

****Grassroots football and belonging****

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Aim. Sports clubs are often portrayed as open, integrative spaces that may offer a strong potential to foster social inclusion. Yet, immigrants and minority ethnic groups are less likely to participate than non-immigrant populations. Explanations usually emphasize cultural differences, socio-economic barriers, different leisure preferences, and self-exclusion, rather than possible discrimination. This paper examines whether ethnic minorities are granted the same right to belong in amateur football clubs in Germany. It introduces the concept of belonging and applies it to sports clubs to shift the focus from integration deficits to possible exclusionary practices.

Methods. The paper draws on publicly available data from a field experiment. A total of 1681 German amateur football clubs were contacted by email with applications requesting a trial practice. The applications were identical, only varying by the sender's name. Half of the respective emails were signed by typical German-sounding names, and the other half by foreign-sounding names associated with the largest foreign groups in Germany (Turkish, Polish, and Italian). Responses were coded as (1) no response or rejection and (2) positive responses (invitations).

Key findings.

- Applications with German-sounding names received significantly more positive responses (66.9%) compared to those with foreign-sounding names (53.6%).
- The likelihood of being invited to a trial practice did not vary significantly by whether the name was Turkish-, Polish-, or Italian-sounding. Contrary to similar experiments, Italian-sounding names experienced the greatest exclusion rates
- Non-response was the most common form of exclusion.
- The results indicate that football clubs play a decisive role in fostering or limiting belonging. Thus, access to a sports club is granted and shaped by how applicants' ethnic background is perceived.
- The findings challenge dominant discourses that present sport primarily as a vehicle of integration. The paper suggests that exclusion and discrimination happen before minority players get the chance to join a club.
- Even where immigrant participation rates appear similar to those of non-immigrants (e.g., male adolescents in Germany), these numbers may conceal underlying inequalities and discrimination. Immigrants may need to exert greater effort than their non-immigrant peers to gain acceptance.