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# BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH SPORTS: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY ON (IMPROVING) INTER-ETHNIC CONTACT AT TWO SOCCER CLUBS IN THE NETHERLANDS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Bridging social capital through sports: An explorative study on (improving) inter-ethnic contact at two soccer clubs in the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, the social integration of minorities has been the subject of much debate in recent years. Historical events such as the murders of politician Pim Fortuyn and writer Theo van

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Gogh, and more recently the emergence of organizations such as Islamic State (IS), have had a major impact on public debate in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, belief in the socially integrative role of sport has increased. Sport, especially formal participation in sport, is expected to contribute positively to social cohesion and the social integration of minorities. Nonetheless, existing research shows that policymakers overestimate the impact of sport on social integration in society. Sport is no panacea. Sport can include people, but it can also exclude them by bringing together those who “look alike”. In this article we explore whether (and how) sport, and in particular soccer, can lead to bridging social capital, despite the fact that people generally prefer to congregate with “equals”. We base our results on questionnaires and a limited number of additional interviews at two soccer clubs in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands. We conclude that although sport can reinforce segregation, formal participation in sport also has the ability to enhance social inclusion and inter-ethnic contacts. The research indicates that measures could be taken in order to promote understanding and respect.

### **Keywords**

Sport, social capital, social inclusion, fair play, soccer, the Netherlands

### **SAMENVATTING**

#### **Overbruggend sociaal kapitaal door middel van sport: Een exploratief onderzoek naar (het verbeteren van) inter-etnische contacten bij twee voetbalverenigingen in Nederland**

In Nederland staat de sociale integratie van minderheden de laatste jaren ter discussie. Gebeurtenissen uit het verleden, zoals de moord op politicus Pim Fortuyn en publicist Theo van Gogh, en meer recent de opmars van internationale organisaties als Islamitische Staat (IS), hebben grote impact op het maatschappelijke debat in Nederland. Desalniettemin is het geloof in de sociaal integratieve functie van sport in Nederland niet afgenomen. Van sport, en dan vooral van sportdeelname binnen verenigingsverband, wordt verwacht dat het een positieve bijdrage levert aan de sociale cohesie en sociale integratie van minderheden. Uit onderzoek weten we al langer dat beleidsmakers de sociaal integratieve functie van sport overschatten. Sport is geen wondermiddel. Sport brengt mensen samen, maar kan mensen ook uitsluiten door het samenbrengen van gelijkgestemden. In dit artikel verkennen we of (en hoe) sport, en dan met name voetbal, kan leiden tot overbruggend sociaal kapitaal (“bridging social capital”), ondanks dat mensen vooral sporten met gelijkgestemden. We baseren onze resultaten op enquêtes en een beperkt aantal aanvullende interviews bij twee voetbalverenigingen in de stad Utrecht. We concluderen dat ondanks dat sport segregatie bevordert, er binnen sportverenigingsverband een

ontwikkeling is van sociale inclusie en interetnische contacten. Het onderzoek geeft aan dat extra voorwaarden kunnen worden gecreëerd om begrip en onderling respect te vergroten.

### **Trefwoorden**

Sport, sociaal kapitaal, sociale cohesie, sportverenigingen, fair play, voetbal, Nederland

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the Netherlands, as in most European countries, the social integration of people from ethnic minorities has become the subject of extensive debate (Gijssberts, Huijnk & Dagevos, 2012). Past events such as the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn (2002) and the writer and film director Theo van Gogh (2004), and more recently the emergence of organizations such as Islamic State (IS), have affected the public debate in the Netherlands. A recurring theme is the fact that Moroccans, Turks and people of Dutch origin<sup>2</sup> socialize predominantly with people from their own respective groups. In Utrecht, for example, ethnic minority groups and those of Dutch origin live their lives for the most part in ethno-rationally and socio-economically separate worlds, both during school and after they leave school (Gemeente Utrecht, 2008). Young Moroccans in Utrecht in particular feel discriminated against and excluded (Gemeente Utrecht, 2008).

Given this context, policy makers, social workers, youth workers and teachers have sought to create new opportunities to improve inter-ethnic social contact in (Dutch) society. The most commonly proposed solution is to organize meetings that actively bring groups together. The classic example is the multicultural street barbeque where ethnic minority residents and residents of Dutch origin can meet one another, eat together and, in so doing, come to understand what is "different" about each other (RMO, 2005). Similar examples are world music festivals, religious dialogue days or public debates surrounding Islam – all these work on the basis of differentiating between different ethnic groups in order to promote better inter-ethnic understanding.

Despite the best intentions of these initiatives, research shows that activities such as multicultural street barbeques are of only limited use in promoting long-term inter-ethnic contact (Snel & Boonstra, 2005). Barbeques are "one-off" social events that bear hardly any relation to the everyday routines of those attending. Moreover, these "one-off" social events are more likely to reinforce the existing dividing lines between ethnic groups rather than bridging them (RMO,

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2005). This raises the question of whether it would not be better to avoid interventions that “target” particular groups and that emphasize ethnic differences.

We know that sports clubs and associations are promising social institutions, in part because of the large number of people who frequent them. Recent figures show that more and more people in the Netherlands actively participate in sports. Various studies (SCP, 2003a;b) have shown that practitioners of sporting activities are indeed more likely to meet members of other ethnic and cultural groups than those who do not participate in sport activities. As such, sport undoubtedly has the potential to promote understanding between different cultural groups (cf. Krouwel, Boonstra, Duyvendak & Veldboer, 2006) and bridge the divisions that exist between different persons and groups.

In short, sport has the potential to transcend ethnic boundaries and participation in sport (i.e. soccer) is “colour-blind”. However, research has also shown that sport cannot work miracles either. Sports can also change social behaviour in a negative way (foul play, aggression, alcohol abuse) and enhance social differences in society (segregation, social isolation, discrimination). The context of sport – the way in which sport is organized, the socio-pedagogical aspects of sports, the competence of referees, and especially the way in which trainers set a good example for their pupils – makes a huge difference in the intermediate or outcome effects of participation in sport (Boonstra & Hermens, 2012; Coalter, 2007). In other words, the question is whether sport is a vehicle for social capital and social integration, or a social institution that reproduces social divisions and inequalities?

Much of the theoretical debate about the social impact of sports is linked to the concept of social capital, which is most often related to Robert Putnam's work. Putnam (2000) states that social capital can best be developed through participation in shared activities. These can take place in formal, as well as informal networks. Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital. “Bonding capital” encompasses ties and relations between people that share a similar socio-economic and ethnic background. “Bridging capital” comprises ties and relations between people from different social groups.

Vermeulen and Verweel (2009) argue that the social capital theory of Putnam differs from the social capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). In his work on social capital, Bourdieu states that the advantages that come with membership of civic associations and social networks are not available to everybody, due to existing political-economic constraints. Moreover, those who do profit from social networks and are able to build social capital “do so precisely because others are excluded” (DeFilippis, 2001, p. 790). It is for this reason that Vermeulen and Verweel state that Putnam and Bourdieu agree on the value of social capital in enhancing social cohesion, and both

emphasize the importance of participation in formal and informal community activities. However, they disagree on the desirability of achieving equal opportunities for access to valuable social capital (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009, p. 24).

In Utrecht in 2008, the “Bridging Social Capital through Soccer” (“Verbinden door Voetbal”) project was launched by two soccer clubs (Zwaluwen Utrecht 1911 and VV De Meern) and HU Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, in collaboration with the Royal Dutch Soccer Association (KNVB), FC Utrecht (the leading professional soccer club in the region) and the Verwey-Jonker Institute (an institute for applied social research). The KNVB publicly supported the project and the Verwey-Jonker Institute coordinated the research activities. FC Utrecht wishes to play a more prominent role in the Utrecht region, not only in sport but also in wider society. The club has taken note of the situation in England, where almost all Premier League clubs are involved in local community schemes.

In this article, we examine the Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project. The project combines research with specific activities such as “positive coaching”, social internships (the clubs offer young people the opportunity to develop their skills by becoming game leaders/trainers) and the organization of “Fair Play Cups”. The line of reasoning behind the project is that playing soccer together in community soccer clubs may increase – and thereby improve – inter-ethnic contacts between groups of people, even though their ethnic backgrounds are not articulated or specifically targeted within the project. In this article, we seek to establish whether this line of reasoning is correct. In the first section, we provide a detailed description of the Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project. The following section describes the research methods. Sections three and four provide, respectively, the results and conclusion of the project. Do we find evidence for the line of reasoning advanced for the Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project, or are we forced to conclude that this project, which sought to transcend ethnic divisions, ultimately failed to produce the expected results?

## **BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH SOCCER – THE PROJECT**

The Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project has been on-going at two soccer clubs (Zwaluwen Utrecht 1911 and VV De Meern) in Utrecht since 2008. In this article, we present the results of a benchmark study carried out in 2008 and a follow-up evaluation in 2010. VV De Meern and Zwaluwen are both ethnically mixed clubs. However, the proportion of those from ethnic minorities is higher at Zwaluwen. In addition, both clubs view their role as “more than just

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soccer". They ascribe themselves a social mission. For example, the management of Zwaluwen aims to help improve the quality of life in the local area (see box). VV De Meern, meanwhile, wants the club itself to generate added value in terms of norms and values, social integration and fair play.

### **A TALE OF TWO SOCCER CLUBS**

Zwaluwen Utrecht 1911 was formed by a merger between two existing clubs. The membership of one of these clubs was predominantly Dutch in origin, while the members of the other club were mainly from ethnic minority backgrounds. The management decided at that time that the new club should have a multi-cultural character. The club is situated between three different neighbourhoods, each of which is fairly uniform in ethnic terms. The first neighbourhood is Kanaleneiland, where residents are predominantly from Moroccan or Turkish backgrounds. The second neighbourhood is Oog in Al, a neighbourhood built in the 1930s with predominantly residents of Dutch origin with higher levels of education. The last neighbourhood is the Dichterswijk/Rivierenwijk, with predominantly Dutch residents with lower levels of education.

For the first sixty years of its existence, VV De Meern was a typical village club. However, a few years ago De Meern became part of the city of Utrecht. Additionally, due to the construction of a significant new residential development at Leidsche Rijn, many more residents came to live near the club. This led to a massive expansion for VV De Meern, from a club with about 450 members, to one with at least 1,400 members in 2009. The urban development around De Meern has meant that the ethnic composition of its members has changed too. More and more members with different ethnic backgrounds are joining VV De Meern.

Eleven students from HU Utrecht University of Applied Sciences worked at both soccer clubs between September 2008 and September 2010. The students came from a range of educational backgrounds, such as Social Work, Cultural and Social Development, Pedagogy and Social and Legal Services. The students spent an average of 20 hours a week assisting the two clubs, partly by organizing activities and partly by carrying out research. They organized activities such as the Fair Play Cup and positive coaching to promote positive behaviour. In the Fair Play Cup activity, referees scored the behaviour of youth teams for the fair play that they demonstrated during matches. At the end of every season, the youth team with the highest fair play score is awarded

the Fair Play Cup, receives medals from an FC Utrecht player and is given the chance to play a match at the FC Utrecht stadium. The aim of the Fair Play Cup is to increase the youngsters' awareness of prosocial and anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, the students organized a volunteers' evening to highlight the activities of the volunteers and a film project to encourage respectful forms of social contact. Finally, during the soccer season, trainers and players from FC Utrecht held soccer clinics where they focused on fair play and social interaction between the players. None of these activities emphasize the differences between participants, but focus on similarities, such as their shared commitment to soccer as a game, and as such these activities could improve inter-ethnic contacts.

In short, although the activities are quite different, they all have one strikingly similar feature: none of them are based on the ethnicity of those involved. The activities focus particularly on the atmosphere at the clubs and the social context of the clubs as a whole, with the potential positive side-effect of more positive contacts between club members and, by implication, more positive inter-ethnic contact.

## METHODS

We used a quantitative pre-post test to indicate whether factors related to the atmosphere and inter-ethnic contacts in the two soccer clubs had changed during the period of the intervention. Questionnaires were conducted among young and adult footballers, parents, and volunteers. The baseline measurement was carried out at the start of the Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project (in September 2008) and follow-up research was carried out after two soccer seasons (in May 2010). The estimated response rate for these two measurements was 35% and 65% respectively at Zwaluwen and 76% and 74% at VV De Meern. The actual (absolute) response is shown in Table 1. The students conducted the questionnaires face to face during training evenings at the soccer clubs. Researchers from the Verwey-Jonker Institute developed the questionnaire and instructed the students on how to conduct them. In addition, the researchers from the

**Table 1: Response to the questionnaires among footballers, parents and volunteers.**

	Soccer players		Parents		Volunteers	
	VV De Meern	Zwaluwen	VV De Meern	Zwaluwen	VV De Meern	Zwaluwen
2008 (t0)	210	26	145	35	23	8
2010 (t1)	185	115	81	11	57	10

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Verwey-Jonker Institute conducted interviews with volunteers at the soccer clubs and with the volunteers who run the soccer clubs.

The questionnaires included questions about the atmosphere at the clubs, inter-ethnic contacts and the willingness to volunteer. One of the first questions was “what is the reason you/your child became a member of this soccer club?”. Examples of possible answers were “because of the atmosphere”, “because it is close to my home”, and “because my friends were already members”. A central aspect of the questionnaire was the question of how the respondents rated the atmosphere at the club, fair play at the club and the way people with different ethnic backgrounds get along together at the club (on a 10-point scale).

It is important to note that the nature of our research was explorative and open. We cannot draw conclusions about whether any improved behaviour can be attributed to particular interventions. However, we are able to gain insight into changes at the two soccer clubs throughout the period of the interventions and we can state whether these changes were in line with the expected outcomes. Moreover, we can try to understand the findings by discussing them in relation to the theoretical assumptions of the project as well as related literature. In short, the aim of this study is not to make generally applicable statements based on statistical generalizations, but to investigate in an explorative fashion how developments at the two soccer clubs are related, using our research data and the available literature. By doing this, we hope to gain insight into relevant future research options (cf. Schuyt, 1995).

## RESULTS

What are the main findings of the benchmark measurement and supplementary research? At first, in 2008 the atmosphere at the clubs was rated as moderate (Zwaluwen) and fairly good (VV De Meern) (see Table 2). The score given by respondents for the atmosphere at Zwaluwen was 6.5 (on a 10-point scale), whereas the atmosphere at VV De Meern was rated 7.9. In interviews, respondents from VV De Meern told us that they loved the friendliness and ambience of their club, despite issues with aggression on the field every now and then. Respondents from Zwaluwen also said that they loved their club, but anti-social behaviour was reported as being much more common there. At Zwaluwen, 46 percent of respondents stated that aggression was a reason to stop playing for some players (compared to just 12 percent at VV De Meern). The score given by respondents for fair play was only just “satisfactory”. This reflects the atmosphere in the neighbourhood of the club – a deprived area with relatively poor levels of security and mutual trust between residents (Gemeente Utrecht, 2008).

**Table 2: Atmosphere, fair play and aggression at Zwaluwen and VV De Meern in 2008 and 2010.**

	<b>Atmosphere</b>		<b>Fair play</b>		<b>Aggression*</b>	
	Score (10-point scale)	Score (10-point scale)	Score (10-point scale)	Score (10-point scale)	% agree/ totally agree	% agree/ totally agree
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
<b>Zwaluwen</b>	6.5 (n=68)	7.6 (n=132)	6.1 (n=68)	6.9 (n=132)	46% (n=69)	38% (n=130)
<b>VV De Meern</b>	7.9 (n=378)	8.5 (n=292)	7.6 (n=378)	8.3 (n=292)	12% (n=378)	10% (n=292)
<b>Total</b>	7.7 (n=301)	7.9 (n=369)	7.9 (n=301)	7.5 (n=369)	24% (n=302)	29% (n=345)

\* "Aggression in my soccer club for some players is a reason to stop playing soccer".

A second finding was that general behaviour improved between 2008 and 2010, as did inter-ethnic contact too. According to the respondents, the atmosphere improved at both Zwaluwen and VV De Meern, there was more fair play, and aggression decreased. At the same time, respondents from Zwaluwen gave the relationship between the immigrant and Dutch members of Zwaluwen a higher score in 2010 than in 2008. While inter-ethnic behaviour was rated as moderate or even poor in 2008, in 2010 it was seen as being fairly good. Although the score given by parents of soccer players for inter-ethnic contact within the club did fall by 0.1 of a point compared to the start of the project, the evaluations of the soccer players and volunteers themselves rose. At VV De Meern too, the scores given by volunteers for interaction between immigrant and native members of VV De Meern rose, but the difference between 2008 and 2010 was no more than 0.2 of a point and the scores of soccer players and parents remained exactly the same throughout this period. However, at VV De Meern the overall scores given to inter-ethnic contact throughout the project can most fairly be described as "stable" (see Table 3).

In the introduction, we argued that the opportunity for lasting contact between ethnic communities could be greater when people are activated along other than ethnic lines, such as

**Table 3: Scores given to interaction between ethnic minority groups and people of Dutch origin of Zwaluwen and VV De Meern.**

	<b>Soccer players</b>		<b>Parents</b>		<b>Volunteers</b>	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
<b>Zwaluwen</b>	5.7 (n=34)	7.5 (n=112)	6.9 (n=26)	6.8 (n=15)	5.0 (n=9)	7.2 (n=9)
<b>VV De Meern</b>	7.9 (n=210)	7.9 (n=174)	7.3 (n=145)	7.3 (n=79)	7.0 (n=23)	7.2 (n=39)
<b>Total</b>	7.6 (n=244)	7.7 (n=286)	7.2 (n=171)	7.2 (n=94)	6.4 (n=32)	7.2 (n=48)

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sharing common goals or common interests such as the pleasure of playing soccer. Our research data appears to partially confirm this line of reasoning, at least when we look at Zwaluwen. There seem to be two social mechanisms at work in this club. On the one hand, we can see that soccer at Zwaluwen – as at many clubs – means segregation, at least to some extent. For example, half of the members of Zwaluwen stated that they became members because friends of theirs were also members, and these friendships tend to be along ethnic lines. In Utrecht, young people of Dutch origin tend to have very few friends among people from minority groups (Gemeente Utrecht, 2008). This finding confirms that people like to play sports with “people similar to them”. This is consistent with the findings of Bourdieu (1991), who found that friends are often similar, both in terms of their ethnic background, level of education, income category, values and standards.

However, our research also shows that interaction and socializing during sports activities is not limited to friends and “similar people”. An unsurprising but still interesting finding of our research was that the footballers, volunteers and parents interviewed at Zwaluwen reported meeting many other people during their activities at the club. We found that socializing and interaction takes place both during and after the football itself, as well as outside the sporting area: club members also socialize with other club members outside the club. The research shows that respondents talk to each other about many different subjects, both about soccer and other subjects such as school, work, going out and hobbies. On average, they talk to at least sixteen other members of the club about subjects that have nothing to do with soccer. Additionally, it seems that the parents, soccer players and volunteers interviewed at Zwaluwen also socialize regularly with one another while they are not playing soccer. They socialize with an average of six other club members and cultural background plays no role in this social contact.

In summary, although the initial membership of the club implies segregation, we also see that race and ethnic background do not seem to be directly important, either when socializing at the club or outside it. This is an important finding, since it supports the theory that playing soccer together can contribute to building social interaction and social capital that crosses ethnic lines. This finding provides confirmation that people like to play sports with “people different from them”, which is in line with Putnam’s (2000) findings that involvement in multi-ethnic sports groups (and other civil society groups) promotes social trust and increases levels of bridging social capital.

Additionally, it seems that the “unifying factor” of soccer at Zwaluwen has the potential to play an even greater role. As mentioned, at the start of the project in 2008 the respondents

gave the atmosphere of the club a less than generous rating of “adequate”. A substantial proportion of the respondents indicated that they often encountered aggression, including parents who become somewhat too involved as spectators on the side of the pitch. When they were asked about how club members of Dutch origin got along with those from ethnic minority backgrounds, the soccer players gave an average score of just 5.7, which reflects the general atmosphere in the neighbourhood, which suffers from a lack of mutual trust and low levels of bridging social capital.

However, since that time Zwaluwen has launched the interventions described previously (the Fair Play Cup, positive coaching etc.) in order to create a better social atmosphere and improve social interaction, including inter-ethnic interaction. The research findings from 2010 confirm the value of these interventions, because not only has the social climate improved demonstrably (with more social contact being perceived as positive, less foul play and aggression in the field), but inter-ethnic contact has also become increasingly positive.

The atmosphere at the other soccer club VV De Meern was generally already good at the start of the programme. Although at this club too, respondents mentioned that players sometimes display rude or aggressive behaviour, the general atmosphere is rated as fairly good. Additionally – and this confirms our hypothesis – inter-ethnic contact seems relatively relaxed at VV De Meern. The scores given by soccer players, parents and volunteers to the way people with different ethnic backgrounds relate to each other were respectively 7.9, 7.3 and 7.0 (two years later these scores were almost unchanged). The members of the club talk to each other a great deal, including about subjects that are not related directly to soccer, such as their hobbies, their own or their kids' well-being, news from the neighbourhood, and so on. The ethnic background of those involved did not seem to be important, just as at Zwaluwen. The members also meet up now and then when they are not playing soccer, and players and their parents also visit each other at home regularly. The way in which members of Dutch origin and members from ethnic minority backgrounds socialize at VV De Meern was also evaluated positively by the members. Footballers, parents and volunteers alike are positive about this, regardless of their ethnic background. The research findings from VV De Meern support the findings at Zwaluwen – namely that a positive atmosphere correlates positively with bridging social capital in inter-ethnic relations.

Of course, there is a tendency for cliques to form at VV De Meern, too. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say, and this happens in almost all areas of society. Just as at Zwaluwen, members

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of VV De Meern say they chose their club because it is close to home and/or because they can meet their friends there. These choices indicate that playing soccer at VV De Meern has a partially segregating effect and seems to confirm Bourdieu's distinction theory, which states that how one chooses to represent oneself socially and culturally reflects one's status, and creates a distance from other groups (Bourdieu, 1991). However, once people have joined the club, playing soccer has a unifying effect.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we will firstly draw two main conclusions on the basis of our research findings. We will then go on to discuss to what extent improvements at Zwaluwen and VV De Meern can be attributed to the interventions undertaken, both from a methodological perspective and from the perspective of other studies on social capital, inter-ethnic contact and sports. Finally, we will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen research method and formulate suggestions for future research.

First of all, our data showed that when members choose these two soccer clubs, a segregating mechanism is at work: people prefer to play soccer close to home and with their friends or people who they already know. However, once they have joined the club, our data indicate that playing soccer may help to unify people from different backgrounds. Of course, the players, the parents and the volunteers interact and socialize with their friends and peers, but also with other people who are connected to the sports club. They do this while they are playing, but also outside the sports club. This would appear to confirm our hypothesis that integration projects – such as playing sports in an ethnically mixed environment – can lead to inter-ethnic socializing which can then become long-term relationships.

However, our data also show that projects that transcend ethnic lines do not automatically lead to socializing and social integration. The social environment also needs to be conducive and provide opportunities for this to happen. It seems that the atmosphere at the two clubs remains aggressive at times, including parents who get somewhat too involved as spectators on the side of the pitch. Such results indicate that extra conditions need to be created in order to guarantee understanding and respect. The Bridging Social Capital through Soccer project addresses this aspect, by organizing activities to improve the atmosphere and build team spirit at the clubs for example. Specifically, students from HU Utrecht University of Applied Sciences have established the Fair Play Cup, which is designed to reward teams, players and parents for sportsmanlike behaviour.

In the future, more such activities can be organized, although as yet there is no indisputable causal evidence that these improvements should be attributed to the activities. However, the question of causality can be addressed based on the results of available studies. According to Allport's (1954) classic study on prejudice, which has been tested and confirmed many times, a number of conditions must be met to improve positive inter-ethnic group relations. One example is the presence of structural (instead of one-time) contact between participants. Another example is working together towards a common goal, which corresponds to Putnam's finding that inter-ethnic contact thrives on shared goals and interests. Although we cannot elaborate on these conditions here, they clearly correspond with the activities at Zwaluwen and VV De Meern. Likewise, the activities accord with evidence-based findings in socio-pedagogical literature (De Winter, Horjus & Van Dijken, 2009), community psychology (Moritsugu, Wong & Duffy, 2010) and ecological social work research (Urdang, 2008), which show that interventions aimed at improving people's social contexts also influence human opportunities and relations (cf. Verhagen, 2008).

However, on the basis of other studies, more ambivalent conclusions could also be drawn. Some authors demonstrate that inter-ethnic sporting encounters can actually exacerbate tensions (Elling, De Knop & Knoppers, 2001; Krouwel *et al.*, 2006), while other authors conclude that the integrating effect of sport is a much more complex and differentiated process than is usually assumed in social capital theory. According to Vermeulen and Verweel (2009) and Janssens and Verweel (2014), social capital is accumulated in ethnically mixed sports clubs, but this also proves to be true (albeit less strongly than anticipated and in different ways) in clubs where only ethnic minorities are members. For example, migrants in clubs with only ethnic minorities talk just as much to each other about the things that are going on in society, which helps them to build relevant bridging social capital.

However, if it is true, as our research data indicate, that inter-ethnic socializing can come about as an added value of planned activities, this needs to be demonstrated by follow-up research. Firstly, the quantitative foundation of future research could be strengthened. More bridging social capital dimensions could be measured, response rates could rise, randomized controlled trials could be executed, and so on. However, in practice-based projects like Bridging Social Capital through Soccer, these goals are not easy to achieve. Negative relations between groups may provide a reason to start a project, but also for low response rates during the project, which in our view was the case at Zwaluwen. Despite great effort on the part of the researchers, in 2008 the response rate at this club was no more than 35%, apparently because club members did not want to

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participate in “yet another academic study” on their deprived neighbourhood. However, once the respondents started to perceive the practical benefits of this project, their enthusiasm increased, resulting in almost a doubling of the response rate two years later. Similarly, randomized controlled trials would be methodologically necessary to prove the effects of interventions beyond doubt, but in projects like Bridging Social Capital through Soccer it is usually impractical to isolate all possible disruptive factors convincingly.

Furthermore, supplementary qualitative research could provide additional insights. As an addition to the quantitative pre-post test design, it would be valuable to observe the participants of the Fair Play Cup and other activities ethnographically on a weekly basis, and to interview soccer players, parents, volunteers and board members more closely about the atmosphere and (inter-ethnic) group relations, as well as their experiences of the different activities. Do they think that the improved atmosphere and better inter-ethnic relations can be attributed to the activities, or do other developments in the club play a role as well? What suggestions for improvement do they have?

Finally, important new insights can also be gained by learning from international comparisons. Many regions face similar social challenges, but professional practices differ across borders. In Europe, there are several networks for Sports and Society. Often, these networks have either an academic or theoretic focus or are purely practically oriented, often being based on representing interests. Maybe, the recently launched Consortium on Applied Research and Professional Education (CARPE) is an exception, although Sports and Society is still only an emerging theme in the CARPE network. In our opinion it would be interesting to look for opportunities to conduct research that is practically oriented and that contributes to social innovation in the field of Sports and Society, integration through sports, as well as other sports or non-sports related issues.

## NOTES

- 1 This article is an extended and revised version of an earlier Dutch text, which was published in the Dutch Social Work Journal *SoziO* (Verhagen, Boonstra, Hermens & Koot, 2009). It includes new research data that were not yet available in the original study. The authors want to thank Niels Hermens and Eelco Koot for their comments on drafts of this article.
- 2 In this article people are defined as Turks or Moroccans if their parents are not born in the Netherlands.

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