

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Intercultural Learning Opportunities in International Voluntary Service in Sport: The Case of *Play Handball*

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#### Abstract

*In recent years, international volunteering has become very popular in Germany, and this also applies to the opportunities in sport-related development work. For young adults, this means familiarising themselves with a foreign culture and contributing their sport-related competences. At the same time, this field of work offers a wide variety of intercultural learning opportunities. This immediately raises the question of how such learning opportunities are designed and accompanied, and how they can lead to the acquisition of intercultural competences. In this study, eight young adults were interviewed about their voluntary service with the organisation Play Handball. The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis and interpreted through the lens of the Process Model of Intercultural Competence from Deardorff. The presentation of results is therefore guided by the central research question of which intercultural learning opportunities emerge in the reconstruction of key intercultural competences among the participants. The analysis demonstrates that the volunteers' prior sport-related experience created specific occasions for learning and reflection that fostered the development of intercultural competences. In particular, the introduction of handball, an underrepresented sport in South Africa, proved ambivalent: while it facilitated experiences of self-efficacy and intercultural learning, it simultaneously revealed colonial power asymmetries and Eurocentric dominance patterns, thereby necessitating critical postcolonial reflection.*

#### Introduction

In recent years, international volunteer service has gained popularity in Germany—this trend is also evident in the field of sports. For young adults participating in such programmes, engaging in voluntary service abroad means adapting to a new cultural environment while contributing their skills in sport-related contexts. These sporting environments offer a variety of intercultural learning opportunities for volunteers.

This raises the central question of how such learning moments are structured and experienced, and whether they contribute to the development of intercultural competencies or influence existing ones. Based on a document analysis, Schreiner, Mayer, and Kastrup (2020) argue that Germany's sport-related development initiatives, while diverse, remain fragmented and insufficiently embedded within a coherent national strategy. They emphasise the need for stronger policy frameworks, more rigorous evaluation, and

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critical engagement with the actual role and impact of sport in development cooperation.

Given the lack of empirical studies on these specific settings, this study draws on interviews with eight young adults from Germany and Switzerland who completed a volunteer service with the organisation Play Handball in South Africa.

The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis and interpreted through the lens of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence. The aim was to foreground the perspectives of the interviewees. The analysis addresses the guiding research question: What intercultural learning opportunities can be identified in the reconstruction of key intercultural competencies among participants in an international sports-related volunteer service?

Furthermore, the findings are discussed in relation to the goals of Play Handball to explore how the organisation can strengthen its conceptual approach to supporting children through sport-based project work.

### *Theoretical Framework*

**International Volunteering Service.** International volunteering is commonly defined as an activity undertaken abroad that involves voluntary, unpaid engagement in development cooperation. It is regarded as an educational experience abroad (Genkova & Schubert, 2020) and is offered by both publicly funded and private organisations. Volunteers typically participate in local projects or institutions, working primarily in education, social services, and health (AKLHÜ e.V., 2018). In recent years, this sector has experienced continuous growth and appears far from reaching saturation (Monshausen et al., 2018). However, particularly in the case of flexible volunteering programs, questions of quality and reliability have increasingly become subjects of critical debate

(Monshausen et al., 2018; Seidel & Stammsen, 2018). Private providers frequently lack clearly defined selection criteria and systematic mechanisms for evaluating activities and standards of volunteer support—both during and after the placement abroad. Even among publicly funded providers, evaluation practices remain the exception rather than the rule (Engels et al., 2008).

International volunteering is undertaken primarily by young adults who have completed secondary education (Abitur) (AKLHÜ e.V., 2018). Key motivations include interest in the host country and its culture, personal development, the pursuit of new experiences, and the desire to improve foreign language skills (Genkova & Schubert, 2020). The academic literature to date has primarily focused on the impact of volunteering on local host organisations and communities (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Guttentag, 2009; Wearing & Gard McGehee, 2013).

More recent German-language studies, however, have increasingly examined the individual characteristics and motivations of volunteers (Engels et al., 2008; Genkova & Schubert, 2020; Monshausen et al., 2018; Seidel & Stammsen, 2018). Despite this growing body of work, there remains a notable gap in empirical findings concerning intercultural learning opportunities in the context of international volunteering, particularly within the field of sport.

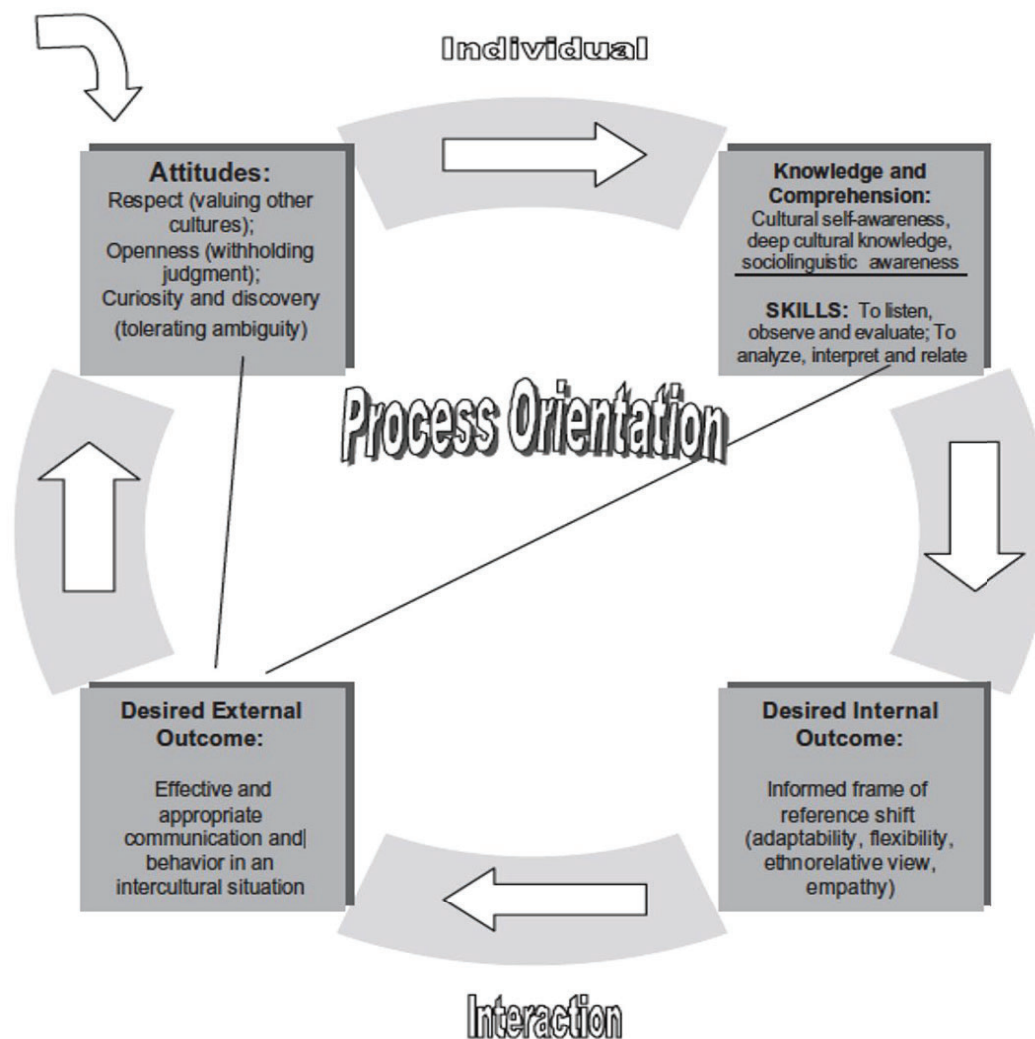


Figure 1. Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, p. 256)

**Learning Opportunities in Intercultural Contexts.** Due to a shifting perspective on immigration and integration, the field of intercultural competence has become a firmly established part of national research discourse. It is analysed from a variety of academic viewpoints (Schondelmayer, 2018). Although intercultural competence is now considered a key qualification of the 21st century (Boecker & Ulama, 2008; Schondelmayer, 2018), there is no universally accepted definition or consistent list of associated skills. The interpretations and research focuses vary significantly between disciplines.

Figure 1 shows the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006).

Most concepts of intercultural competence can be linked to three basic assumptions:

- There are different cultures.
- These cultures are associated with national and/or ethnic origins.
- Communicating with different cultures requires a specific form of social competence (Schondelmayer, 2018).

Intercultural competence is regarded as a collection of skills rather than a stand-alone form of action competence (Bolten, 2007); rather, it is a complex construct (Deardorff, 2006) that must be understood in conjunction with other theories of

competence and communication (Bolten, 2007). Notably, many definitions emphasise communication aspects (Auernheimer, 2005).

The acquisition of such competences is inherently linked to learning processes; consequently, attention must be directed toward learning within intercultural contexts. Intercultural learning “takes place when an individual is compelled to engage with a foreign cultural environment in some form” (Layes, 2009, p. 126). When this definition is combined with the perspective that interculturality emerges not only through interactions between different nations and cultures but also among individuals belonging to diverse social groups and possessing varying characteristics (Auernheimer, 2013), it becomes evident that opportunities for intercultural learning can be found in virtually all areas of social life.

However, a distinction must be drawn between learning and a learning opportunity. Learning occurs “when people discover novel perspectives and previously unknown knowledge for themselves and engage in processes of self-transformative learning. Learning becomes framed as a crossing of boundaries” (Schäffter, 1997, p. 693). For the unfamiliar to be perceived as a learning opportunity, an irritation, understood as a “signal indicating the crossing of meaning structures” (Schäffter, 1997, p. 694), is required. However, not every irritation necessarily leads to learning; this transformation requires active exploration and reflection on the part of the individual. Consequently, learning opportunities represent only the learning potential, which must be realised through conscious engagement and interpretive processing.

To better understand irritations in intercultural interactions, Auernheimer (2013) proposes four dimensions of intercultural encounter:

- Power asymmetries: Unequal relationships and resources among interaction partners.
- Collective experiences: (Historical) experiences of one cultural group in relation to another (e.g., colonialism).
- Stereotypes and images of others: Socially produced and widely accepted opinions/prejudices about a cultural group.
- Different cultural patterns or scripts: Behaviours shaped by socialisation within a cultural group, perceived as normative.

Intercultural learning can be initiated through specific learning opportunities, enabling the development of intercultural competences (Boecker & Ulama, 2008). Deardorff (2006) developed a process model that outlines the impact of intercultural learning in four domains (see Figure. 1). Deardorff’s model stands out for its process-oriented, consensus-based, and practice-oriented design, its holistic integration of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and outcomes, and its reflexivity toward power and contextual factors—offering clear advantages over more linear, narrower, or less application-oriented models (Ang et al., 2007; Bennett, 1986).

The four domains evolve through intercultural experiences, thereby expanding an individual’s intercultural competences. At the same time, the domains influence one another (Genkova & Schubert, 2020).

Acquiring intercultural competences during a stay abroad requires adaptation to the local culture, which can often be challenging (Genkova & Schubert, 2020), especially when initial enthusiasm gives way to negative experiences that lead to feelings of being overwhelmed or alienated (Bolten, 2007). The so-called culture shock can be overcome by accepting—and ideally understanding—cultural differences (Bolten, 2007). Understanding these differences often coincides with adaptation and identification with local conditions, a process referred to as acculturation (Bolten, 2007; Layes, 2009). The engagement with

foreign culture becomes intertwined with the individual's experience of their own culture (Layes, 2009).

In conclusion, irritations can serve as learning opportunities that initiate the development of intercultural competences. The following section explores how such intercultural learning opportunities can arise, specifically in the context of sport volunteering.

**Intercultural Learning Opportunities in Sport.** Sport holds significant potential for fostering intercultural competence—though not automatically. While several studies have demonstrated positive outcomes in this regard (Braun, 2020; Gieß-Stüber et al., 2020), the overall body of scientific evidence remains limited and inconclusive (Burrmann & Mutz, 2015).

In a comprehensive review, Svensson and Woods (2017) identified 955 sport-for-development organisations worldwide, the majority of which operate in Africa and predominantly employ football as their central intervention tool. Most of these programmes focus on areas such as education, health, and livelihood improvement. Existing research in the field of sport and development cooperation primarily reports positive social and educational impacts on young participants—findings largely derived from football-based, community-oriented qualitative projects. However, the available evidence remains fragmented and geographically uneven. While most projects are implemented in the Global South, much of the corresponding academic research continues to originate from institutions in the Global North (Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

Sport-based projects in development cooperation pursue diverse goals that can be addressed through sport (e.g., conflict resolution, health education, empowerment and self-determination, social inclusion, education, and prevention; Brand, 2020). However, the role of sport in development cooperation is also subject to criticism. The

global spread of modern sports has, in many regions, occurred alongside colonialism, leading to accusations that sport has been instrumentalised (Digel, 2008; Ndee, 2002). Digel (2008) argues that sport continues to act as a colonial power in international contexts by transmitting central elements and values of Western societies. In the context of development cooperation, this critique is understandable, as interventions often “reflect the classical model of externally defined development aid, reproducing North-South asymmetries” (Brand, 2020, p. 110). Moreover, many projects lack transparent impact evaluation, with noticeable discrepancies between the claimed goals and the actual outcomes of sport development programs (Brand, 2020). In response to this critique, it must be noted that, like many other development projects, sport-based initiatives face attribution problems—meaning that project outcomes are only partially attributable to the sport-specific interventions (Petry et al., 2020).

To ensure the success of sport projects in development cooperation, the personnel involved are considered a key factor (Schmid & Arnemann, 2020). Training them to deliver high-quality sports programs for children and youth is seen as a top priority.

## Methods and Materials

Play Handball is a non-profit sport and development organisation that aims to promote handball among children and young people (Play Handball, n.d.). The organisation supports local clubs and schools across Africa in building training and organisational structures. Its core activities include networking, training and continuing education of coaches, and the placement of volunteers. In addition to promoting technical sports competencies, Play Handball utilises the sport as “an educational tool for the personal development of individuals as well as for socio-economic and community development in a broader context” (Play

Handball, n.d.). The organisation places and supports volunteers within various projects in South Africa and Kenya. These volunteers mainly come from Germany and are typically young adults.

The sample comprised eight former volunteers from the organisation Play Handball. Participants were selected using purposive homogeneous sampling (Misoch, 2019). This approach was applied to ensure a group of cases with similar characteristics, thereby enabling meaningful comparison across participants (Döring & Bortz, 2016). Specific eligibility criteria were established for inclusion in the study. Participants have completed their volunteer service with Play Handball in South Africa within the past 5 years, with a minimum of 3 months. In addition, all participants grew up in a German-speaking country.

Homogeneous sampling in qualitative research facilitates the comparison of individual experiences and meaning-making processes. It also increases the likelihood that others similarly experienced situations encountered by one participant during their service abroad. For recruitment, the director of Play Handball contacted former volunteers. Eleven of them expressed interest in participating. Based on the eligibility criteria, eight were

selected for interviews (five women, three men).

All participants were provided with detailed information about the aims, procedures, and scope of the study prior to their participation. They were informed about their rights, including the right to decline participation or to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. Participation was entirely voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed or pseudonymised in the transcripts and in the reporting of the findings.

For data collection, the former volunteers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. To gain a detailed insight into the life worlds and perspectives of the former volunteers, the guide was deliberately kept open in many parts (Misoch, 2019).

The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018). The coding of the material was based on a category system (see Table 1), developed through both deductive and inductive category formation. Initially, categories were derived from the theoretical framework and used to structure the material deductively. In line with a dynamic

*Table 1. Main Categories and Subcategories*

Main Categories	Subcategories
K1 – Challenges	Communication; Language; Personal safety; Unknown conditions and structures
K2 – Experiences of Otherness	Feeling of foreignness; Discrimination; Privileged otherness
K3 – General Observations	Positive representations; Attitudes and mindsets in South Africa; Apartheid; Poverty; Crime; Cultural knowledge / general structures
K4 – Reflection on Home Country	Privileges; Attitudes in Germany; Perception of wealth
K5 – Personal Reflection	Identification; Self-reflection; Perceived personal development; Inner conflict
K6 – Organizational Framework	Support; Host family; Partner organization; Handball; Expectations and demands
K7 – Function of Sport	Connection and communication opportunities through sport; Personal relation to sport; Challenges in sport

analytical process, the category system was continuously revised during transcript analysis—by adding, modifying, or removing (sub-)categories. Some subcategories emerged inductively from the data material. Two researchers were involved in this process. They coded the material and continuously engaged in critical reflection on their results to secure the credibility of the findings.

## Results

The findings are drawn from in-depth interviews with eight volunteers, providing insights into their intercultural learning experiences. Based on the data analysis, prominent phenomena are described and supported with anchor quotes. Due to the qualitative research design, this study does not aim for statistical generalisation. Instead, it seeks to generate context-sensitive insights that, in the sense of analytical generalisation, may be transferable to similar contexts. In line with the stated research interest, intercultural learning opportunities both within and outside the specific sport project are analysed to determine the significance of sport in fostering intercultural competence (Figure 2).

### *Learning Opportunities Outside of Sport*

The volunteers describe experiences that deviate from their own expectations of normality and can be interpreted as moments of irritation. These irritations stem either from specific events or from the general living conditions in South Africa. Examples include climatic conditions, which directly affect work situations, and personal safety issues stemming from rampant crime and poverty. One volunteer, for instance, reported being involved in a robbery together with other volunteers. Others mentioned that they were not allowed to leave the house alone during certain hours. These circumstances were described as challenges or (temporary) overwhelm. These interpretations provide learning opportunities, as the situations were unexpected and the responses unprepared.

Further irritations emerged in social interactions, which the volunteers explained in interviews as being linked to cultural differences – also rooted in their own personalities. For instance, interacting with members of the host family was perceived as challenging, as the following example illustrates:

“Yes, for example, I as a person am probably more like the Nordic cliché, quieter and more introverted. Moreover, I



Figure 2. Results

was in a coloured township, and the typical coloured person is, of course, much more extroverted, has lots of people around, and is always talking and communicating. That naturally led to misunderstandings at first. My host family thought: ‘What’s wrong with him?’ And then I first had to explain that actually everything was fine with me, even if I wasn’t talking. And that when I read a book or just sit on the couch and listen to a podcast, that everything is still okay.” (T 7, Pos. 42)

The volunteer attributes the differences in communication styles to cultural stereotypes and personal traits, referring to the “typical coloured” and himself. Notably, this statement is made during the interview, i.e., after the stay in South Africa. The continued use of stereotypical thinking suggests a degree of persistence. This raises the question of whether any meaningful learning process took place or whether the situation could have prompted deeper reflection. Such an emphasis on cultural differences is reflected in various statements in which volunteers reflect on life in South Africa or on residents’ attitudes. From repeated observations of behaviour, broader conclusions were drawn about South African culture or society, as in the following quote:

“And like I said, the typical African thing for me is: there’s always a solution—no matter what the problem was, somehow there was always a solution. It was really absurd at times, it was never just the problem. And then, like I mentioned, this sense of community, this care for others. I would best describe it with the term Ubuntu. That you always look to your left and right and make sure everyone’s doing okay.” (T 1, Pos. 42)

Another prominent topic is the standard of living, which volunteers compared to conditions in Germany and Switzerland. After returning home, many reflected on South African living conditions and re-evaluated their own privileges and wealth. In addition, the values and social

attitudes of their personal environments were critically questioned:

“And then I realised how much I actually live in a bubble here in Germany. I’ve tried to break out of it a bit [...] In my friend group, almost everyone went to university, there are hardly any foreigners, and you just live in your German bubble and can’t really judge what’s happening between cultures here in Germany.” (T 3, Pos. 64)

“And when I got back, I just shook my head and thought: ‘Look at all the cars here. This can’t be real—people over there are starving and here we indulge in our fifth family car.’ And that, I think, was honestly more of a culture shock than anything I experienced in South Africa.” (T 2, Pos. 69)

Both statements clearly reflect learning about one’s own living conditions in Germany or Switzerland through the experience in South Africa—between cultures, so to speak. The volunteers’ reflections demonstrate increased awareness of the lives of people with a migration background in Germany. At the same time, they critically engage with their own situation (“in my German bubble”). In the second example, Western affluence is contrasted critically with the poverty experienced in South Africa.

### *Learning Opportunities Within the Project*

Further learning opportunities—specifically those tied to Play Handball—were reported by volunteers during their work in schools, after-school programs, or local sports clubs. Volunteers perceived the material conditions and working with children as particularly challenging. Ethnic attributions also appeared in the context of project work:

“I was the first volunteer there and the only white person in my township. So, it was super exciting for the kids that their class had me—the white person. Now and then I even noticed how they would touch my hair, I think it was all very exciting for them. That’s also why they were highly

motivated. They really tried to make an effort.” (T 5, Pos. 26)

The volunteer describes her experience as the only person of a different skin colour in her environment. The behaviour of the children—who showed “a high level of motivation” and were apparently fascinated by the unfamiliar—is highlighted. Another volunteer reported a clear experience of discrimination:

“I also felt a lot of hostility towards me. Like, a kind of reverse racism. People just didn’t want to talk to me. And they really approached me with a lot of prejudice.” (T 4, Pos. 39)

“On the other hand, it’s probably also tied to the project structures. Like, okay. Some rich white German women in our town, trying to do something with balls, pretending she’s one of us? It’s understandable that this kind of classic in-group/out-group dynamic creates some hate and racism.” (T 4, Pos. 65)

The volunteer describes a perceived form of discrimination, using the term “reverse racism,” which indicates a reflective interpretation of the situation. The volunteer, in the sense of Schäffter (1997), is irritated but, in this intercultural encounter, perceives a power asymmetry (sensu Auernheimer, 2013). Her image of the children is a negative hetero-image, shaped by the prejudices of the children at school about her as a white person. She further attributes this experience to the project structure itself—which, by positioning her as a white trainer or teacher, potentially reinforced such dynamics. The perceived foreignness of handball as a sport (“doing something with balls”) also becomes evident here and will be explored further in the next section.

### *The Role of Sport in Fostering Intercultural Learning*

For all interviewees, sport was a key reason for engaging with Play Handball, as they had a personal connection to handball—either as players or coaches. Despite varying levels of handball-related

experience, volunteers identified challenges stemming from different local conditions and from working with children:

“There were handball court markings, but the cones were still just cones, and the goals were cones, too. The balls were old, worn-out handballs donated from Germany. I know it was also super dangerous on that asphalt court, doing jump shots and such. Sometimes the kids trained barefoot, even at school.” (T 2, Pos. 30)

“I don’t really have a comparison, but it was sometimes very hard to work with the children, especially to teach them something new. I often felt they just didn’t concentrate. I had the impression they really enjoyed the attention, and when you tried to explain something, they’d all talk over you or start doing something else.” (T 8, Pos. 68)

In the first example, the volunteer contrasts local conditions with their own sport-specific socialisation. In the second case, the volunteer—who had no prior coaching experience—found it challenging to facilitate learning, attributing this to the children’s limited ability to concentrate. This, in turn, is explained by the fact that the children may not receive much attention in their everyday lives. His statement refers to the children’s social environment, which he learned about through the project. This perceived lack of discipline is also mentioned.

The volunteers also emphasised the unifying aspects of sport, which they believed played an important role in development cooperation. Handball often inspired enthusiasm and engagement among the children, thereby easing project work. Volunteers further noted the potential of sport to serve preventive functions and to convey values:

“It’s not just about achieving sporting goals in the games—there’s also this other level. For example, which team lets all players participate—that counts toward the result, too. Or M. [a staff member at Play Handball] also had these environmental goals. Like, who keeps the field clean

before the game starts. Sport is a great tool, and I tried to reflect that in my concepts—especially the idea that the kids referee themselves. Sport as a tool to teach values through play was just perfect. You connect on a completely different level compared to standing in a classroom and saying: ‘Honesty is a great value.’ On the sports field, you realise—yeah, if I stick to the rules, it works, and everyone has fun. That’s a whole different thing.” (T 8, Pos. 82)

At this point, the specific rules for handball games in the Play Handball program are described. Some go beyond sport itself (e.g., “environmental goals”), while others create new learning opportunities through the act of playing and competing (e.g., “refereeing themselves”), or are implemented as supplementary rules (e.g., “let all players participate”). The volunteer reflects here on the broader function of sport within the project and highlights the multiple goal dimensions enabled through this format.

## Discussion

The phenomena described often represent deviations from what is familiar or perceived as normal. This corresponds to the assumption that learning opportunities arise from irritations that differ from prior knowledge or expectations (Schäffter, 1997). The volunteers reported negative experiences that were unfamiliar and unforeseen. These can be linked to the concept of culture shock (Bolten, 2007; Layes, 2009), defined as a reaction to negative experiences in an unfamiliar environment that can lead to feelings of alienation and being overwhelmed. The volunteers’ personal coping processes, as well as changes in attitudes and perspectives, became particularly evident when they were able to reframe the circumstances they encountered (e.g., safety issues or housing conditions) (Deardorff, 2006).

The phenomena presented here can be situated within the Process Model of

Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2011; Grein, 2019). In particular, the dimensions of attitudes, skills, and behavioural adaptability are addressed. However, statements regarding external outcomes (i.e., constructive interaction) cannot be reliably derived from the data.

It is noticeable that volunteers often connect immediate challenges with general observations and reflections about their own personalities or previously known norms. This supports the notion of intercultural competence as an interdependent interplay of internal and external processes (Boecker & Ulama, 2008; Deardorff, 2006, 2011). Given the complexity of the phenomena under consideration, the strengths of Deardorff’s model become particularly apparent. The learning and appropriation processes of volunteers rarely evolve in a strictly linear fashion—as suggested by Bennett’s model (1986)—but instead tend to progress in dynamic leaps and surges. Referring to Schäffter (1997), these can be interpreted as intercultural learning moments, as the volunteers actively processed the experiences through reflection.

The changes in attitude and mindset, within the process model framework, are intertwined with a revised understanding of one’s own socio-cultural position and national identity. Many volunteers recognised the privileges they enjoyed as German or Swiss citizens, both in their home country and in South Africa. These reflections also opened the door to a recognition of power asymmetries (Auernheimer, 2013), which in South Africa are still visibly shaped by the legacy of apartheid.

One indicator of at least temporary adaptation is that most volunteers reported difficulties with reintegrating into their home environments. They attributed this to newly developed worldviews, which partly clashed with prevailing social attitudes in their home countries. In analogy to the concept of culture shock, this can be described as a reintegration crisis,

suggesting that the volunteers developed a newly acquired cultural distance from their country of origin (Layes, 2009).

Regarding the role of sport, it can be concluded that Play Handball has developed a project design that clearly addresses intercultural learning. The project's structure and participation requirements appeal to a specific target group—namely, individuals with an affinity for sport and prior experience as coaches or players. Such prior experience is unusual for international volunteering programs (Monshausen et al., 2018) but brings several advantages: it enables volunteers to contribute their expertise with greater confidence, fosters independence in project work, and enhances their engagement.

Because of these sport-specific backgrounds, sport projects offer distinct opportunities for learning and reflection. This pertains to both the material conditions of training and to collaboration with local project staff and children. Since the project environment did not align with the volunteers' previous understanding of structured training, they demonstrated adaptive flexibility to meet the demands of the setting (Bolten, 2007; Gieß-Stüber et al., 2020).

A crucial aspect is the sport's relative unfamiliarity in South Africa. This uniqueness within the project also created intercultural learning opportunities. Although children and youth often showed strong enthusiasm for the training sessions, some volunteers reported experiencing external attribution or even discrimination. Handball, in these cases, was associated with the "white" volunteers who were introducing a new and unfamiliar sport. This power asymmetry (Auernheimer, 2013) is rooted, among other factors, in historical circumstances.

This dynamic is especially significant given that sport played a particular socio-political role during apartheid in South Africa (Chappell, 2005) and is generally criticised for its Eurocentric dominance in

international development programs (Brand, 2020; Digel, 2008). Consequently, the volunteers' observations could be used more actively as reflection opportunities in future iterations of the project—both for the volunteers themselves and for Play Handball as an organisation, and in cooperation with local partners. At this point, it is crucial to engage with this realisation—that the "white" sport of handball is not only perceived as foreign but may also carry negative connotations at this level—sensitively and reflectively. Where appropriate, consideration could be given to an adapted staging approach.

In doing so, Play Handball could further realise its overarching goal of strengthening social cohesion through sport (Play Handball, n.d.) by integrating critical reflection and the development of intercultural competence into its conceptual foundation.

## Conclusion

This research demonstrates that international sport volunteering offers substantial potential for intercultural learning—particularly when volunteers are exposed to unfamiliar contexts that challenge their prior assumptions and lived experiences. Such moments of irritation, whether triggered by living conditions, social interactions, or project dynamics, can initiate reflection and transformation. However, these learning processes are neither automatic nor universal; they require personal willingness, contextual awareness, and supportive frameworks.

The findings underscore the importance of integrating structured reflection into volunteer programmes, especially those operating in development cooperation contexts. Organisations like *Play Handball* already address intercultural learning implicitly through their educational goals and sport-based methodologies. However, more explicit strategies—such as intercultural training, facilitated reflection, and dialogue with

local communities—can further enhance these outcomes.

Sport, in this context, serves not only as a tool for social inclusion and engagement but also as a mirror of socio-cultural dynamics. Its effectiveness in promoting intercultural competence lies in its capacity to create shared experiences while also revealing cultural distinctions. To fully harness this potential, future program designs should critically engage with the cultural implications of introducing Western sports in post-colonial settings and recognise the reciprocal nature of intercultural encounters.

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### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Notes on Contributors

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