

Sports Therapy and Refugees in Conflict Settings

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ABSTRACT

Refugees in conflict settings often face numerous psychological and social challenges that can often lead to trauma, anxiety, and disrupted development, particularly among adolescents. Despite this, mental and social health assistance and interventions have been forgotten, particularly in developing regions and areas of conflict where it is most needed. This paper examines the use of sports or sports therapy to address the mental and social health of refugees and people in conflict zones. It reviews existing literature highlighting the benefits that sports can provide to mental well-being, social cohesion, and self-concept, while also discussing limitations such as vague definitions of “social cohesion.” Through case studies and organization examples, the paper shows how sports have been successfully utilized in certain aspects, such as encouraging friendships and positive social interactions, and positive emotions. The paper also discusses the “make or break” factor for sports therapy to properly work: the need for the sports and methods to be contextually appropriate for the population. Overall, the findings show that sports therapy can significantly benefit refugee mental and social health only if the project is planned and executed in a context specific manner and that further research is needed to better understand the long-term impact of sports or sports therapy on refugee populations.

Introduction

In conflict settings and among refugees, individuals are often subjected to many stressors that can lead to trauma and lingering psychological and social issues (Samuels et al., 2017). Despite this being a serious issue, mental and social health are frequently overlooked in healthcare discussions, particularly in developing regions where it is highly important (Bragin, 2014). One promising approach to this crisis is through sports and physical activity (Ley & Barrio, 2019; Fox-Sowell, 2023; Draper & Ogbonnaya 2020; Smith & Phoenix, 2015).

This paper explores the potential and successes of sports therapy to enhance the mental and social health of refugees and others in conflict settings while also considering the limitations and the necessary conditions to properly implement this specific type of therapy. It will also provide an overview on existing literature related to the topic. This literature review can be utilized for comprehension of research on sports and refugees or people in conflict zones and may be helpful in understanding how to better incorporate sports or sports therapies into new or existing programs working with refugees or people in conflict zones. This paper will also explore programs that have incorporated sports to help refugees to further understand existing efforts.

Challenges Faced by Refugees and People in Conflict Settings

Refugees and others in conflict settings face a wide variety of challenges and obstacles that can severely impact their mental and emotional well-being. Exposure to violence, harsh living conditions and death can lead to significant psychological trauma and stress. Indeed, Betancourt et al. (2014) and Dejong (2002) write about how mental health issues concerning adolescents put in these stressful situations are alarmingly high. For example, in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon, where adolescents are often exposed to armed conflict, the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is estimated to be 5-8% in Israel, 23-70% in Palestine and 10-30% in Iraq among adolescents. The same study

found that in Lebanon almost all children displayed symptoms of social issues and anxiety (Dimitry, 2012). These statistics highlight the urgent need for mental health assistance in these countries. Unfortunately, in numerous developing countries, discussion and research on healthcare have often neglected mental and psychological health and wellbeing (Bragin, 2014). During the preflight phase, the period leading up to the refugees' "flight" from their home countries, refugees often face challenges like social unrest, turmoil, and instability in the region. Concerning adolescents and children, limited access to schools hinders both educational progress and social development (Lustig et al., 2004). During the flight phase, which is where the refugee leaves their home, these issues are exacerbated. Refugees frequently rely on external assistance to fulfill their basic needs and determine their asylum possibilities. Children born during this period face critical stages of psychological development amidst instability (Lustig et al., 2004). Indeed, studies and research on children in exile find a high prevalence of emotional and behavioral disorders, prominently PTSD accompanied by depression and anxiety (Fazel & Stein, 2002). These issues can lead to major issues later in life as Schlack et al. (2021) found that individuals with "internalizing problems" in childhood or adolescence, tended to report poorer mental health, more symptoms of depression, and a higher likelihood of exhibiting eating disorders. Given these disturbing psychological issues faced by refugees and people in conflict zones, there is a need for an effective solution that can support their mental health and well-being. One of the solutions for refugees and people in conflict zones is through sports which has been shown to provide a wide variety of benefits.

The Role of Sports in Addressing Mental and Social Health

A significant amount of research supports the notion that sports and sports therapy are beneficial for psychological and social health, but other evidence reveals certain limitations which lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the subject.

One of the most significant strengths of sports, as found in many studies, is the potential to enhance mental and social well-being of people. For instance, participation in team sports has been shown to enhance self-concept, especially for middle school girls (FERENCE & MUTH, 2004), and generally, extracurricular participation in sports positively enhances self-esteem, improves social interactions, and fosters a sense of "school connectedness." This is crucial, especially during youth and adolescence when they are learning how to navigate social interactions and developing mentally. Intramural sports are also very beneficial for students as they also help students develop positive relationships and self-esteem (Pantzer & Woodson-Smith, 2018). It is worth noting however, that these studies were not conducted with refugees or people in conflict zones and were conducted in more stable "western" settings.

However, while certain benefits are well-documented, there are weaknesses in the evidence that cannot be overlooked. One of these weaknesses is the inconsistent and vague definition of "social cohesion", a topic frequently invoked in the discussion about the benefits of sports. Moustakas (2022) writes that "[social cohesion] is often used as a catch-all to describe a broad range of sociological concepts and that has led to exaggerated claims about how well this area has been researched." For example, a review of 35 articles on sport for social cohesion found that about half the articles did not even define the term, and when it was defined, it was often conflated with individual ideas about social capital (Moustakas, 2022). This lack of clarity could undermine the validity of the research. Indeed Raw et al. (2022) goes as far as saying the inability to define social cohesion negatively affected the practice and strategies of sports programs which could further deteriorate social networks and "socio-cultural assumptions." In practice, this ambiguity leaves very little guidance on the most effective way of utilizing sports to improve social relations, as there is no consensus on the definition of social cohesion.

Despite this, sports are still used for psychological and social support among populations. These programs are supported by arguments like that presented by Putnam (1992, 2000), that participation in voluntary practices like sports allows people to form social relationships and networks. These networks can help foster mutuality and trust between people. Overall, these articles suggest that while sports may indeed be able to foster social cohesion, the effectiveness may be decreased or compromised if concepts like social cohesion are not clearly defined and cannot therefore be deliberately and consistently developed. Considering the distinctive challenges that refugees and those in

conflict settings face, it is essential to explore how sports can be tailored to address their specific psychological and social needs, which can differ drastically from those in a stable environment.

Case Studies Concerning the Utilization of Sports for Refugees

A study on Syrian refugee youth participating in sports programs showcases the benefits and limitations of these programs for improving social and psychological well-being. The research primarily centered around the hypothesis that engaging in sports would lead to better mental health outcomes for these youth, focusing on concepts like increased happiness, reduced anxiety, and improved social relationships (Fox-Sowell, 2023).

The study was conducted in Jordan and utilized eight Syrian youth male refugees and information was gathered through detailed interviews with the youth. Participants reported that playing sports helped them enhance their relationships and that sports built and created communities. Likewise, participants mentioned how friendships were created through sports and noted that sports led to integration and social barriers being broken down. Concerning emotional well-being, several participants said that engaging in sports helped them release negative emotions relating to depression, anxiety, and pressure (Fox-Sowell, 2023). These findings correlate with the literature discussed above indicating that sports positively shape psychological and social health.

However, there were certain limitations to the study, which included only eight males who played sports being interviewed from one part of Syria which could raise concerns about generalizing these findings. The absence of female participants could mean that the author may have not been able to capture the full picture of the refugee youth. It is also worth noting that only the students, not parents or coaches, were interviewed which could further narrow the perspective of this study.

Another study using non-clinical sports therapy done on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in a sports hall showed that sports or physical activity could significantly diminish the levels of distress and disturbance and increase positive self-perception (Draper et al., 2020). It is worth noting that the study did not assess the long-term effects of sports therapy and that, overall, the effectiveness of sports therapies can greatly vary depending on the context. For example, a study conducted on sports therapy in Northern Uganda found no evidence that “sports for development interventions” benefited mental health outcomes in post conflict settings (Richards et al., 2014).

The critical factor that can make or break the success of sports intervention is the need for sports activities to be culturally and contextually appropriate. The activities and sports should be adapted according to the sociocultural backgrounds and individual/collective needs. Effective planning and tailoring activities to meet the social needs of the participants and the dynamics of the group are necessary to encourage full participation and prevent anyone from feeling or being excluded (Ley & Barrio, 2019). Activities should be based on varying characteristics of participants (i.e., if the participants are from a country that plays a certain sport), age, gender, and past experience. If this does not happen, Ley and Barrio also describe how lingering psychosocial issues and conflicts among refugees can often become evident in sports. The problems may become even worse if sports are not properly adapted to the post-conflict context circumstances.

On the other hand, done properly, sports can offer an invaluable “distraction effect” for refugees helping them to cope with post-migratory stretchers like insecurity, worrying about their country or the people they left behind, and intrusive memories. For example, in a study that utilized surfing as therapy for combat veterans, the majority of which had PTSD, found that participating in surfing helped create positive emotions and temporarily relieved them of the negative effects of PTSD (Caddick et al., 2015). This was done by bringing them together and creating positive social interactions and a sense of security among their peers. This was also successful because the researchers chose the sport based on the participants they had. Surfing reflected the physically demanding nature of the veterans' past military careers which allowed the veterans to embrace the challenge of learning to surf. They also enjoyed engaging with the physicality of learning to surf and being tossed around in the waves. This research study showcases how crucial it is to implement a proper plan and to model sports activities based on individual and group needs

Another program called Football for Peace (F4P), a program founded in the UK in 2001 to help Israeli, Jewish, and Arab children to meet and form bonds across the social divide through football in the U.S. The project organizers utilized football for several reasons. Football is very popular; it is simple to organize and manage; it often emphasizes the five components discussed below; and it inspires passion which can lead to conflict. The researchers observed the activities of the children in this program and conducted interviews with all those involved besides the children such as the parents and coaches. To attempt to improve the children's conflict resolution skills, the coaches often tried to cause conflict amongst the children to create learning moments and to teach them how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful and positive manner. The program had a clear-cut plan, as discussed earlier, and was based on five components (trust, respect, neutrality, responsibility, equity/inclusion). Exercises each day were modeled and focused on one of the components. By the end of the program there was an increase in friendships through the social divide and as well as increased intergroup mingling (Lea-Howarth, 2006). The children began to behave better towards people from different backgrounds and improved their conflict-resolution skills.

Examples of Organizations Using Sports to Support Refugees

This section will provide examples of organizations that are actively using or that have attempted to use sports to assist refugees, showing how various approaches can be used to support different types of people and challenges.

First is a project supported by the Integrated Community Development Initiative (ICODI), a non-profit organization with goals to improve the overall economic and social well-being of underdeveloped and poor communities in Uganda, and facilitated by Sports en Commun, a digital platform that helps facilitate interactions and projections between different stakeholders of Sports and Development in Africa. This project was used to assist 2,000 people, ages 15 to 25 in the Nakivale refugee camp in Southwest Uganda and nearby areas with the goal of creating a socially and economically self-sufficient community. The project organizers used sports to benefit mental health and foster social connections within communities. This project had over 200 coaches and objectives like raising awareness concerning intercultural and interreligious dialogue among adolescents and people from a variety of nationalities, cultures, and religions. The sports used were football, netball, volleyball, running, and yoga. Their approach emphasized intercultural and interreligious dialogues about issues such as gender and social inclusion and diversity, and it appears that this project was done with an organized structure, and a sizable number of coaches to properly implement these sports.

Another organization that uses sports to assist refugees is Peace and Sport, an organization that has established an international coalition, to highlight best practices, pinpoint challenges with goals of strengthening the positive social impact of sports at the community level. In over 15 years they have worked with stakeholders to create 13 field programs in 12 different countries using 30 different sports. In these programs, they use a "bottom-up approach" and solutions adapted to the specific community challenges that they face. Their goal is to create impactful programs that leverage sports to foster inclusive, peaceful and equitable communities. This organization and their stakeholders seem to have specific but adaptable programs based on the environment and community, and have used a large variety of sports to aid refugees. This adaptability, as I have discussed earlier, is vital for these sports-aid programs to succeed (Ley & Barrio, 2019).

An additional organization that uses soccer specifically to help refugees and other people in need is Soccer Without Borders (SWB). With refugees, they leverage soccer as a "universal language" and allow newcomers to have a welcoming and safe space to find communities and create friendships. This organization has assisted youth from 82 different countries from a variety of locations. They focus on key factors like accessibility, training coaches, quality and consistency of their implementations, and the ability to create safe spaces. They have many different frameworks, rubrics, and assessments to help guide coaches to best build inclusive sporting environments like the FAMILY coaching framework or the Program Site Rubric. These tools are used to ensure positive consistency throughout all their Soccer Without Borders programs and spaces. According to the organization, they have a 15-1 trained coach-to-participant-ratio across the U.S. This organization also seems to have specified methods and frameworks to conduct their programs and specific focuses to help the refugees and people in need in their programs.

These three organizations demonstrate how sports can be used with a variety of different methods and frameworks. The project by ICODI in the Nakivale refugee camp focused on fostering certain intercultural and interreligious dialogue through organized sports like football and volleyball. On the other hand, the organization Peace and Sport focuses on developing flexible programs that are adaptable to the needs of each community across different countries, using an extremely wide range of sports. Soccer Without Borders centers its efforts around soccer as a universal language, and using specific frameworks, utilizing the sport to create safe and beneficial environments for refugee youth. This demonstrates that there is not one set solution when using sports as a tool to aid refugees and people in conflict zones, and through adaptable frameworks, these programs showcase the large number of ways sports can be used in these settings.

Conclusion

The literature showcases the potential for sports therapy to be used as a tool in combating psychological and social issues for refugees and people in conflict zones. Overall, the findings show that engaging in sports improves social challenges by offering bonding opportunities and friendships (FERENCE & MUTH, 2004; Lea-Howarth, 2006). Additionally, sports help combat psychological issues by creating positive emotions like happiness, enhancing self-esteem, and offering refugees and those in challenging situations a place to relieve challenging emotions (Fox-Sowell, 2023; Caddick et al., 2015; FERENCE & MUTH, 2004). However, it is important to note that these positive benefits are not guaranteed and rely on the adaptation of the sports to the specific needs of the individuals and groups (Ley & Barrio, 2019). Other issues like not clearly defining key terms such as “social cohesion” (Moustakas, 2022) could also contribute to hampering the effectiveness of these projects due to decreased alignment and purpose. Studies mainly measured short-term well-being; therefore, there are research gaps on the long-term effects of sports therapy. Ultimately, while sports and physical activity can play a key role in rehabilitating refugees or people in conflict zones, careful planning and adaptive individual/group-focused approaches should be utilized to ensure positive results and prevent any unintended outcomes. Further research should be conducted on the long-term effects of sports therapy on refugees and individuals in conflict zones, as current studies mainly focus on short-term outcomes. Additionally, more research is needed to better show how specific cultural and physical adaptations in sports programs can improve their effectiveness. Finally research and refinement of key concepts such as “social cohesion” should be conducted to support the development of clear standards for these programs.

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