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Multicultural Common Spaces: A Study of Canadian Hockey Arenas and Social Integration

Project Summary

The research objective was to assess whether the game of hockey, and its associated social spaces, contributes to the social integration of immigrants and racialized minorities in Canada? This research assesses whether the game of hockey provides for multicultural common spaces where interactive pluralism occurs and enables a sense of Canadian identity and belonging for immigrants and racialized minorities as part of their integration (See Figure A in Appendix A).

The conclusion is that for most immigrants and racialized minorities, who are directly engaged in the game of hockey in some capacity (such as players, parents of players, hockey fans), there is a moderate to strong association of hockey with Canadian national identity and a sense of belonging. However, there are obstacles such as racism in hockey. The social spaces of hockey¹ are very much a contested terrain where immigrants' and racialized people's agency and participation can still forge a sense of national identity and belonging in spite of the specter of racism. There is a Janus-faced nature to the game of hockey which includes both inclusion and exclusion.

Research Methods

Multi-qualitative methods were used and involved structured observations in hockey arenas and face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews in the cities of Halifax, Toronto and Calgary. Data were collected during the hockey seasons of 2018/19 and 2019/20 before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The planned resumption to finish the data collection for the next two hockey seasons failed due to the continuation of Covid and a decision was made in early 2022 to conduct analysis of the data on hand.

The total data collected include 55 structured observations and 143 interviewees. The participants were hockey players, hockey fans, and key-informants. The hockey players included youth and adults involved in organized hockey, while the hockey fans were adults, many of whom were parents of hockey players. Key-informants were those knowledgeable about hockey such as coaches and authors of hockey books.

The participants' demographic characteristics include 106 (74 %) males and 37 (26%) females with ages ranging from 11 to 79 years old and a median age of 35 years. Of the 143 participants, 39% were visible minorities and 60% were Caucasian while 28% were immigrants and 71% were Canadian-born.

¹ These include among others hockey arenas (ice, stands, lobbies, parking lots), other public places (streets-Red Mile, public squares-Jurassic Park, sports bars, and virtual spaces).

The semi-structured interview questions pertaining to identity were: i) Has playing hockey helped you identify yourself as a Canadian? ii) Has watching the game of hockey in arenas helped you identify yourself as a Canadian? and iii) Do you think the game of hockey helps newcomers and minorities to identify themselves as Canadians. The key questions pertaining to a sense of belonging were: i) Has playing hockey helped give you a sense of belonging to Canada? ii) Has watching the game of hockey in arenas helped give you a sense of belonging to Canada? and iii) Do you think the game of hockey helps newcomers and minorities develop a sense of belonging to Canada? Further, the topic of barriers to engaging in hockey were addressed and included the following the question: Do you feel that there are barriers to playing organized hockey in Canada? If yes, what are they?

Research Results

Key Findings

National Identity Via Hockey

Overall 86% of participants indicated that hockey contributes to their Canadian identity, however, 95% of immigrants felt this way compared to 82% of the Canadian-born (Table 1, Figure 1, Appendix A). With respect to visible minority status the findings are similar as 91% of visible minorities felt that hockey contributes to Canadian identity compared to 81% of Whites (Table 2, Figure 2). In both cases more immigrants and visible minorities², than Canadian-born and Whites, felt that hockey contributes to Canadian identity. The following quote from a 30-year old male Mexican immigrant living in Calgary illustrates this point:

Juan: Oh yeah, that's the first time I felt Canadian.... I think there's something special where people are singing their national anthem before every...the Canadian national anthem before every sports game. It's just a nice reminder.... Just remind everybody who they are and where you are kind of thing, especially when you come from abroad. It's a nice touch.

Sense of Belonging Through Hockey

Overall 55% of the participants indicated that hockey contributes to their sense of belonging to Canada which is a smaller percentage than the 86% who indicated that hockey contributes to a sense of Canadian identity. However, when broken down by nativity, 80% of immigrants felt this way compared to only 45% of the Canadian-born (Table 3, Figure 3). This large difference can be explained by the fact that the Canadian-born were more likely to take “belonging to Canada” for granted as a birthright. With respect to visible minority status 73% of visible minorities felt that hockey contributes to their sense of belonging compared to only 42% of whites (Table 4, Figure 4). The following quote from a hockey fan, and a host for the Calgary Flames, who is a male Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong in his late 30s, illustrates this point:

² It should be noted that most immigrants are also visible minorities, thus, there is some overlap of the respondents in figures and tables in Appendix A. However, there is also a small but significant number of visible minorities who are Canadian-born (2nd + generation).

Brian: Yeah, it's (hockey) a *common language*. Being in different workplaces that I've been in, pretty mainstream as well, when we talk about hockey, it becomes a common language, right? It's just like you wouldn't feel the barriers, right – different colours of skins of people and we came together...
If you talk to people in North America, they understand this is Canada's game. They know that. If they could have that sense of belonging where they have a professional team playing well in the city and they can call the players by their names and know what they do, all the back stories, all the personal stories, it's their common language...I think the conversation is in the community. You're going to the rink, it's very multicultural – very multicultural, right? Whether they see them as immigrants or not, I don't know, but they come together to a common platform to cheer for something that... I think a sense of belonging would be number one.

See Appendix B for additional quotations illustrating national identity and sense of belonging.

Barriers to Participation in Hockey

85% of the participants indicated that there were barriers to playing organized hockey with the following barriers being the most frequent: 1) economic (48%); 2) racism (41%); 3) time and commitment (15%) ; 4) sexism (13%); and 5) accessibility (12%) (See Figure 5).

Not surprisingly economic barriers were identified the most. The financial costs of playing minor hockey range from \$15,000 per year for a small number top tier elite players³ to \$1,666 per year for others playing at the non-elite levels⁴. A significant finding is that there was virtually no difference between immigrants and the Canadian-born, nor between visible minorities and whites, in terms of identifying economic barriers as they are class-based. Secondly, and also not surprisingly, racism was the second most identified barrier. This identified barrier has emerged very prominently over the last decade in Canada and there have been a few scattered programmatic and policy proposals to try to address this barrier⁵. While the other barriers were identified considerable less they are nevertheless very important ones, such as the barrier of sexism.

Conclusion

The engagement in hockey by immigrants and visible minorities facilitates their integration into Canadian society via multicultural common spaces that enhance their Canadian social identity

³ Sean Fitz-Gerald (<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-oct-2-2019-1.5304832/adults-can-ruin-anything-kids-hockey-is-facing-a-crisis-in-canada-says-author-1.5304835>)

⁴ SRG-Sports Research Group (2014). *Youth Sports Report*. Toronto: SRG

⁵ See for example, Policy Paper for Anti-Racism in Canadian Hockey by Szto, McKegney, Auksi and Dawson (https://hockeyinsociety.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/policypaper_anti-racisminhockey_execsummary_final.pdf)

and sense of belonging to Canada. The barriers to engagement in hockey, such as financial cost and racism, need to be addressed.

Policy and Program Implications

In an increasingly diverse Canada the sport of hockey needs growing as it contributes to social integration. Hockey will grow if it becomes progressively more inclusionary and the exclusionary practices of classism, racism and sexism are reduced or eliminated. With such growth comes increasing Canadian national identity and a sense of belonging for immigrants and racialized persons who participate. The following are some policy and program recommendations which would enable greater interactive pluralism in hockey.

1. The recent corporate initiatives to make hockey more inclusionary should be lauded and further encouraged by Sport Canada⁶. Moreover, Sport Canada might want to consider co-sponsoring such programs.
2. The few existing and successful community level programs in Canada that help immigrant youth participate in hockey could be modelled on a much larger scale and promoted throughout Canada in cities with relatively high concentrations of immigrant and racialized youth. Two potential programs that could be modelled, as best practices, include the *Hockey 4 Youth* program in Toronto and the *FHL (Football Hockey Link)* in Calgary. Either Sport Canada, or perhaps Hockey Canada, could take on this programmatic initiative.
3. Diversity policy initiatives, at all segments and levels of leadership in organized hockey, need to be implemented and these would include at the grassroots level of community and city minor hockey associations, provincial/territorial hockey associations and federations, as well as Hockey Canada itself. Also, diversity initiatives for hockey positions such as coaches and managers, would facilitate greater inclusion. Sport Canada could very well be the catalyst for these types of policy initiatives.
4. The financial costs of playing hockey for Canadian youth could be reduced by the state (municipal, provincial, federal) through the subsidization of hockey arenas at the community level for minor hockey associations.
5. Finally, and perhaps very controversially, the federal government could implement a “hockey tax credit” for lower income Canadians to offset the high costs for families with children playing hockey. This type of tax credit would be rationalized by the fact that hockey is deemed, via federal legislation, as Canada’s official winter sport, in distinction from other sports.

⁶ Examples here include: Molson Canadian and Sportsnet’s streaming of *Hockey Night in Canada* in seven non-English and non-French languages in April 2021; the Scotiabank’s *Hockey for All* program; and the Hockey Diversity Alliance and Budweiser’s *Tape Out Hate* campaign.

Next Steps

How effective are the current equity, diversity and inclusion policies and initiatives in hockey in promoting or enabling interactive pluralism?

How can the various potential social change agents in hockey be organized and integrated systemically and holistically, to develop an overarching strategy to eliminate racism in hockey? These social agents would include, among others, the following: Sport Canada, other federal government departments, other levels of government, corporate sponsors, minor league hockey associations, the NHL, and the sports media.

Knowledge Translation

The current strategy for knowledge translation includes the writing of academic manuscripts based on the findings. Other strategies are in the planning stages at this point.

Appendix A: Figures and Tables

Figure A. Interactive Pluralism Vs. Fragmented Pluralism

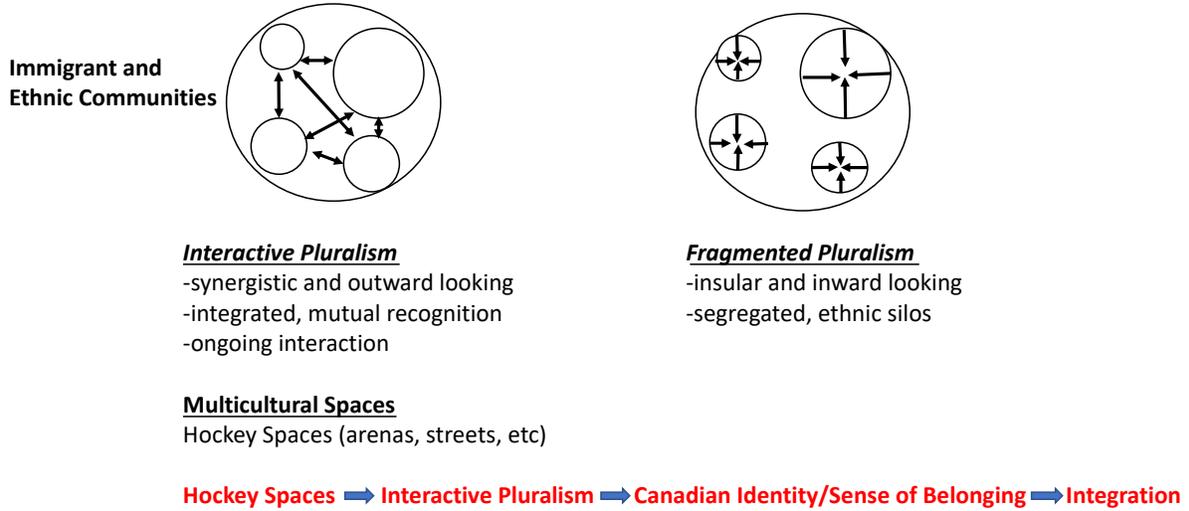


TABLE 1. Hockey Contributes to Canadian Identity by Nativity

<i>Hockey contributes to Canadian identity</i>	<i>Nativity</i>			
	Immigrant	Canadian-Born	Total	
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Yes	38 (95%)	83 (82%)	121	(86%)
No*	2 (5%)	18 (18%)	20	(14%)
Total	40 (100%)	101 (100%)	141	(100%)

*also includes no response or ambivalent answer

ε (maximum difference) = 13 percentage points = moderate relationship

FIGURE 1. Hockey Contributes to Canadian Identity by Nativity

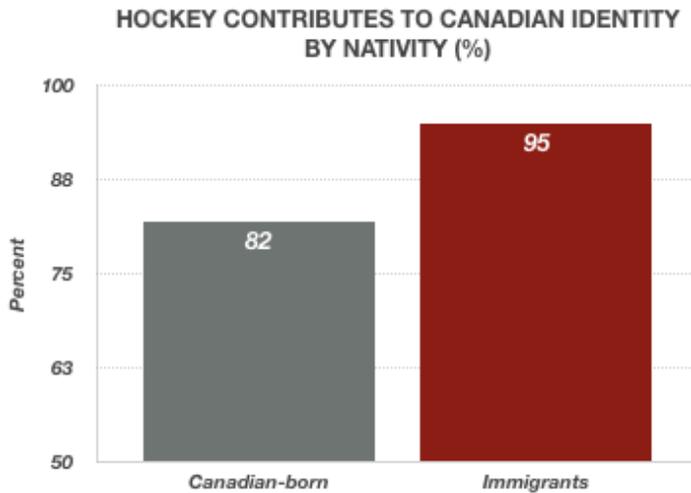


TABLE 2. Hockey Contributes to Canadian Identity by Visible Minority Status

<i>Visible Minority Status</i>				
<i>Hockey contributes to Canadian identity</i>	Vis Min n (%)	White n (%)	Total	
Yes	51 (91%)	70 (81%)	121 (85%)	
No*	5 (9%)	16 (19%)	21 (15%)	
Total	56 (100%)	86(100%)	142 (100%)	

*also includes no response or ambivalent answer

ϵ (maximum difference) = 10 percentage points = moderate relationship

FIGURE 2. Hockey Contributes to Canadian Identity by Visible Minority Status

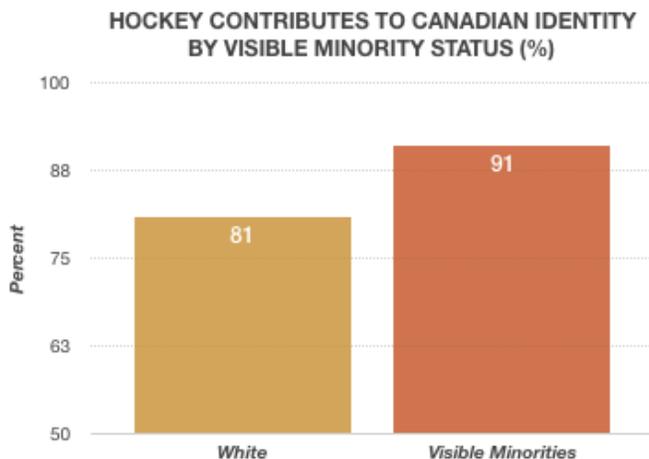


TABLE 3. Hockey Contributes to Sense of Belonging by Nativity

<i>Hockey contributes to sense of belonging</i>	<i>Nativity</i>		Total
	Immigrant n (%)	Canadian-Born n (%)	
Yes	32 (80%)	45 (45%)	77 (55%)
No*	8 (20%)	56 (55%)	64 (45%)
Total	40 (100%)	101 (100%)	141 (100%)

*also includes no response or ambivalent answer

ϵ (maximum difference) = 35 percentage points = strong relationship

FIGURE 3. Hockey Contributes to Sense of Belonging by Nativity

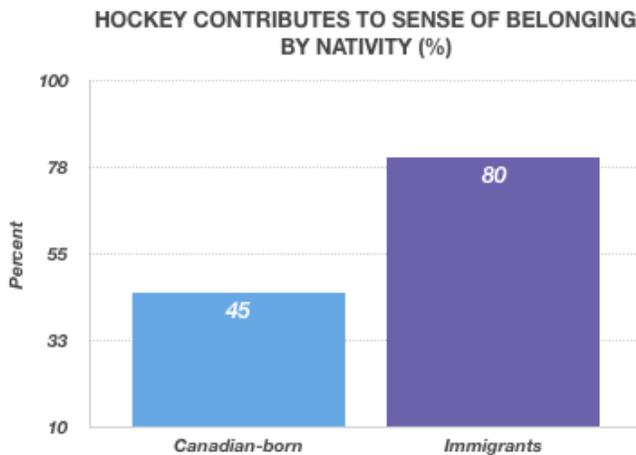


TABLE 4. Hockey Contributes to Sense of Belonging by Visible Minority Status

<i>Hockey contributes to sense of belonging</i>	<i>Visible Minority Status</i>		Total
	Vis Min n (%)	White n (%)	
Yes	41 (73%)	36 (42%)	77 (54%)
No*	15 (27%)	50 (58%)	65 (46%)
Total	56 (100%)	86 (100%)	142 (100%)

*also includes no response or ambivalent answer

ϵ (maximum difference) = 31 percentage points = strong relationship

FIGURE 4. Hockey Contributes to Sense of Belonging by Visible Minority Status

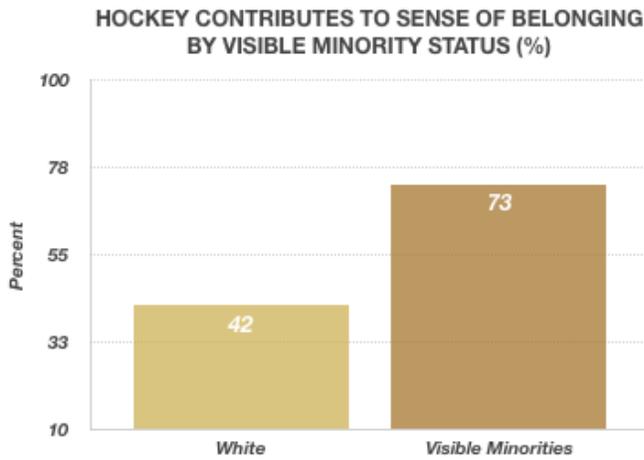
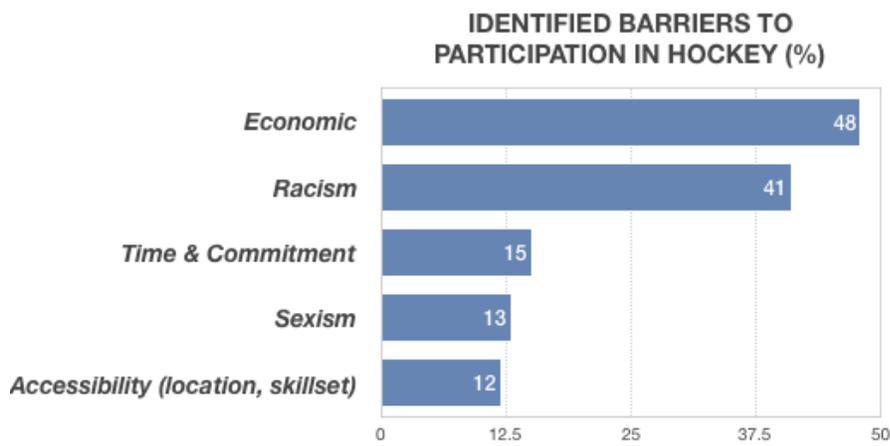


FIGURE 5. Identified Barriers to Participation in Hockey



Appendix B: Selected Additional Quotations From Participants

National Identity Via Hockey

Anne, a female 30-year-old second-generation Vietnamese living in Calgary:

Q: Has the game of hockey has helped you identify as a Canadian?

Anne: Yeah for sure. I think that's one of the things. I guess Canada is known for its hockey. You think of Canada and the maple leaf and hockey and Tim Horton's. I think it's been helping me identify as a Canadian as well, so yeah.

Q: Do you feel the same way watching it on TV as you do watching live hockey?

Anne: Yeah, I'd say so. I don't think it really matters to me personally where I'm watching it as long as you're watching it and kind of being immersed in the sport. It's part of who you are I guess or something that you value as a person as well.

Afaf, a female in her late 20s, came to Canada as a young child (1.5 generation) from India, living in Toronto:

I think hockey is so, like, rooted in Canadian culture that even watching hockey will make you feel more Canadian and more, um, you know, it'll make you feel you belong. Definitely, when I go to Maple Leaf Square, even if I go to a hockey game, even if it's people that don't look like me around me, I still feel like I belong there, and I feel like I'm connected to the sport. Um, I think, uh yeah, especially with like newcomers and immigrants, it's, like, hockey is one of those things that you can watch, and you can kind of immediately feel like you're part of the bigger community. Like I was saying, in our Indian community in Toronto, everyone watches hockey, everyone loves hockey, everyone loves the Leafs. It's just like if you're an immigrant, you're kind of automatically thrown into the environment where you become a Leafs fan or you become a hockey fan. So, it definitely helps with feeling that sense of identity, especially as a newcomer.

Mary, a white 50-year-old Canadian-born hockey mom and hockey fan living in Calgary:

Because... to be a hockey player is Canadian and... and I'm sooo proud to be a Canadian. And I think that that's... maybe I didn't specifically in my mind choose that but when I think about why do I love hockey, and why did I want him to play hockey... as opposed to soccer... cause I... soccer's not Canadian!

Onan, a 16 year-old male Turkish-Bangladeshi immigrant hockey player in Halifax:

Hockey definitely does help with that, like watching hockey, playing hockey, being involved with hockey, you're seen as someone like Canadian obviously, because it's like mostly Canadian sport, derived in Canada, so yeah it definitely does like make me feel Canadian when I do anything related to hockey.

Sense of Belonging Through Hockey

Frank, a Caucasian immigrant from the U.S. in his mid-50s living in Calgary:

Q: Do you think that hockey gives you a sense of belonging in Canada?

Frank: Yeah, pretty much so. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I can think of few things that give me more of a sense of belonging. I live in a... in a part of the country now where I cannot feel belonging based on my political sensibilities as I could have in Toronto or I could in Montreal or Vancouver, even Edmonton. I mean, you know, I'd feel much more welcome as far as that... that aspect of culture. But the thing is that that culture is not just about politics and there's... there's a lot of things that we share with... with one another and one of them is this beautiful game, you know, and that... that it does absolutely enhance my sense of being Canadian. And I like that. I like it very much.

Gino, a white male Canadian-born hockey coach and a hockey administrator in Toronto in his late 40s:

I've seen it a lot with kids that are brand new to the game and take an instant liking to it and then the parents are gung-ho. "Just tell me what you want me to do and I'm going at it, no problem." Does it help them become more familiar with Canada and help them live in Canada? I think it does and the reason why I say that is because they feel part of something. If they were an outsider and they come to the hockey arena and they don't have anyone to talk to and no one's talking to them, they're not developing and then they don't have anybody to reach out to. That's the stuff outside of hockey that you find because it's, I have a new friend at school and they're playing hockey, maybe I could play hockey with my friend and I could develop more friends and move forward from there. So I think that's the social aspect that I think is very important.

Ben, a racialized person in his mid-40s and a former hockey player and coach living in Calgary:

I mean hockey is... I mean, I think it works in all the sports, but as we know, hockey is the one that has been... has really kind of mobilized the strategy of making it synonymous with Canadian identity. Um, so I think there's no question, you know, for the young kids, the young players, and I would say also for the parents [...]. Um, but I think about the experience that they go through. So, you know, as we know with immigrant communities, they can get very insular. Um, you know, themselves... very safe spaces, you know, speak the same language kind of thing. But you can see, the kid integrating further into the society through sport forces the parents into those spaces, forces the parents into arenas, forces the parents into, you know, the Tim Horton's run kind of thing, right? So it's... it's a simple thing, but isn't that a huge thing, you know? So let's say you're a... you know, a Chinese Canadian, a parent or something, and here your kid is playing and you know, and somebody's going to Tim Horton's and it's like alright double double. A double double for you? Yeah, I don't like coffee, but I like this *feeling of being*, you know, sort of integrating outside of just my community into this wider Canadian cultural practice... [...] So, uh, I don't think it can be denied. It's just built into the dynamics. It is forced, you know. Now, again, is it magical? [*italics added*]

Punya, a second-generation female Sri Lankan in her mid-20s living in Toronto:

Q: Does hockey give you a sense of belonging to Canada?

Punya: It does. Just a couple weeks ago, the Leafs had some open ice skate event. It was a festival that was going on, and going there, even though I was a person of colour – sorry, I wasn't actually the only person, there were a lot of other people of colour, because it was a festival that was taking place.