sport and volunteering.

Our article will start with a brief review of the literature on forced migration and sport with particular attention to studies of refugees' participation in volunteer-based sports clubs.

Former studies of refugees' sports participation

As identified in a recently published review, existing literature has aligned with the current political focus in describing health promotion, integration and social inclusion as goals of

refugees' participation in sport and physical activity (Spaaij et al. 2019). Notwithstanding, existing research often problematizes the great political trust in sports as a panacea for a wide range of social problems, emphasizing that sports are not inclusive *per se* but can also lead to exclusion and, specifically, experiences of discrimination and racism (Spracklen et al. 2015). For instance, studies show how sports clubs' inherent logic and structures, i.e. a strong focus on competition along with organized and formal activities, may clash with the actual needs of refugees (Jeanes et al. 2015). Furthermore, Dowling's (2020) critical discourse analysis centred on a voluntary sports club in Norway showed how the club not only prioritized competition and winning over inclusion and social justice but also framed refugees as a homogenous group of 'dangerous Others', a discourse that 'functioned to limit the number of refugee participants' (Dowling 2020, 1161).

Further, recent research emphasizes that the integration of refugees does not happen automatically (Doidge et al. 2020; Flensner et al. 2020; Michelini et al. 2018; Nowy et al. 2020; Stura 2019; Tuchel et al. 2021). Characteristic of these studies is that they do not only focus on barriers but also on specific enablers that can enhance integration processes in sports clubs. Such an enabler is, for example, a welcoming, safe and supportive environment in which the focus is not on competition but on enjoyment and social interaction (Doidge et al. 2020; Flensner et al. 2020). In addition, scholars depict 'human resources' in the form of dedicated club officials, coaches and other volunteers (Doidge et al. 2020; Flensner et al. 2020) as well as teammates (Stura 2019) 'as the driving force behind implementing offers for refugees' (Michelini et al. 2018, 28). Indeed, Nowy et al. (2020) found that the time spent by core volunteers was more important than financial resources for a club's level of engagement in the process of integrating

refugees. Specifically, migrant club members were found to have a positive influence on the club's engagement (Nowy et al. 2020).

In addition, Block and Gibbs (2017) highlight the central role of volunteers or part-time employees in reaching out to and communicating with young refugees' families (e.g. about expectations of behaviour or attendance at games and training). Notably, the authors reported on a project that used volunteers/employees with a refugee background, which they considered of crucial importance when it came to supporting young refugees' sports participation and integration into multi-ethnic clubs (see also Mohammadi 2019). Taking the perspective of African Australian football coaches with a background as refugees, Luguetti et al. (2020), too, described how such coaches could 'break barriers' and provide support to young people inside and outside of football. What is more, the coaches contributed towards creating a space for sharing personal experiences of social inequality; in this way the programme 'could be a vehicle of disrupting harmful public and media discourses around African Australian refugee-background young people' (Luguetti et al. 2020, 10).

Other pieces of research consider refugees' involvement as volunteers as desirable but difficult to realize. For example, club officials in Stura's (2019) study talked about language barriers and a lack of familiarity with German traditions and culture, which in the club's eyes made it difficult for refugees to volunteer. Likewise, although Michelini et al. (2018) pointed to the relevance of involving people with a refugee background in the organization of sports club activities, they also found that hardly any refugees were volunteering in the clubs under study. Whilst club officials mostly named refugees' uncertain and difficult life situations, including a lack of prioritization for such activities, as potential explanations, Michelini et al. (2018) also argued that mechanisms of social closure impeded the voluntary engagement of refugees.

In sum, previous research has focused on barriers and facilitators for including refugees into sports clubs and enhancing their integration, while also being critical of such approaches (e.g. their implicit focus on assimilation). Furthermore, existing research has mainly focused on refugees as active participants and on 'white' club officials' descriptions of the challenges for refugees to become volunteers (see, however, Luguetti et al. 2020). Adding to the existing literature and in line with Jeanes et al. (2015) as well as Toffoletti and Palmer (2017), we want to move beyond the current focus on sports participation as a means to integration and develop a more encompassing perspective on the processes through which refugees may become volunteers in sports clubs. We will now turn to postcolonial theory, which will help us link our interviewees' experiences with sport and volunteering in their homelands with their experiences upon arrival in Denmark.

Postcolonial theory

Whereas postcolonial or transnational *feminism* has been highlighted as a fruitful approach to study the sport and physical activity experiences of the female 'Other' (Toffoletti and Palmer 2017), 'classical' postcolonial theory, including the concepts of mimicry, hybridity and minority discourse, has only marginally been used within the study of sport and migration issues. Yet such concepts are particularly useful in both remaining critical of dominant discourses surrounding sport and integration and highlighting the agency of refugees in their settlement journeys. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are key contributors to postcolonial theory, which critically explores the discourses legitimizing colonialism and emphasizing the great (and on-going) impact of European colonial rule (Moore-Gilbert 1997).

Central to postcolonial theory is the concept of ethnocentrism, which describes people's tendency to interpret the world based on their own norms and values. Said's (1985) critical term 'Orientalism' refers to Western societies' construction of the non-Western world, 'the Orient', as a homogenous cultural entity, which creates a binary hierarchical relationship between a 'superior' Western self and an 'inferior', 'backward', non-Western 'Other'. One consequence of such colonial discourses about 'the Orient' is that facing Western society can make the 'Others' feel marginalized and lead them to think of their own culture as inferior and incomplete. This creates doubt in the minds of 'Oriental Others' about the legitimacy of their culture (Said 1985). Such feelings of being marginalized and inferior as 'Others' may be particularly relevant to consider in the first years when refugees settle into a Western society.

Also relevant for analysing the processes through which the refugees we have interviewed have come to take up roles as volunteers is Bhabha's (1997) notion of mimicry, which refers to members of a colonized society imitating Western behaviour, culture, language, etc. Specifically, (colonial) mimicry describes:

> the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*; Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference (Bhabha 1997, 153).

In other words, colonial discourse wants the colonized to adapt to and adopt the dominant culture – however, not completely as the colonizer aims to maintain a hierarchical power relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Notably, Bhabha's mimicry does not describe a slavish imitation but rather opens a field for agency and resistance among the colonized (Huddart 2006). Indeed, mimicry is an *overstated* imitation of culture, practices, language and so on, employed by the Other, 'a repetition with difference' (Huddart 2006, 57). As such, the notion of mimicry

allows for an analysis of how refugees who become volunteers engage in an overstated imitation of the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other', while also opening a field of agency that may lead to resistance towards dominant discourses of sport and volunteering.

To further examine whether novel ways of volunteering appear that cut across refugees' experiences and 'ethnic Danish' understandings of the role of volunteers, we also draw on the concept of hybridity that was originally coined by Frantz Fanon. Bhabha (1994) also draws on the notion of hybridity in pointing to the difficulties of upholding essentialist ideas of pure cultures, including the binary relationship between 'us' and 'them'. According to Bhabha (1994, 221 quoted in Huddart 2006, 126), 'the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.' This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority as well as new political initiatives. Bhabha's claim is that, firstly, there were no pre-existing cultures that subsequently became hybrid (rather, cultures are constructed through the process of hybridity); secondly, it is in the meeting between the colonizer and the colonized that the possibility for new subject positions emerges. Hence, in postcolonial theory hybridity is a positive concept used to express innovation and creativity. In our study we will use the concept of hybridity to examine whether the refugees we have interviewed become volunteers in sports clubs in ways that renew what tends to be a more sport-specific and demarcated understanding of volunteering.

In line with Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars, JanMohamed and Lloyd (1987a, b) also focus on Western societies' oppression and homogenization of cultural 'Others'. However, JanMohamed and Lloyd (1987b, 10) argue that in spite of great differences between various minority groups it is their shared marginalized subject position that links them. According to

JanMohamed and Lloyd (1987a, b), these common experiences of marginalization can and should lead to the development of inclusive solidarities and coalitions between different minority cultures. Such a broad minority coalition can create a (critical) *minority discourse*. Although JanMohamed and Lloyd (1987b, 7) consider a minority discourse a 'product of damage', the oppressed individual can react to this negative position by transforming it into a positive and collective one. Indeed, the declared goal of a critical minority discourse is to problematize dominant, homogenizing structures and to 'produce social and cultural formations genuinely tolerant of difference' (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1987b, 16). In our study we use the concept of minority discourse to examine whether our informants show solidarity with other newly arrived refugee families as well as develop coalitions with other minority ethnic groups towards a potentially collective and positive discourse about refugees in Denmark.

Method

Life history interviews seek to gather information about a person's subjective experience of his/her life history (Atkinson 1998, 2007). Such an approach is relevant to provide a more encompassing perspective on how the specific informants' experiences and backgrounds from their countries of origin as well as their experiences upon arrival in Denmark intersect in the processes towards taking up the role as volunteers in local sports clubs.

According to Lewis-Beck et al. (2004), the difference between life history and life story interviews is often one of emphasis and scope. Life history interviews often focus on a specific aspect of the informant's life while a life story interview focuses on a person's entire life experience (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). We have used life history interviews with a limited focus on the

informants' experiences of sport and physical activity and their encounters with volunteering. According to Atkinson (1998, 11) 'there may be no better method than the subjective narrative of the life story to help the researcher understand a life from the insider's point of view'. Yet gaining insight into individuals' life histories is not something that can be obtained through a single interview.

Therefore, we set out to conduct a series of interviews with our informants. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we only managed to conduct the first round of interviews in the informants' local surroundings, while the second round of interviews was completed online two months later. Having already met the informants in person turned out to be significant for the second round of interviews, which were conducted by the same interviewers (Jeppe, Jesper and Jonas) as in the first round. Sine also participated in all follow-up interviews and both interviews with one of our four informants.

The interviews were conducted with a rather open interview guideline. The follow-up interview was used as a form of member reflection in which the informants were asked to comment and reflect further on the narratives we had constructed based on the first interviews. Member reflections have been described as a quality criterion in qualitative research which can enhance the credibility of the research findings as well as contribute to sound research ethics (Tracy 2010). Member reflection allows 'new data which throw fresh light on the investigation, and which provide a spur for deeper and richer analysis' (Bloor 2001, 395 quoted in Tracy 2010, 844). Accordingly, this is not a simple act of checking narratives but rather provides an opportunity for discussion and collaboration (Caddick 2018). Through our work with constructing narratives based on the life history interviews and through the informants' reflections, we mutually engaged in producing interpretations of the life aspects in focus (Atkinson 1998, 2007; Jackson and Russell

2010).

Life history interviews require a partnership between the interviewer and the informant, who both contribute towards creating the product (the interview). In life history interviews the informant should be given more influence on the material produced while the interviewer acts as a guide with less control over the interview (Atkinson 1998, 2007; Tagg 1985). Song and Parker (1995) point out that the research participants' assumptions about the interviewer are important for how the informant shares his or her life history (Song and Parker 1995). According to Fontes (2008), a difference in cultural background makes it particularly important to develop a mutual understanding between the interviewer and informant. In addition, language differences may require detailed explanations of questions and lead to less detailed answers, thus having an impact on the quality of the interview (Ryan 2011). All our informants had learnt the Danish language very quickly and were very keen to examine which words were the best to use in the dialogue with us. As such, we generally received very detailed answers to our questions.

The informants of this article were two men and two women who had arrived as refugees. Kawa is 38 years old and arrived as a refugee from Syria in 2014. He is married to Zaza, who is 35 and also from Syria. She and their four children arrived in Denmark by way of family reunification in 2015. Selda is from Syria, 33 years old and has two children and a husband, with whom she fled the country in 2014. Ahmed is 38 and from Eritrea. He fled to Ethiopia and spent 10 years there before fleeing to Denmark. He reunified with his family in 2015.

All informants had become acquainted with volunteers early in their stay in Denmark and within a few years of their arrival had become volunteers themselves in the local sports club. As such, our informants were rather unique, and it was challenging for us to recruit more informants with similar experiences. While the Danish Refugee Council had supported our informants and

other persons with refugee backgrounds through the 'Corps of Parents' programme, their activities were closed down during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, despite many efforts from our side, it was not possible to recruit more than four newly arrived refugees with the unique experience of having taken up roles as volunteers. These informants were affiliated to two different sports clubs.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and we collected 11 hours of interview material. In addition, before the actual interviews we had a two-hour long conversation with three of our informants, which also contributed to our understanding. When interviewing people with refugee backgrounds, some might react with sadness when they talk about aspects of their life history (Temple and Moran 2006). While expressing sensitivity to this issue before the interview, the informants reacted by saying that there was nothing we could not ask them. The conversation before the interviews also contributed to the informants' knowledge about us and our project, enabling them to give informed consent. All data was de-identified and kept confidential. We have changed the names of the participants and we do not mention the name of the specific sports clubs and localities to which they are affiliated to protect the anonymity of the individuals.

The life history interviews were analysed using a narrative analysis approach. In narrative analysis the central focus is on the structure of meaning in the subject's story (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Firstly, we made a chronological reconstruction of the narratives based on the two rounds of life history interviews with each individual. Secondly, we identified four different periods: the time before their arrival in Denmark, their first meeting with Denmark, the period during which they took up the role as volunteers, and the current period in which our interviewees have developed an elaborate network. For each of these periods we extracted parts of the narrative of an interviewee whose experiences were particularly insightful. This was followed by an analysis in which we integrated the other informants' experiences in the same period, which helped us draw

out central aspects in the life history interviews with the various informants (Jackson and Russell 2010).

Findings

The following presentation of our findings is structured around the four periods identified in our analysis of the material derived from the life history interviews. Each section starts with a condensed narrative that describes one of the four interviewees' experiences in the period before including the others' life histories in the analysis. In doing so, we will draw on key concepts from postcolonial theory to explore the common patterns in our informants' narratives.

Experiences with sports and volunteering

> Selda started playing handball when she was around 11-12 years as her physical education teacher wanted to start a team for young girls in the capital city of Syria, Damascus. They started practising a couple of times a week on an outdoor field. Soon they began practising in a gym, and Selda ended up playing in a national tournament and receiving money for playing. She was affiliated to a club that raised financial resources through offering sport camps for children and renting out their facilities, which meant that the club could hire coaches to the women's handball team. According to Selda, there were no volunteers connected to the club. Selda stopped playing handball when she was 18 years old because she started studying at the university but also because playing professional handball required a lot of travelling. While living in Damascus and later for some years in Saudi Arabia, Selda took care of elderly people in her free time. After taking a language teaching course, she also helped other families' children to learn the English language – for free. Selda feels that it is important to be helpful with any tasks, and in Syria you would help where it was needed.

Like Selda, all our informants described a physically active childhood with different types of play,

physical education and some sport. Thus, some affinity to sport and physical activity appears central in the trajectories towards taking up volunteering in sports at a later stage. However, contrary to Selda's description above, the other informants' experiences pertained mostly to self-organized sports activities. On the other hand, Kawa played organized football when attending high school and Ahmed described cycling events that were organized and paid for by the state in Eritrea. Ahmed did not only play football but was also keen on cycling. According to Ahmed, he had to walk a long way to be able to participate in such cycling activities. Zaza had other experiences with sport. According to Zaza, who unlike Selda grew up in the countryside in Syria, it was primarily boys who had the opportunity to play sports. Zaza described how the opportunities for Syrian girls and women to be active were mainly in fitness centres or if sports were on the school's timetable.

Interestingly, although not related to sports or physical activity, Selda and the other interviewees described how (without getting paid) they *helped* friends, neighbours, the elderly, etc. Yet they did not describe such practices as volunteering. With Zaza's current understanding of volunteering, apparently shaped by discourses in Denmark that construe volunteering as taking place within an organized context specifically related to clubs and associations, Zaza said that she did not do voluntary work in Syria. Yet, in the life history interviews she described how she, like Selda, taught children also when she was not professionally obliged to do so:

> I was a music teacher in a primary and lower secondary school, but when the war started, the government stopped me from teaching. I voluntarily taught my own and my neighbour's children, but I did not see it as volunteering. It was just something I did to help. I did not see it as volunteering, but rather as something where I could help others the best way possible. You have to understand that I did not know what it meant to be a volunteer at the time. (Zaza)

While such acts of volunteering were primarily directed towards Zaza's own and closely related children, it might not be that different from parents volunteering in sports clubs in Denmark to promote the chances for their own and related children to develop, in this case, their sporting skills.

In comparison, Ahmed stated that he had no experiences with volunteering in Eritrea or Ethiopia, where he lived for a long period. According to Ahmed and Kawa, no one was volunteering in sports clubs in either Eritrea, Ethiopia or Syria; everyone who organized sport was being paid. Kawa even expressed that the common perception in Syria was that 'if you worked for free, you were stupid'. For instance, in Eritrea, where Ahmed lived, there was an annual bike race organized by the government and everyone involved with the race was paid. However, Ahmed did have experience of volunteering in non-sport related contexts before arriving in Denmark:

> No, I do not have any experience volunteering (...) There was an organization (in Eritrea) attached to the church where I helped. I am a Christian. You can volunteer at that organization, but it is still not as I have experienced it in Denmark. (Ahmed)

Hence, despite not having any experience of voluntary work as it is organized in Denmark, all informants still had experience of societal involvement in diverse roles as teachers (Zaza and Selda), as a reporter (Kawa) and as a bible teacher (Ahmed). Building on such insights into the experiences that refugees carry with them may contribute to a better understanding of the roles that migrants may take up in sports and leisure settings in the receiving context (Agergaard 2018a). This observation is in accordance with transnational migration theories suggesting that refugees are not merely immigrants that adapt to the new societal context, but transmigrants (Schiller et al 1995). However, as shown in the section below, such a focus on refugees as persons with particular experiences and interests does not appear to be the view our informants are met with upon arrival

in Denmark.

The first encounter with Denmark

> When Ahmed first came to Denmark, he arrived by train from Germany. When he got off the train, there was no sight of police or military who could help him find the asylum centre, which surprised him. He then asked people who were passing by, but no one seemed to be interested in helping him until an African woman provided him with guidance.
> Soon after he had arrived in Denmark, Ahmed received a phone call from family members in Eritrea, who told him that his brother had passed away. At that point he felt very alone in Denmark and had the feeling that no one wanted to talk to him and now his brother, whom he loved so much, had passed away. He sat on the sidewalk of his street and cried, and he felt that no one was taking any notice of him. A lorry driver stopped, looked at him and moved on.
> Afterwards he thought about the incident and was shocked about the feeling of loneliness. Then Ahmed realized that he had to learn the language, but he did not know how to progress. He went to the asylum centre, where he met a priest who told him to go to a thrift shop. There he met an elderly woman who asked what they could do to help him. Generally, the volunteers in the shop were keen to talk to him. Now Ahmed also wanted to become a volunteer, not least because he then would be able to meet 'Danes' and learn the language.

Like Ahmed, who faced hostility when arriving in Denmark, Zaza also expressed a feeling of being lonely and different when she first came to Denmark:

> I looked at myself and saw that there was nobody like us. The neighbours at the house we used to live in did not welcome us to the area. If I were to say hello to them, none of them would answer me. (Zaza)

When non-Western minority ethnic women like Zaza experience marginalization in their meeting

with Western society, postcolonial scholars like Said and Fanon argue that the category as the 'Other' develops (Said 1985; Macey 2012). Our informants encountered this feeling of 'Otherness' in different ways: while Ahmed felt that no one wanted to talk to him or answer his questions, Selda described that she also experienced a feeling of being 'the Other' in the wake of the increasing political debate on the arrival of refugees in Denmark. In the terminology of postcolonial theory, such positions as 'the Other' are related to feelings of being inferior and backward in relation to the Western population (Said 1985).

Ahmed and the other informants felt that learning the language, meeting with ethnic Danish people, and becoming engaged in voluntary work contributed to reducing the feeling of 'Otherness'. Similarly, Zaza's feeling of being 'the Other' that is described in her narrative about her first encounter with Danish society was gradually reduced, and she, Kawa and their children moved to a local community that appeared exceptionally welcoming to newcomers. Ahmed expressed that he was pleased to have become engaged in voluntary work, which appeared to offer him the opportunity of escaping the negative depiction of refugees that prevails in society outside sports clubs:

> I think about the future, and I'm happy with it as it is now. But it can be hard that Danes always look negatively at us, and not always accept us. But in the sports club it is often different. (Ahmed)

Ahmed and the other refugees we interviewed expressed that they were accepted in the sports clubs in which they volunteered. However, the fact that feelings of 'Otherness' may decrease over time and when settling into local communities and civic networks does not mean that the otherwise dominant discourse in society that subordinates and marginalizes non-Western minority groups

disappears. Rather, our research participants appear to imitate behaviours that are perceived as 'Danish' (such as being engaged in voluntary work) to momentarily escape the feeling of 'Otherness'. In the following section, we will further interpret the ways in which persons with a refugee background may come to take up positions as volunteers in local sports clubs.

Volunteering in sports and beyond

> Zaza was a volunteer in the local sports club, where she translated and provided information for parents with refugee backgrounds and guided their children towards becoming part of the local sports club. She also told the families about the often implicit expectations, for example about how the children should behave (e.g. in the locker room), and how the parents were expected to accompany the children to and from sports. According to Zaza, she prevented potential conflicts and misunderstandings between coaches with ethnic Danish backgrounds and families with refugee backgrounds. Zaza felt that the parents with refugee backgrounds trusted her because she shared experiences with them. For Zaza, it made more sense that she was the one explaining how things were to be done than if it was a native Dane.
> Zaza expressed that she filled the role as a volunteer in her own way; no one had told her to act in a specific way. When she began, she mirrored other volunteers, both native Danes as well as other volunteers with refugee backgrounds. Zaza has been a volunteer in humanitarian organizations besides local sports clubs, and she has experienced the freedom to volunteer in the way she wished. According to Zaza, being a volunteer (and member) of a sports club has helped her and her children to integrate into Danish society, understand Danish culture and learn the language. Thus, Zaza viewed voluntary work as a key to becoming part of Danish society, and she often encouraged other parents with refugee backgrounds to volunteer in some capacity.

Similar to Zaza, for whom voluntary work appeared as a key to Danish society, Ahmed stated that, in order to integrate better into a new society, persons with a refugee background should take up voluntary work. Through voluntary work in a sports club, Ahmed believed that one became

acquainted with the system, and this was a perfect way to learn from those whom he labelled 'the Danes'. This may be interpreted with Bhabha's notion of mimicry (Bhabha 1997). When mimicking 'the colonizer', the subordinated group acts in a way that provides an often overstated imitation, while the hierarchical power relations are still maintained. As the subordinated group (in this case the volunteers with a refugee background) does not slavishly imitate the host society, the act of mimicking contains mockery as well as menace, which means that mimicry is not purely resemblance. Such acts tend not only to reproduce the dominant culture, with its language and practices (in this case imaginations about volunteering as particularly Danish), but also to potentially challenge and expose them. This is in line with the refugees we interviewed, who appear as "super-volunteers" and whose emphasis on voluntariness as Danish may seem exaggerated. Further, our research participants may also come to implicitly challenge volunteering as a particularly 'Danish thing'.

Through the interviews it became clear to us that Zaza, Kawa, Selda and Ahmed had developed their own perception of volunteering. In their perception the task as volunteers did not only involve things that supported daily practices in the sports clubs, but also encompassed helping other families with a refugee background with understanding how to communicate with the local school, writing applications, applying for renewal of temporary residence permits and so on. Selda explained:

> Sometimes I help families write applications for a job, renew their passport or extend their residence permit. I also help families to apply for subsidies from the municipality so their kids can participate in sports activities. (Selda)

In this sense the volunteers appeared to have developed a hybrid between their own broad perception of voluntary work as general helpfulness and an imagined Danish perception of volunteering that tends to be more delimited and sports specific. This expanded understanding of voluntariness can be interpreted with the concept of hybridity as a mixture of different cultures (Shumar 2010). Their interpretation of voluntary work does not only support the specific organization (e.g. sports club) but also provides more general help to families with refugee backgrounds.

Expanding the role as a volunteer, Kawa also talked to other families with refugee backgrounds about how they could help their sports club. It was his conviction that it was important to make the responsibility as a volunteer tangible and manageable:

> One parent could not speak Danish, but he contributed anyway. He offered to help as a workman, wherever it is needed. I know some clubs that have strict rules, but we do not require them to volunteer in a specific way and what work they should do. You are always welcome to contribute with the things you can. (Kawa)

Such attempts to tell refugees to act as a volunteer in a capacity in which they are capable contribute to the involvement of refugees in the local sports club. This effort may also be seen as a step towards equalizing the otherwise negative view of families with a refugee background. Yet the difference between backgrounds does not seem to vanish completely.

Ahmed and Kawa described how volunteers with a refugee background sometimes organized ‘cultural events’ in which everyone from the sports club (and the local community) could participate. Here different minority ethnic groups displayed their language, food and customs. Ahmed believed that such cultural events could contribute to a better reciprocal understanding between refugees and Danes. Nevertheless, ‘cultural events’ may also be interpreted as sustaining

a prevailing discourse that presents refugees' cultural background as fundamentally different and possibly exotic, which can reinforce a binary relationship between 'us' and 'them'. This points to the relevance of examining whether our informants also collaborate with others in substituting stigmatized discourses about refugees with positive and collective discourses that may contribute towards establishing a coalition among minority ethnic groups.

Building a network

> Although Kawa was no longer officially registered as a volunteer in the local sports club and hence did not organize specific events and activities at the moment, he had a verbal agreement with the club that they could reach out to him when needed. Rather than acting as a sports-specific volunteer, he had become a facilitator who could help establish contact with other refugee families when the local sports club or other organizations organized events and activities. Thus, the sports club and other organizations made use of his knowledge of the local community and the elaborate network that he had developed with persons with refugee as well as ethnic Danish backgrounds.
>
> To Kawa it was important to build acquaintances with your neighbours, stressing that volunteering was necessary to become part of what he described as a larger and better network. According to Kawa, such a network had been more crucial to him as a newcomer in Denmark than in his home country, where he did not experience the same necessity. Kawa also believed that establishing such a network would be a way for refugees to learn the language and cultural practices and to become a part of Danish society. By way of his network, Kawa had gained permanent employment.

Like Kawa, Zaza and Ahmed were not volunteers in the sports club to the same extent as when they had first arrived, and this was not only due to COVID-19. Ahmed was now volunteering in a wide range of organizations beyond the sports club because he was so well known in the local community. However, he described that he was not as active in the sports club as earlier because

he was both a volunteer in the Christian community and in other humanity organizations. Even though he was not as active in the sports club, he still appeared to be committed to voluntary work. Likewise, Zaza, was no longer a volunteer in the local sports club. She explained that her acts of volunteering were limited by time as she had four children, all of whom had started taking up positions as, for example, assistant coaches in the club.

Through the Danish Refugee Council's 'Corps of Parents' programme, in which persons with refugee backgrounds are supported in becoming volunteers in local sports clubs, a network is not only created between refugee families and ethnic Danish members in specific local communities but also among persons with different backgrounds. In this way our interviewees may be said to initiate what postcolonial literature terms a 'minority discourse', which rejects the majority's tendency to marginalize minorities (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1987a). According to JanMohamed and Lloyd (1987a), such a critical minority discourse is directed towards producing cultural and social formations genuinely tolerant of difference.

Selda's description of how she had created an idea of establishing a women's café offers an illustration of the opportunity of contributing to developing a minority discourse. The café was designed to welcome all groups with the purpose of creating friendships and networks across women of different age groups and nationalities. She was seeking municipal support to actualize this idea and had applied for childcare funding to give all women the opportunity to stop by at the café.

> I got the idea to establish a cafe for women, where you can come and play board games, exchange cultural perspectives, learn new languages. It is also a place where the Danes can come and learn from former refugees' different cultures. (Selda)

Selda's ideas of establishing the women's café was a response to what she perceived as the damage wrought by the change of discourse about refugees in the wake of the so-called paradigm shift in Danish immigration politics of 2019. Thus, her initiative may be interpreted as an effort towards establishing a positive and collective minority discourse that is tolerant of differences. The women's café signified a place for sharing experiences of marginalization that might contribute towards developing inclusive solidarities between persons with different backgrounds.

Concluding discussion

Through narrative interviews with four unique refugees, who within a few years have learned the Danish language and come to take up roles as volunteers, we have gained insight into rather diverse trajectories. While our informants had had very varied experiences with sports in Syria and Eritrea, they all had some affinity with leisure time physical activity. Furthermore, they all had experience of volunteering (e.g. caring for elderly people or teaching their neighbours' children free of charge), even if they did not define these roles as volunteering. Hence, supporting previous research that emphasizes the importance of previous sport experience for asylum seekers' engagement in sports (Dukic, McDonald and Spaaij 2017), our findings emphasize that previous experience of and affinity with sport matters not only for playing but also for volunteering.

Our narrative analysis shows that our research participants' first encounter with Danish society was characterized by a sense of 'Otherness'. This made the newly arrived refugees mimic the volunteers they encountered in Denmark and stress the importance of voluntary work in integrating into Danish society. Yet when taking up roles as volunteers, our informants created a hybrid of their own understanding of voluntariness as helpful behaviour, which they had also practised in their home countries, and the prevalent understanding of organized voluntariness in

Denmark. This is in line with Luguetti et al. (2020), who described how the coaching role of refugees with an African Australian background extended beyond the football field (e.g. breaking barriers relating to parents' engagement or helping with job-seeking and educational opportunities). Thus, our interviewees' practices included helping other families with matters related to work, their children's school or the Danish authorities, thereby showcasing an extended understanding of volunteering that extended far beyond the sports setting. Further, we find that some of the initiatives, like Selda's women's café, may contribute to a minority discourse that counteracts the majority's tendency to depict minorities in ways that are damaging to them.

Using key concepts from postcolonial theory (such as 'Otherness', hybridity, mimicry and minority discourse) has contributed to analysing our research participants' trajectories into volunteering without reproducing the instrumental aim of integrating newcomers into the receiving community. A postcolonial perspective provides insight into how the colonial legacy makes itself present in the feelings of 'Otherness' that our research participants experienced upon arrival in Denmark. Yet postcolonial theory also contributes to an understanding of how our interviewees may be seen to both negotiate and transform dominant discourses on sports and volunteering.

Further, our usage of life history interviews has contributed to gaining insight into newly arrived refugees' trajectories towards volunteering in Danish sports clubs in ways that expand the current focus on their experiences merely in the receiving community. Thus, this article follows the recent call for developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks for studies of forced migration and sport (Spaaij et al. 2019) in utilizing concepts and research designs that allow us to pay attention to how various types of migrants' experiences of sport and physical activity cut across nation-state borders (Agergaard 2018b).

Existing studies have already described how refugees may take up roles as volunteers,

employees, or teammates in the processes of including other refugees (Doidge et al. 2020, Flensner et al. 2020; Nowy et al. 2020; Stura 2019). However, studies have also pointed to the difficulties facing persons with a refugee background when taking up such roles (Block & Gibbs 2017; Michelini et al 2018; Mohammadi 2019, Stura 2019). While former studies have focused on such barriers and potentials for refugees as volunteers, this article turns attention to the ways in which refugees may also implicitly challenge dominant discourses on sports-specific volunteering and point to new hybrid forms of civic involvement.

For further research it would be interesting to pursue certain findings in this article, for example on how volunteering in the form of everyday helpfulness goes beyond the dominant understanding of voluntary work as a sports-specific activity in a civic organization. It appears relevant to examine more all-encompassing approaches to voluntary work with marginalized groups and individuals that goes beyond support in the form of participating in activities in sports clubs. In this way, future research might lead to broader attention being paid to the diversity of ways in which newcomers might be encouraged to engage in civic networks operating in the range between sports consumers and sports managers.

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The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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