The Role of Leisure in the Assimilation of Brazilian Immigrants into Japanese Society: Acculturation and Structural Assimilation through Judo Participation

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The purpose of this study was to examine how a leisure activity (i.e., judo) affected the assimilation of Brazilian immigrants in Japan. Researchers hypothesized that judo participation would affect the processes of assimilation, particularly acculturation and structural assimilation. Based on the results of observations, informal interviews, and questionnaires conducted with Brazilian judo participants and their parents as well as the results of formal interviews held with the judo instructors, the hypothesis was confirmed. This result suggests that there are multiple ways in which leisure organizations can work with immigrants to help them adjust to a new society. This study contributes to the growing, yet still understudied, area of immigrant leisure research, and it provides a unique perspective by examining the experiences of Brazilian immigrants living in Japan.

Keywords: assimilation, immigrants, Japan, judo, leisure

1. Introduction

Researchers (e.g., Castles, 2002) have begun to recognize that the mobility of populations across borders is inextricably linked to other flows accompanying globalization. Although Western countries often view immigration as only a Western issue, some non-Western countries are also experiencing significant increases. In Japan, for instance, the number of alien registrations reached more than two million by the end of 2008; an increase of 47% over the past decade (Immigration Bureau, 2009). Immigrants often struggle adjusting to their new socio-cultural environment and experience acculturative stress (Berry et al., 2002). For example, according to Ishida (2003), many immigrants in Japan struggle adjusting to Japanese society because of language and communication barriers, difficulties educating their children, and problems adapting to Japanese culture and customs. This is particularly true for immigrants from Brazil, most of who are of Japanese ancestry (Onai, 2003a). In fact, the acculturative stress experienced by the members of this group became so acute that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2003, 2004) held symposiums focused specifically on Brazilian immigrants in 2003 and 2004. On the other hand, some Japanese people appear to feel uneasy because of differences between Japanese and Brazilian cultures and customs (Onai, 2003b); and this uneasiness has been heightened by reports of increased juvenile crime committed by Brazilian youth (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2004).

Although research on experiences of assimilation, of which acculturative stress is one component, has increased in leisure studies, it remains under-examined (Floyd et al., 2008). Studies of how leisure, leisure activities, or even specific types of leisure-such as different types of sports-affect assimilation are rare even though, in regard to the last, early sport sociologists often examined this
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2. Literature Review

2.1. Assimilation Studies

Although many researchers attempted to define and explain assimilation in the early 20th century, Gordon’s (1964) assimilation model became predominant. Simply put, assimilation refers to the process whereby the minority group comes to accept and internalize the values and culture of the dominant group (Gordon, 1964). Gordon both expanded the discussion of assimilation and distinguished among seven different variables or sub-processes: (1) cultural assimilation (or acculturation), (2) structural assimilation, (3) martial assimilation (or amalgamation), (4) identificational assimilation, (5) attitude receptional assimilation, (6) behavioral receptional assimilation, and (7) civic assimilation. Though Gordon’s assimilation model has been widely used, Williams and Ortega (1990) pointed out that the validity of the typology was not tested, and suggested that the seven sub-processes could be reduced to three: (1) structural assimilation, (2) acculturation, and (3) receptional assimilation.

Given that both Gordon (1964) and Williams and Ortega (1990) incorporated acculturation and structural assimilation into their assimilation models, these two sub-processes would seem central dimensions for assimilation studies. In leisure studies, Floyd and Gramann (1993) also only surveyed these two dimensions of assimilation, therefore, the present study also focuses on acculturation and structural assimilation.

Regarding acculturation, more specifically, Gordon (1964) defined acculturation as a “change of cultural patterns to those of the host society.” According to Warner and Srole (2005), immigrant cultures can be divided by two aspects, language and religion. Because most of the previous studies (e.g., Williams and Ortega, 1990) have been concerned about acculturation through language and religion, this study also concentrates on these two phenomena as indicators of acculturation.

In terms of structural assimilation, Gordon (1964) defined it as a “large scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on a primary group level.” Furthermore, he regarded structural assimilation as “the keystone of the arch of assimilation.” Yinger’s (1981) definition of structural assimilation provides further insights into this phenomenon. Yinger defined structural assimilation as a process in which a set of shared interactions is developed because of contact between two or more groups from separate sub-societies. Similarly, Williams and Ortega (1990) focused on “primary contacts with persons other than those in one’s own ethnic group.” Based on Yinger’s and Williams and Ortega’s work, we examine whether a leisure setting can lead to social interaction between Brazilian and Japanese children. This interaction, in turn, is conceived of as an indicator of structural assimilation.

2.2. Sport and Assimilation

Some early sport sociologists were also influenced by Gordon’s (1964) assimilation theory. Pooley (1968) and Day (1981) examined the role of sport (i.e., soccer) in the assimilation of ethnic groups into North American society. Whereas Pooley concluded that “with some exceptions, participation in ethnic soccer is not conducive to furthering assimilation,” Day reported that participating in ethnic soccer clubs could potentially promote the process of assimilation. Both researchers’ studies revealed, to some degree, the relationship between sport participation and assimilation, but they unfortunately overlooked an important characteristic of sport. That is, according to Allison (1982a), that sport can represent distinctive expressions or patterns of behavior in different cultures. Thus, given the limited history and lack popularity of soccer in North America (at least at that time), soccer was not a suitable sport for determining immigrants’ assimilation in their work.
Nogawa (1983) recognized this limitation and so focused on basketball (which has its origins in America, Allison, 1982a) to examine how participation in ethnic sport clubs affected the rate of assimilation of Japanese in the United States. He concluded that “participation in ethnic sport clubs was apparently not a causal factor favoring the assimilation of Japanese-American high school males.” Even though he selected basketball to assess the effects of sport on assimilation, his study participants were Japanese-Americans who belonged to a Japanese American basketball league that was, to some degree, isolated from American mainstream society. Therefore, as Nogawa expected, participation in basketball did not affect their assimilation process.

In contrast, however, there are some researchers (Kitano, 1969; Lam, 1933) who have reported that, for Japanese-Americans living in America, participating in baseball or basketball leagues played a role in accelerating the rate of acculturation. Given the above, in conjunction with Allison (1982a) and Nogawa’s (1983) propositions, a dominant or “indigenous sport,” such as basketball or baseball in America or martial arts in Japan, would affect the processes of assimilation. Because martial arts are based on Japanese customs (Shishida, 1998), they are assumed to be significant vehicles to affect the assimilation of immigrants and members of an ethnic minority group in Japan. Thus, our study hypothesis is that judo, a valued and traditional Japanese sport, will affect the processes of assimilation, particularly acculturation and structural assimilation, of Brazilian immigrants into Japanese society.

Although the process of assimilation involves critical issues for immigrant’s children (e.g., education, childcare; Onai, 2003a), previous research has focused primarily on either adolescents or adults. Thus, to address the difficulties that Brazilian children face, and to expand our understanding of the relationship between assimilation and leisure, this study focuses specifically on children.

3. Method

3.1. Survey Areas and Descriptions of the Judo Schools

The towns of Ooizumi and Oota in the Gunma Prefecture were selected as this study’s survey areas. Ooizumi, in particular, has the highest percentage of foreigners in Japan, and most of these are Brazilians (Onai, 2003a). Whereas the population of foreign residents in Japan is 1.56 million (or 1.2% of the total population; The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2005), there are 6,774 foreign residents in Ooizumi (or 16.1% of the total population; Ooizumi Public Relations Magazine, 2009).

One reason why Brazilians have gathered in these two Japanese towns is because the nearby factories (e.g., Fuji Heavy Industry, Sanyo Electric Company) provide employment opportunities (Onai, 2003a). Onai (2003a) found, however, that the work and living environment often led Brazilians to become segregated from Japanese society. Given this situation, the Gunma Prefectural Police Department established two martial arts schools in the Ooizumi and Oota Police Stations in May 2007 in order to provide Brazilian immigrants and native-born Japanese children an opportunity to interact with each other.

These schools were mainly comprised of Brazilian and Japanese elementary students, with the maximum number of participants being 30 in each school. The number of participants fluctuated in each class because of absence, the arrival of new participants, or participants quitting without notice. Therefore, the exact number of Brazilian and Japanese participants was indeterminable, although 25 Brazilian and 18 Japanese children (male \( n = 33 \) vs. female \( n = 10 \)) participated in the judo schools when we distributed our questionnaires. Classes were held twice a week in the Ooizumi police station and once a week in the Oota police station. Tuition was free and judo uniforms were provided by the Gunma Prefectural Police Department.

3.2. Procedure

Four instruments or methods of collecting data were utilized to explore the study hypothesis: (1) observations, (2) formal interviews, (3) informal
interviews, and (4) written questionnaires. Data were collected between August 2007 and April 2008. The observations were designed to examine assimilation in two different dimensions, acculturation and structural assimilation. It mainly focused on Brazilian participants' use of Japanese language (acculturation) and interactions with Japanese instructors and participants (structural assimilation). Based on Gold's (1958) classification, “complete observer” and “participant-as-observer” methodologies were employed in this study to obtain a variety of information. Observations were conducted 20 times (6 times as a complete observer and 14 times as a participant-as-observer). Whereas the observations as a complete observer were conducted by taking field notes and by taking photographs, the observations as participant-as-observer were carried out by participating in judo along with the subjects, and field notes were taken after classes.

The formal interviews conducted with the judo school instructors were designed to obtain their perceptions of study participants and information on the judo schools, such as the latter's history and policies. The formal interviews were held with two male judo instructors of the Ooizumi and Oota schools, both of whom were also Gunma Police officers, in August 2007 and April 2008 respectively. The informal interviews were carried out with the children who participated in the study and their parents in order to obtain data which could not be observed in the schools, such as religious behaviors and school and daily life information. The informal interviews were held during classes and break times.

The questionnaires were employed to obtain socio-demographic information from child study participants; information such as age, sex, and type of school they were attending. Participants were also asked to rate, using five-point bipolar scales, changes in their Japanese language skills (i.e., not improved to improved) and number of Japanese friends (i.e., not increased to increased). Additionally, their parents were asked to complete a questionnaire composed of items that we expected the children would not be able to answer, that is, their children’s religious affiliation, place of birth, generational status as immigrants, and length of time living in Japan. The questionnaires were administered to the Brazilian participants and their parents under the supervision of the judo instructors. A total of 25 Brazilian participants and 13 of their parents completed the questionnaires.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

The average age of the children in this study was 9.2 years (range: 5 to 13 years). The majority of the children were male ($n = 20$ vs. female $n = 5$). Some of these ($n = 9$) attended Japanese public schools, whereas others ($n = 15$; one individual unknown) attended Brazilian schools. Based on the parent questionnaire results, it was discovered that eight of the children were Catholic and five were atheists. In terms of the children’s birth place, seven were born in Japan whereas the other four were born in Brazil (two individuals unknown). In addition, four of the participants were third generation, whereas the remaining seven were fourth generation (two individuals unknown). Lastly, on average, the children had lived in Japan 8.5 years, with the range being from six to 11 years.

4.2. Acculturation

In the judo schools, Japanese language was used in every situation, such as judo lessons, greetings, calls, and replies. Because judo is a sport that requires an opponent, Brazilians had to communicate in Japanese during pair practice. It should be noted that instructors reported intentionally forming pairs between Brazilian and Japanese participants as much as possible. For example, one of the instructors said during a formal interview that “I know it is hard for Brazilians to practice using Japanese, but this will be a good chance for them to learn Japanese.” Judging from the above, this judo school provides an opportunity for language acquisition to the Brazilians.

However, most Brazilians were not able to speak or understand Japanese very well except for the Brazilians who belonged to Japanese public schools. To resolve this language difficulty, the instructors hung a diagram that explained the human body in two languages, Japanese and Portuguese (the native language in Brazil). Everyone subsequently learned some words using the picture before each lesson. As a result of this change, the Brazilian participants began speaking simple Japanese words more
frequently. It is important to highlight that not only did the Brazilians learn the Japanese language but the Japanese participants also learned the Portuguese language. As time passed, the pairs showed an attitude of understanding toward the partner’s language and each other. For example, it was observed that a Japanese participant tried to teach his Brazilian partner how to perform assigned judo techniques using simple words and body language during pair practice. In fact, 64.0% ($n = 16$) of the Brazilian participants responded that their Japanese language had either improved or somewhat improved through attending the judo schools. Furthermore, during an informal interview, a Brazilian parent reported her perceptions of the improvement of her son’s Japanese language through the judo school.

As well as language acquisition, another Brazilian parent answered to an open-ended question in the questionnaire that his/her child began respecting Japanese customs (which was assumed to include moral education, such as replies, greetings, or courtesy) by attending the judo school. Moral education was also emphasized in the judo schools. Before and after judo lessons participants always made a line to greet and bow to the instructors to express their respect. Participants were also required to reply in Japanese when the instructors talked to them during lessons. Therefore, it is not too surprising to find that morals began to change as a result of attending judo school. This discovery is congruent with Nonaka’s (2000) proposition that the main purpose of judo is the cultivation of the mind and moral education as well as physical education.

In contrast to language acculturation, the results from the questionnaires and the informal interviews showed that there seemed to be no changes in behaviors related to religion. Most of the parents ($n = 8$) were Catholics, hence some participants usually went to church on Sunday and some read the Bible. For example, in the informal interviews, one of the participants said that “I go to church every weekend with my family.” Additionally, a Brazilian participant’s grandmother explained how important religion is for them and reported that her grandson prays twice a week. This discovery was congruent with Stodolska and Livengood’s (2006) finding that non-essential elements of the mainstream culture appeared to be assimilated, whereas ethnic heritage, such as the religious influence on Muslim women’s clothing, was likely to be retained.

Gramann and Allison (1999) also posited about the process of selective acculturation and its relationship to leisure. According to them, some ethnic minorities will become more like members of the dominant society in their recreation as they assimilate, however, recreational behavior that reflects core cultural values will be sustained, regardless of assimilation pressures. In this case, through judo participation, language appeared to be assimilated quickly, whereas religious behavior, which is considered to be a core cultural trait, did not appear to be assimilated.

### 4.3. Structural Assimilation

There were mainly two situations, such as judo practice and cleaning-up, which brought about contact between Brazilian and Japanese participants. As mentioned earlier, participants practiced in pairs regardless of ethnic background because the instructors usually required them to do so. Moreover, all participants were required to clean up the judo hall regardless of their ethnic background before lessons. These practice and cleaning routines brought about contact between participants having different ethnic backgrounds. As time passed, some of the participants who arrived early at the judo hall began playing tag and also played on the mats, thus showing no apparent concern about ethnic background. In fact, 68.0% ($n = 17$) of the Brazilian participants responded that the number of Japanese friends they had either increased or somewhat increased through attending judo school. Similarly, during an informal interview, a Japanese parent reported that her son made some Brazilian friends through the judo school. Additionally, another Japanese parent told the observer that her son and daughter were invited to a Brazilian friend’s house. Thus, judo school acted as a “go-between” for Brazilian and Japanese participants.

In contrast, participants generally divided into two groups during break times. It should be noted that they did not cluster together according to ethnic memberships, but rather they gathered together based on language (i.e., Japanese and Portuguese). Thus, it would be sufficient to say that language plays an important role in promoting structural assimilation. In other words, acculturation may
bring structural assimilation, a finding congruent with Gordon’s (1964) proposition that structural assimilation occurs after acculturation. However, given the earlier examples where Brazilians and Japanese participants played together without concern for ethnic background even though they did not share a common language, structural assimilation may occur before acculturation, as Williams and Ortega (1990) insisted. Given these contradictory results, assimilation appears to be a multi-dimensional process (Barkan, 1995).

In summary, the above findings about acculturation and structural assimilation supported our hypothesis, which was that participating in judo would affect the assimilation of Brazilian immigrants into Japanese society.

5. Conclusion

In this study we attempted to clarify the effects of judo participation on the assimilation of Brazilian immigrants into Japanese society. This study found that judo participation affected the assimilation process of Brazilian immigrants living in Japan. As Yamaguchi (2006) suggested that sport clubs in Japan can play a role in promoting integration, this result shows that there are multiple ways in which leisure organizations can work with immigrants to help them adjust to a new society.

As with any research, this study has limitations. For example, the length of the study (i.e., nine months) may not have been long enough to fully investigate assimilation. This is one reason why, for example, Williams and Ortega (1990) recommend the use of extended longitudinal designs to improve our understanding of assimilation. There is also a possibility that other factors affected participants’ assimilation rather than participating in judo. For instance, the improvement that some Brazilian participants reported in their Japanese language skills might have been a result of them attending a Japanese school. Similarly, in terms of structural assimilation, participants might have gathered during break times based on type of school and not language preferences.

Having acknowledged these limitations, however, we still believe that this study contributes to the growing, yet still understudied, area of immigrant leisure research, and that it provides a unique perspective by examining the experiences of Brazilian immigrants living in Japan.

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