



"We are the Weak Ones": Self-Narratives of Young Urban Women in a Sport-for-development project in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

Young people from Brussels are often considered a homogeneous group and associated with a negative connotation. Nowadays, one way to mobilize these young people is through social sports projects. These "Sport for Development" (SFD) programmes focus on individual and social development within a multicultural society. Now it appears that the scientific results of these programmes are not unequivocally positive and mostly include (young) men and boys. BC Foyer Molenbeek is such project with this special feature that it focuses exclusively on girls and young women. It concerns a group that is both socially and scientifically invisible. The following research question has been decided upon to discover what these urban women consider important and at the same time to empower them: "Which elements are represented in the self-narratives of the girls of BC Foyer Molenbeek?" Through a participant-oriented, open and bottom-up research approach, we wanted to gain insight into these women's stories and empower them at the same time. Their self-narratives seemed of undeniable value as they showed us the importance of not only recognizing but also acknowledging this group and the everyday discrimination they have to face in a so-called "post-racial" and "post-feminist" society. In addition, theoretical expectations of SFD programmes do not always correspond with practice; depending on an internal (within the club) or external (contact as a member with the outside world) frame, some of the goals are reached, others are absent or even experienced in the opposite way.

Keywords: young urban women, Sport for Development, Brussels, self-narratives, everyday discrimination

Introduction

Brussels, the capital of Belgium and de facto capital of Europe, can be considered a demographic outsider. While other Belgian regions have undergone a shift towards an older population, this is not the case for Brussels. International and national migration flows of young people and a high natural birth number have led not only to a young but also to a diverse and even super-diverse population (Geldof, 2013; Hermia, 2014). Different nationalities, cultures, religions and socio-economic positions live next to and with each other, transforming Brussels into a dynamic and future-oriented city (Elchardus, Roggemans, & Siongers, 2011). However, a unilateral positive view falls short: Brussels is also characterized by a high degree of poverty and a continuing increase in inequality. In comparison with other Belgian regions and European countries, the levels of (youth) employment, well-being and the quality of education remain rather low (Elchardus et al., 2011; Geldof, 2013). This, combined with phenomena such as radicalization, terrorism and (media) debates on safety in Brussels, has resulted in a negative image of the capital in general, and specific districts in particular, as places characterized by nuisance and criminality (Cops & Put, 2011). Not only the city itself but also young people living there have to deal with these negative views and representations (Vettenburg, Elcharus, & Put, 2011). Despite the lack of (scientific) attention given to this group and their subjective environment, they are continuously associated with alarming themes such as unsafety, criminality, unemployment, low degrees of education and poverty. Negative clichés have become the norm and a problem approach dominates discussions about them (Rea, Nagels, & Christiaens, 2009; Vettenburg et al., 2011). As a consequence, different categories of urban youth in Brussels are often described as vulnerable, at risk or lacking social capital. The deficit model builds on this by stating that young people from disadvantaged areas are uniformly deficient. Instead of focusing on social systems underlying social vulnerability, individual shortcomings are emphasized (Nols, Haudenhuyse, & Theeboom, 2017; Rea et al., 2009).

As a result of this approach, a wide range of social programmes has been developed to focus on the emancipation of these young people (Perkins et al., 2007). Sport for Development (SFD) programmes are organized to reach and mobilize young people, building on the assumption that they can benefit from sport as a form of positive development (Herbots, 2011). Such programmes aim to develop and empower vulnerable young people within a multicultural society (Kidd, 2008). However, research has shown that the outcomes of these projects are difficult to measure, and promising images of SFD projects may be overrated. The outcomes of these programmes are not unequivocally positive as sports may contribute to discrimination and exclusion (Chawansky & Hayhurst, 2015; Deelen, Burgers, Jansen, & Koelemaij, 2015; Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Vandermeerschen & Scheerder, 2015). For example, Coakley (2011) suggests that sport projects mainly result in bonding with "equals" based on socio-economic status, or racial or ethnic identity, while "bridging" and facilitating relationships based on differences happens less frequently.

In addition, while research on young women and girls is under-represented in criminological research in general (Chesney-Lind & Chagnon, 2016), and more specifically in Belgium, this is even truer when it comes to research on women in SFD projects. Despite the increasing number of young women participating in these programmes, research on SFD programmes mainly focuses on (young) men (Tlili & Delorme, 2014; also see, however: Schaillée, Theeboom, & Skille, 2017).

Building on these gaps, we conducted research to gain insight into the participation of urban¹ women from Brussels in an SFD programme, and into their life stories in a more general way (Bougrine, 2018).² The study had two main goals. The first goal was to create more visibility for recognition of urban women participating in SFD programmes. We aimed to raise the awareness of this issue amongst criminological scholars. The second goal focused on the participatory aspect as we tried to voice and empower an often forgotten group, not only in research, but also in policy and practice. By collecting personal stories and women's self-narratives, we gained insight into their life world and experiences. The main research question was: "Which elements are represented in the self-narratives of the young women of Basketball Club (BC) Foyer Molenbeek?" A special focus was given to the role of gender and the importance of this basketball project in their self-narratives.

Methodology

The research was conducted at Basketball Club Foyer Molenbeek. This club focuses on vulnerable and urban youth in an inclusive way and emphasizes personal, interpersonal and social development but is exclusively focused on women. Accessibility, engagement, respect and learning are important values. (Young) women play basketball in categories ranging from "under eight" to "older than nineteen". They have the opportunity to play in a recreative or competitive team, practise twice a week and play a game at the weekend.

The fieldwork was conducted by the first author in March and April 2018. The researcher participated in an active way, which enabled her to create informal trust relationships. After a short immersion period, the researcher asked women playing in the "under nineteen" and the women's team (aged 14 years and older) to participate in the research. Initially, eight of them volunteered, five of whom actually participated. Participants were aged between 15 and 21 and were living in different areas of Brussels (Schaarbeek, Sint-Joost-ten-Node, Jette and Molenbeek). Other important characteristics in the context of this research include their skin colour (all respondents have a tinted or dark skin colour), origin (most of them are Belgian nationals but their origins can be found in Senegal, Guinea and Congo) and spoken languages (Peul, French, English, Dutch, Lingala and Wolof).³

1 Urban youth are defined by Grebe as young people living in "distressed *neighbourhoods and [being] consistently marginalized from society due to race, income and lacking opportunities*" (Grebe, 2017).

2 This research was conducted by Jasmien Bougrine in order to obtain the degree of Master in Criminology (master's thesis). An Nuytiens was the supervisor of this master's thesis. The annual Jeanine Segers Prize for the best master's thesis in criminology was granted to Jasmien Bougrine in 2018, and the Gülen Chair award for the best intercultural master thesis (KULeuven) in 2019.

3 Peul and Wolof are West African languages spoken in Senegal, Gambia, Congo, Guinea and Nigeria, among others

The study was inductive with a bottom-up approach, and we used different qualitative methods to give a voice to these urban women and to avoid controlling or leading their answers. I asked the participants to collect photos they considered characteristic, important or special in their everyday life. Fotohistorias is participatory photographic research often used to study minority or marginalized groups and to present stories that are less expected or less visible in current media and power structures. The collected photos served as a starting point for one focus group with four respondents and one interview with one respondent. Both the focus group and the interview were focused on in-depth conversations and connections with these women and were semi-structured, as the participants were asked to choose a picture and to talk about it. This way, the participants were able to introduce, emphasize and elaborate on the topics they wanted to (Yefimova, Neils, Newell, & Gomez, 2015). This resulted in rich data on values, motivations, feelings and meanings. Initially, two focus groups were planned. Due to a short time frame and for practical reasons, the second focus group was replaced by a one-to-one interview. The interview and focus group were conducted in French, Dutch or a mixture of both languages. The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analysed with MAXQDA software.

Me and us

From the data, five identity categories emerged in which the participants recognized themselves: "me as a basketball player", "me as a student", "me as a friend and family member", "me as a resident of Brussels" and "me as an individual". Almost all the stories and photos could be related to one of these categories, emerging as important components of the identity of these urban women.



Figure 1
Basketball player
Gym



Figure 2
Student
Blackboard



Figure 3
Friends and family member
Movie tickets

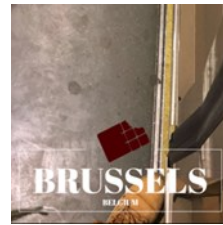


Image 4
Resident Brussels
Metro

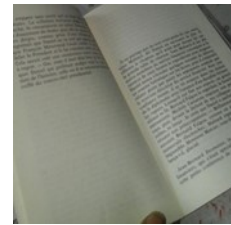


Image 5
Individual
Book

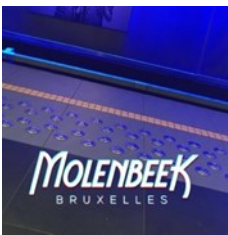
By listening to their self-narratives and assuming a constructionist approach in which "absolute truths" do not exist (Drake, Fergusson, & Briggs, 2014; Flick, 2004; Luyten, Nuytiens, Christiaens, & Dumortier, 2018; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2016), we were able to distinguish some new perspectives. While the general image of living in Brussels is rather negative, the participants repeatedly talked about the city's positive side. The city is the place where they grew up, built memories and can be independent.

*This is Brussels, and since everything I do takes place in Brussels and since we live in Brussels, it is also like being ... independent you know, our parents don't need to drop us off somewhere the whole time.*⁵ (participant 1)

Similar stories were found in the other identity categories. As students, the participants emphasize the importance and the fun of going to school and developing themselves. When they talked about the basketball project, pleasure, friendships and participation in extra sporting activities like adventure camps and reunions were emphasized. The participants also stressed the small things in life, their own uniqueness and how they appreciate spending time with their family and friends.

Me and them

While the young women identify themselves in these categories, this self-identification does not match the identification applied by others to them, or at least the way they feel others identify them. Skin colour, the negative stigma connected to Brussels/Molenbeek and gender become more important when we introduce social processes and other persons.



Yes, or it is like "aaah Molenbekers [people from Molenbeek]" (...). So they call us names or they say like, really rude, or ... to us but we do understand them [we understand Dutch] so we are ... we lose our focus on the game, we cannot concentrate anymore ... (participant 2)

Figure 6
Molenbeek

Similar processes take place across different identity categories. The participants point out the discrimination they experience based on skin colour, gender and the negative stigma correlated to Brussels.



Yes, my parents always tell me that we have to work more than our co-students at school who are white because we are coloured, so it is harder for us. If we don't have a diploma, what are we going to do for ... (participant 4)

Figure 7
Women

Not everyone is ... there are always stereotypes that ... "yes, women are good for staying at home, they are good for..." , in the sense of ... how do I say this (participant 2)

Sermijn (2013) defines the Other as a combination of other persons, social language and discourses interacting as co-constructors of self-narratives. Consequently, the Other plays an indistinguishable role in the construction of our own self-narratives and identity (Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, Mastari, & Siongers, 2016). Different aspects of these women's social identity (e.g. ethnicity, gender, appearance) can then

⁵ All the quotes are translated from Dutch or French. In this process, we tried to stay as close as possible to the original meaning.

lead to labels and stereotypes. The social identity theory as developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) indicates this process and the creation of an in-group on the one hand and an out-group ("the others") on the other. By categorizing and stereotyping these women into non-dominant identity groups, a process of othering takes place. These processes create expectations and control interactions (Bourabain & Verhaeghe, 2018; Lutz, 2002; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016).

Experienced discrimination should not be underestimated as it may lead to the development of a negative self-image and create negative consequences for one's own identity (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016). It appears that these processes continue to exist in a society proclaiming to be free of racism and sexism, also called a "post-racial" or "post-feminist" society. The results rather support the idea of a "colour-blind" or "gender-blind" society in which it is claimed that all people are equal, but in fact (in reality) they are not. Everyday discrimination emphasizes these hidden forms of discrimination in significant life events as well as in everyday and recurrent situations (Bourabain & Verhaeghe, 2018).

(...) Because, for example, the boys can go out to play with their friends, but the girls cannot because the parents believe that... how to say this ... they will go out to do stupid things with boys and stuff like that. (participant 5)

While these hidden forms of discrimination are minimized and even denied, their consequences should not be underestimated. Experienced discrimination is linked, among other things, to social problems and decreased personal well-being (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016). In addition, attributional ambiguity includes hidden forms of discrimination in combination with uncertainty about why someone acts, or their wider motives. This means that people cannot distinguish any longer whether someone acts based on their personal qualities or based on characteristics of their social identity (in this case: being a woman, being black and living in/playing for Molenbeek). As a consequence, insecurities about the motivations of people can lead to attributional anxiety. When one expects to be discriminated against or is conscious of being a member of a stigmatized group, negative experiences will more often be perceived as discrimination. Finally, the rejection identification model highlights the risk of coping with these processes through group identification, reinforcing identification with "social equals" and experiencing a higher degree of discrimination (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016).

In these processes, it is important to emphasize the multifactorial nature of experienced discrimination. The young women find themselves on multiple axes (perceived as non-dominant or deviant in society) of social exclusion. An intersectional vision (Crenshaw, 1989; Kambel, 2001), in which different social signifiers are recognized, is therefore recommended. Processes such as self-identification, socialization, internationalization and stereotyping by oneself, others and society are all included in such a vision (Van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2009). Attention to intersectionality then allows us to create a higher degree of visibility and inclusion (ELLA, 2014).

It is not because you are a girl and because you have a coloured skin that you cannot skateboard. (participant 5)

Yes, it is just as we As we are standing... There are benches and you just have to cross the field. Then you see all these eyes watching you like you are something weird. And then you think like “yes, alright I am black I am from Molenbeek, yes, I play basketball, yes, I can do things yes ... but in the end ...” (participant 2)

Us and the basketball project

As the women were connected through basketball, the project had a dominant place in their conversations. It is important here to distinguish an internal (within the club) and external (contact with the outside world) frame. The participants indicate that the project helps them to develop and engage themselves, build friendships, positive peer relations and social contacts, and to develop individual and social skills. This means that some important SFD goals are reached (Deelen et al., 2015; Vandermeerschen & Scheerder, 2015).

After school, we meet and then we go to the movies, we go to eat something, or when there are birthday parties, I invite them, or when my niece gets married I ... or even not my family ... to say that when we are not playing basketball, we do other things [together]. (participant 3)

However, when the women talk about the external frame (how outsiders look at them), they point out their experiences with stereotypes, othering and conflicts. SFD goals such as multiculturalization, ethno-cultural encounters and social participation (Elling, 2004; Herbots, 2011) are not achieved and are even experienced in a negative way. Contrary to what is expected, participation in this project makes them aware of being different. For example, some participants indicate that they will leave the team and join a team playing in the French-speaking league because they think there is more diversity and expect less discrimination.

(...) and when we, I don't know, we touch them, drama is created, so I decided ... I'm not saying it won't exist in the French-speaking league but ... (participant 2)

It will be less because there is more of a mix on the French-speaking side than on the Dutch-speaking side. (participant 3)

They feel their opponents, as well as supporters and even the referees, treat them based on their social identity, rather than on their actions and basketball skills. While they apply the label of “basketball player” to themselves, the “others” label them as “black” or “Molenbeker” and a process of othering is experienced. Consequently, no unambiguous answer can be presented since the goals of SFD programmes are not reached in an unequivocally positive or negative way.

Between them, they [the younger players in the club] are used to diversity, so they cannot understand that when we go to a game somewhere else, they are the only black girl team, Arab and so on, and all the other teams when you arrive at the reception, and so there are only white people and they do not mix between club A and B and ... they stay like this Or when the refs do not whistle for them and stuff like that, the little ones do not understand why And you, you see it And explain this to a child?! Because the white kids don't do this on purpose as they too are amongst whites only there, you see, so it's like that. (participant 4)

Conclusion and reflection

Through a participant-oriented and open research approach, we were able to gain insight into the stories of a group that up until now has remained underexplored and hence invisible. Theoretical expectations of SFD programmes do not always correspond with the practice: while some of the goals are reached, others are absent or even experienced in the opposite way.

This study has explained the importance of these urban women's self-narratives in social programmes and issues. Some major and valuable understandings were discussed and analysed. As a consequence, this study also demonstrates the value of a bottom-up, open and inclusive research approach. Urban youth should be approached as subjects instead of objects. They should be able to speak up for themselves and spread their opinions on themes concerning them. It is important to recognize but also to acknowledge these groups and the contemporary issues they have to deal with. Listening to their stories showed us the importance of recognizing everyday discrimination and the importance of the role of “the Other”.

Unfortunately, Belgian anti-discrimination laws are falling short since they do not cover everyday and hidden discrimination. The current discourse denying discrimination needs to be replaced by one that acknowledges its existence, whereupon a conclusive and interdisciplinary policy can be put in place, both on a national level and on the level of the basketball federation.

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