

Beyond the Game: Basketball's Role in Fostering Social Integration for Newcomers in NYC

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Abstract. Basketball, a low-cost and largely non-verbal sport, can operate as a practical entry point for newcomers seeking footing in New York City. Through semi-structured interviews, this study follows how participation reorganizes social life at two scales: the interpersonal (friendships, cross-cultural contact) and the individual (feelings of competence, recognition, and belonging). Evidence suggests that the court's meritocratic norms help participants who face language or cultural barriers to take part and to be seen. Yet inclusion is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Women and others from underrepresented backgrounds recount exclusionary moments and the unease of male-dominated environments, which limit access to the same benefits. Interpreting these patterns with Yuval-Davis's theory of belonging and Putnam's account of social capital, the article distinguishes bonding within close networks from bridging across difference and shows how basketball can enable both under specific conditions. It concludes with actionable recommendations for community programs to widen access and with a call for intersectional, comparative work across sports and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Sport, Social integration, New York City, Basketball

1. Introduction

Sports spaces have long served as an informal field for intercultural contact; yet, their role in the social integration of newcomers remains uneven and varies by context. As cities across the globe experience increasing migration flows, researchers and policymakers have turned to sport as a potential tool for fostering belonging, breaking down cultural barriers, and building inclusive communities. However, while organized sport programs have received growing attention from scholars, the informal, everyday dynamics of sport participation are comparatively underexplored. This paper investigates how basketball, one of the most prominent and accessible sports in New York City, facilitates or constrains social integration among newcomers, including international students, recent immigrants, and domestic migrants.

New York City is an apt proving ground for this study: a hyper-diverse metropolis where a dense history of street and pickup basketball intersects with everyday migration. The same spaces that make quick encounters possible—campus courts, neighborhood leagues, public parks—also circulate tacit codes and embodied habits. These norms ease entry for some players while rendering participation fragile or uneven for others across lines of gender, race, and culture.

Our evidence comes from semi-structured interviews with seven newcomers—arriving from China, Nigeria, Canada, Los Angeles, and upstate New York—whose trajectories and basketball literacies differ markedly. Across cases, basketball reorganized social life in the city: it opened corridors to

friendship and recognition, but it also exposed frictions tied to language, preferred styles of play, and gendered expectations. In short, the court can function as a bridge, yet not for everyone and not in the same way.

Guided by this tension, the paper treats sport-based integration as both structural and affective. It asks how newcomers mobilize basketball to form relationships, what mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion they encounter on the ground, and what these mechanisms imply for the broader promise—and the limits—of recreational sport in hyper-diverse urban settings. The contribution lies in shifting attention from institutional programs to informal participation pathways and in detailing how “belonging” on the court is continuously negotiated, unevenly shared, and sometimes openly contested.

2. Literature review

Newcomer integration is not a single process but an uneven interplay of emotional, cultural, and structural forces. Prior work indicates that social integration can satisfy core psychological needs—belonging, competence, and relatedness—thereby expanding newcomers’ capacity to adapt and participate [1]. As social ties deepen and access to community resources improves, adaptation typically becomes easier; conversely, when such ties and resources are thin, participation stalls. Beyond well-being, integration bears directly on employment, housing, and health trajectories, underscoring its material stakes [2].

Urban settings such as New York City sharpen these contradictions. Diversity is widely celebrated, yet everyday life is patterned by segregation, unequal claims to public space, and displacement pressures associated with gentrification [3]. These conditions contour where relationships can form and who is welcomed once there. Public venues—and sport spaces in particular—operate as important sites for cultivating belonging, while simultaneously remaining contested arenas in which inclusion is negotiated and sometimes refused.

Sport figures prominently in this literature because of its capacity to assemble routine interaction, shared practices, and cross-difference encounters that can accumulate into social capital [4]. Following Putnam, social capital denotes the networks and norms that facilitate cooperation and trust, with a key distinction between bonding (strengthening ties within relatively homogeneous groups) and bridging (connecting across lines of division) [5]. Evidence from European and North American contexts suggests that clubs and recreational leagues can generate either or both forms, depending on how participation is organized and governed [6,7].

Yet participation is stratified. Newcomers—particularly those racialized or from working-class backgrounds—encounter cost, transport, scheduling, and documentation hurdles, as well as cultural exclusion and language-based misunderstandings [8]. Gender further structures access: in many settings women face thinner programming, fewer safe or welcoming time slots, and stigmas that depress sustained involvement [4]. The implication is straightforward but important: sport’s integrative promise hinges not only on availability but on social and cultural accessibility.

Basketball is salient here given its popularity, low direct costs, and strong urban footprint. New York City alone hosts more than 700 courts, many outdoors and free to enter, which lowers material barriers to initial participation. Two features repeatedly flagged by scholars matter for integration. First, coordination on the court relies heavily on non-verbal cues—tempo, spacing, rotation—which allows players without a shared language to cooperate meaningfully. Second, selection is largely meritocratic: performance on the floor tends to outweigh social background, with skill, effort, and teamwork often judged more than race, gender, or class identity [9].

Still, openness does not erase hierarchy. Tacit court norms, preferred play styles, and unspoken pecking orders can inhibit a newcomer’s ability to claim space, form partnerships, or be selected into runs. Building on this scholarship, the present study turns to informal basketball in New York City to

examine how newcomers experience inclusion and exclusion in practice, and what those experiences reveal about the broader possibilities—and limits—of sport in urban integration.

3. Theoretical framework

This study reads informal basketball through two complementary lenses: Putnam's account of social capital, which specifies the relational architecture through which cooperation and opportunity circulate [5], and Yuval-Davis's theory of belonging, which surfaces how membership is felt, negotiated, and recognized across everyday settings [10]. Taken together, the frameworks allow us to track who connects to whom and on what terms, as well as how those connections register emotionally and symbolically for newcomers in New York City.

Following Putnam, social capital refers to resources embedded in social networks—trust, shared norms, and patterned cooperation—that lower the costs of collective action [5]. Two forms matter here. Bonding capital consolidates ties among people who share salient attributes (language, culture, ethnicity), yielding dense support and close relationships. Bridging capital links across difference; these ties are typically looser yet often more consequential for accessing information, opportunities, and broader publics. In sport, bonding may emerge when co-nationals or culturally proximate players self-organize and reinforce internal solidarity, whereas bridging takes shape when participation brings newcomers into sustained contact with players they would not otherwise meet. Prior research shows that both forms can facilitate integration, but under different conditions: bonding forms readily; bridging tends to require repeated interaction and an environment that actively lowers social and cultural barriers [5-7]. In this study, Putnam's distinctions guide how we read interview accounts of teaming, selection into games, and the durability of ties beyond the court.

While social capital clarifies the structure of ties, it does not fully capture how inclusion is experienced. Yuval-Davis conceptualizes belonging as layered attachments and identifications through which people come to feel “of” a place, not merely present in it [10]. We attend to three levels. Emotional belonging concerns safety, comfort, and ease—the affective ground on which participation becomes thinkable. Social belonging concerns recognition as part of a group—being invited, counted on, or integrated into teams, leagues, and recurring runs. Political belonging concerns the validation of presence and identity within wider norms and hierarchies—whether one's cultural markers are respected or, conversely, misread, marginalized, or policed. Read this way, moments of welcome, hesitation, or exclusion on the court are not incidental; they index how belonging is organized and distributed even in ostensibly open, recreational spaces.

Analytically, the two frameworks work in tandem. Putnam helps explain how networks are produced through basketball (bonding vs. bridging and their enabling conditions), while Yuval-Davis helps explain what it feels like to inhabit those networks (emotional, social, and political belonging) and where that habitation frays. Our analysis therefore examines newcomers' narratives for (a) the kinds of ties they form via basketball and (b) the layered experiences that accompany those ties. The combination clarifies when basketball supports connection and identity-building among newcomers and where these processes stall, revealing both the promise and the limits of sport-based integration in a hyper-diverse city.

4. Methodology

To examine how basketball shapes social integration for newcomers in New York City, the study adopted a qualitative, interview-based design grounded in an interpretive orientation. The objective was to recover participants' lived experience—how they read inclusion, negotiate identity, and assemble connections on and around the court. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit thick, situational accounts and to enable probing and clarification across diverse backgrounds. A qualitative

strategy was selected to privilege depth, context, and meaning over breadth or measurement, allowing the analysis to attend to nuances that standardized instruments would likely flatten.

4.1. Researcher position

The researcher is an international student and an active participant in the New York City basketball community. This position made it easier to access participants and build trust, but it also required ongoing reflection. To minimize potential bias, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal and regularly reviewed the interview data to remain aware of personal assumptions.

4.2. Participants and sampling

Seven participants took part in the study. All were newcomers to New York within the last five years. They came from China, Nigeria, Canada, Los Angeles, and upstate New York, and brought varied basketball backgrounds, including casual, club, and school-level experience.

Participants were recruited through convenience and purposeful sampling. The researcher reached out to individuals in existing sports networks and then utilized snowball referrals to expand the sample. The goal was to include participants with diverse experiences of basketball and integration.

4.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and were conducted in person at familiar locations, including parks, cafés, and campus spaces. An interview guide was used to keep conversations focused but open-ended. Topics included participants' basketball history, social relationships, comfort levels in various basketball settings, and any challenges they encountered.

4.4. Data analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic procedure [11], but with an explicitly inductive posture. First, transcripts were read and reread to establish familiarity and to surface early hunches about how participants narrated relationships, belonging, and exclusion in basketball settings. Second, line-by-line coding produced a wide slate of descriptive and interpretive tags. Third, these codes were clustered into provisional themes that captured patterned regularities across cases. Fourth, themes were iteratively reviewed—against both the coded extracts and the full data corpus—to test coherence, resolve overlaps, and split or merge where needed. Fifth, themes were defined and named with memo writing to clarify their boundaries and internal logic. Finally, a narrative account was produced that linked themes back to the study's questions. Throughout interpretation, core ideas from the theoretical framework—bonding, bridging, and layered belonging—were used not to predetermine categories but to deepen reading of inductively derived patterns.

4.5. Ethics

Ethical safeguards were integral to design and fieldwork. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to each interview. Participants were told the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw without penalty. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms; no direct identifiers appear in the report. All interactions were conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect, and care was taken to protect participants' privacy across recruitment, interviewing, and write-up.

5. Findings

5.1. Social benefits: connection and belonging through basketball

All participants described basketball as an impactful platform for making friends and forming social bonds after arriving in New York City. Many stated that at least half of their closest friends were made through basketball. These connections developed differently depending on the participants' backgrounds and the environments in which they played. For newcomers from non-English-speaking backgrounds, basketball served as a cultural entry point. Jack, an international student, reflected on how language made early interactions difficult: *"My English was bad when I first came. It was hard to communicate with people, let alone make friends. But one thing I knew for sure was how to play basketball. I felt more comfortable on the court... the courts were the most familiar thing to me at that time."*

In Jack's case, basketball helped ease the emotional discomfort of transition and provided a familiar setting for him to begin social engagement. This aligns with Yuval-Davis's concept of emotional belonging, where comfort and familiarity are precursors to a deeper connection. Leo emphasized the importance of frequency and shared experience. Through intramural basketball, he built close relationships with teammates: *"We got to see each other plenty of times each week. We trained together, adjusted to each other's play styles... eventually, it elevated our friendship."*

For Leo and others, basketball fostered bonding capital by creating tight-knit groups through regular collaboration, mutual learning, and shared competitive goals. Native English speakers, including domestic migrants like Joe and Olivia, used basketball more to strengthen existing relationships. Joe noted, *"One of my main friend groups was formed through basketball. We started playing in a local league, and after games, we'd go out together. We've been playing for four seasons now."* In these cases, basketball strengthened connections between different aspects of life, including work, socializing, and recreation. It fostered a deepening of trust and familiarity over time.

Several participants also described the role of basketball in communication. Jack and others noted that basketball's fast pace encourages non-verbal cues, which helped them feel understood even when language was a barrier. Simple movements, hand signals, and shared instincts on the court became a form of embodied communication, allowing participants to feel connected without needing fluent English.

Others found that basketball provided a space to express parts of themselves that were otherwise difficult to show. Leo explained: *"On the court, I can be me. I know what I'm doing, I can be creative and help my team win. That's not always easy in real life because of the language or culture barrier."* This experience reflects a form of social re-empowerment, where the court becomes a level playing field. Recognition is based on performance, not accent, status, or background. For some, this status extended beyond the court. Varsity players like Leo and Noah noted that being recognized for their athletic ability in class or on campus gave them confidence and visibility in broader social settings.

Together, these experiences illustrate how basketball helps newcomers build both social capital and a sense of belonging. Whether by forming new friendships, reinforcing trust, or providing a space for self-expression, basketball played a meaningful role in participants' early adjustment to life in New York.

5.2. Individual benefits: discipline, identity, and personal growth

Participants cast basketball as more than a place to socialize; it functioned as a personal scaffold during unsettled periods. Regular play, they noted, sustained motivation and sharpened focus, with small, repeatable goals—showing up for runs, completing drills, improving a specific move—feeding a broader sense of competence. Confidence accumulated on the court and bled into other routines

(work, study, language learning), partly because the sport supplied structure and purpose when daily life felt in flux. In this sense, basketball did not merely fill free time; it organized it, offering benchmarks of progress that anchored participants through transitions.

Olivia, a former high school athlete, spoke about how basketball helped her recover after a major injury: *“I really felt like I lost a part of my identity... But I had to figure out what’s next... I ended up writing a medical article... and used that time to focus on my career.”* Although she could no longer play at a competitive level, Olivia remained connected to basketball through training, reflection, and academic work. Her experience shows how sport can help individuals reshape their goals and identity after setbacks.

Noah also emphasized the importance of basketball in promoting discipline. After playing Division I basketball as an undergraduate, he chose to compete one more season in Division III while completing his master’s degree: *“It’s my last year playing. It’s about finishing something I care about and staying sharp.”*

Others, including Robert and Paul, approached basketball with similar seriousness. They had no varsity background, but they trained regularly and treated their improvement on the court as a reflection of their values. Robert: *“The way someone treats basketball reflects how they treat their life.”*

The court operated as a proving ground for confidence: a place to test limits and to practice small acts of agency. Even outside formal sport systems, participants described play as restoring a sense of control and direction—showing up, being selected into runs, executing a role—each a concrete decision that steadied them in unsettled periods.

Professional trajectories also intersected with the game. Noah and Olivia, both working in the sports business, linked their basketball involvement to access to mentors and hands-on experience. Jack emphasized a different vector: pickup play expanded his circles across cultural and professional lines, which, in turn, supported both social growth and career development. In these accounts, the court doubled as a networking commons without being reduced to one.

Across cases, basketball was more than a pastime. It imposed a mental scaffold and a discipline of practice that participants could carry into other domains, while offering a contained arena for identity work. Whether recovering from injury, planning for life after competitive sport, or simply trying to regain balance during a difficult stretch, they framed the court as a site for building self-trust and resilience.

5.3. Barriers to participation: discomfort, exclusion, and access

Gains in friendship and confidence were counterbalanced by friction points that narrowed who could participate and how. Gendered dynamics—male-dominated runs, tacit hierarchies around who calls plays or takes shots—left some spaces feeling guarded rather than welcoming. Language barriers complicated quick coordination and off-court small talk, subtly pushing newcomers to the margins when tempo rose. Practical constraints compounded these pressures: costs and uneven access (gear, league fees or sign-ups, crowded courts, inconvenient time slots) made regular participation harder to sustain. Taken together, these factors did not erase the benefits of play but conditionalized them, making inclusion contingent on context rather than guaranteed by the game itself.

Female player Olivia described pressure to perform and difficulty joining certain games. She shared: *“Sometimes it feels like I have to prove I belong. If I miss a shot early on, people stop passing me the ball. It’s hard to relax and just play.”* This experience illustrates how informal sports spaces can perpetuate gender norms, even without formal rules. For some, this affected their willingness to keep showing up.

Language was another barrier. Jack and Leo, who speak English as a second language, said that during their early months in New York, they struggled to understand jokes, directions, or in-game

talk. While basketball's non-verbal nature helped bridge the gap, they still felt out of place at times. Leo noted: *"People are nice, but I still miss things. Sometimes I feel like I'm not part of the inside group."*

Participants also pointed to cultural differences in play style and behavior. What counted as aggressive, competitive, or respectful varied across backgrounds. For newcomers, this often meant adjusting their approach or watching first to understand local norms.

Beyond social barriers, structural issues also made participation difficult. Indoor gym fees, league registrations, and travel costs were concerns for some, particularly in the early stages of their time in the city. Jack explained: *"I couldn't afford a gym membership when I first got here. So I mostly waited for decent weather and played outside."* Even with over 700 public courts in New York, participants said that finding the right environment where they felt safe, inclusive, and welcoming was not always easy. Some avoided courts that had a reputation for hostility or over-competitiveness. Others had trouble finding consistent groups to play with.

Taken together, these stories demonstrate that participation is not only about access, but also about comfort, recognition, and a sense of fit. Basketball offered many opportunities, but these opportunities were not equally accessible to everyone. Gender, language, experience, and income all shaped how participants engaged and how often they returned.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore how basketball contributes to the social integration of newcomers in New York City. The findings indicate that basketball can provide both interpersonal and individual benefits, although access to these benefits is not equally distributed. Framed by Yuval-Davis's theory of belonging and Putnam's model of social capital, the data illustrate how sport becomes a space where emotional connection and social mobility are negotiated.

Drawing from Putnam's concept of bonding capital, where tight, supportive networks are formed among people with similar identities. We identified that Basketball provided opportunities for newcomers to form close-knit relationships, particularly with peers from shared linguistic or cultural backgrounds. And from Putnam's bridging capital, many participants were able to build connections across cultural, racial, and professional backgrounds. These bridging relationships were fostered through regular interaction, shared goals, and the leveling effect of informal play. Still, these connections often required mutual adjustment, patience, and time.

Read through Yuval-Davis, the court functioned as a site of emotional belonging: newcomers felt noticed and valued through performance, teamwork, and simple presence. Yet this belonging was conditional and uneven. Women confronted gendered expectations and subtle exclusions; others ran up against language frictions, cultural misunderstandings, or economic constraints. Such limits make the politics of belonging visible—who counts as a legitimate participant, and on what terms.

Participants were not merely acted upon by these dynamics; they navigated, adapted, and at times pushed back. The court thus appeared not only as a space of assimilation but as a venue for identity negotiation. Olivia's trajectory captures this doubleness: injury altered her path, yet basketball remained central to how she understood herself and imagined future goals. Jack's experience points to a complementary mechanism: despite limited English, he built friendships through embodied coordination and shared play, underscoring how non-verbal communication can enable integration where conventional services do not.

For practitioners, these insights suggest that sport-based programming must go beyond access. Creating inclusive environments requires addressing gender dynamics, supporting linguistic diversity, and ensuring cultural sensitivity. Informal play has unique strengths, including its spontaneity, flexibility, and low barriers. But it must be accompanied by intentional design to be truly welcoming.

Future research might explore how these dynamics unfold in different sports or settings, and how changes over time (e.g., longer residence, shifting identities) affect newcomers' experiences. More comparative work across cities and immigrant groups could further refine our understanding of the limits and possibilities of sport as an integration tool.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how basketball contributes to the social integration of newcomers in New York City. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it highlighted the sport's unique ability to foster both interpersonal connections and individual growth. For many participants, basketball was more than a pastime. It was an entry point into an unfamiliar environment, a space where friendships could be built, identities expressed, and a sense of control regained.

The findings reaffirm the relevance of Putnam's and Yuval-Davis's frameworks in understanding urban sport spaces. On the court, newcomers built both bonding and bridging social capital, though not without limitations. While emotional belonging was often present, it was shaped by cultural familiarity, gender dynamics, and language fluency. The conditional nature of inclusion, especially for women and non-native English speakers, underscores that belonging in sport is always situated, contested, and uneven.

The analysis foregrounds participant agency. Whether adjusting to unfamiliar play styles, working across language gaps, or reorienting goals after injury, newcomers used basketball to practice resilience and to assemble a more coherent sense of self. These dynamics carry practical consequences for city recreation planners, sport organizations, and universities. Inclusion is not delivered by unlocked gates alone; it depends on environments where people from varied backgrounds can feel safe, be recognized, and have their voices register. In short, supporting integration through sport means designing and stewarding spaces that make participants feel safe, seen, and heard—so that the court functions not only as a venue for games but as infrastructure for belonging and identity development.

While limited in sample size and geographic scope, this research offers a detailed portrait of sport's integrative potential in one of the world's most diverse cities. Future work should expand this inquiry across different age groups, regions, and sports to deepen our understanding of the role of sport in shaping the experiences of migrants and newcomers. As cities continue to grow more diverse, sport remains a vital tool for building more connected communities.

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