

# Diversity in Sports and Recreation: A Challenge or an Asset for the Municipalities of Greater Montréal?

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## **Abstract**

Today, ethnocultural diversity is a fact of life in big cities, and indeed in smaller ones, where it sometimes serves as a means of promotion. How are cities responding to the issues raised by the growing numbers of people who have different needs and different tastes? This article offers some answers based on the findings of two surveys of practices followed in managing diversity, conducted in Greater Montréal. Municipalities are developing a variety of responses to diversity: some are adopting policies that advocate accommodation, others favour a universal approach. In the field of recreation, various issues arise: infrastructures (redesign of recreational spaces) and interethnic cohabitation (changes in preferences, group issues). Generally, Montréal's municipalities are responding ad hoc, case by case, in a pragmatic spirit, as seen in the case of pool management. The management of diversity may thus seem to be improvised, but this approach has the advantage of allowing gradual adaptation to the differences among residents, with a view to fostering reciprocal learning.

Keywords: Municipal management of diversity, Montréal, recreation, pools

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#### Introduction1

The cosmopolitan face of Metropolitan Montréal has changed a great deal in the last 20 years, particularly as a result of increased and diversified immigration. While Montréal has fewer immigrants in absolute terms (about 30,000 a year) and as a proportion of its total population (28%) than Toronto (49%) or Vancouver (37%), it is distinguished from the other two metropolises by the variety (albeit already substantial in the case of Toronto) of countries that immigrants come from and by their concentration within the metropolitan area (9 out of 10 immigrants admitted to Quebec). This has led to the growing significance in the urban fabric of strongly multiethnic neighbourhoods, both at the centre and in the outlying areas of the Island. Thus, the presence of people who are "different" is a part of the daily urban experience of most Montréalers, and has been for many years. Yet ethnocultural diversity has not necessarily been incorporated into the municipal agenda, apart from any formal "intercultural policies" that may have been adopted (Pare, Frohn and Laurin 2001).

In this sense, the case of the municipalities of the Montréal conurbation illustrates the recent awareness in cities of certain issues raised by the diversity of their populations. Cities are responding by positioning themselves as cosmopolitan, multicultural, diverse cities, but they are also setting up management mechanisms designed to address this diversity (Poirier 2005).

In 2000, as part of a research program into municipal practices in the management of diversity entitled *Appropriation de l'espace et pratiques municipales de gestion de la diversité ethnoculturelle*,<sup>2</sup> we attempted to look beyond formal policies and examine the reality of municipal practices in the management of diversity in Greater Montréal, at least in those municipalities with significant numbers of immigrants<sup>3</sup> (Germain, Dansereau et al. 2003). How did municipalities deal with the growing presence of immigrants and cultural communities? How did they accept, at a practical level, the expression of ethnocultural differences? How were they responding to the special requests that might emerge from these minorities?

As a rule, sports and recreation, along with culture, and apart from basic services related to infrastructure maintenance, is one of the most important municipal services at the local level in terms of the financial and human resources it employs. It was therefore interesting to see how municipalities were developing their range of services and adjusting to the increasing ethnocultural diversity of their clientele.

However, these management practices do not have unanimous support, and are regularly the target of virulent criticism. One reader, for example, asked "Où cela s'arrêtera-t-il?" [where will it end?] (La Presse, Forum, September 13, 2004, A21) after reading a series of articles on the introduction of separate swimming schedules in some pools in Montréal. Yet sports and recreation generally appears to be an ideal means of integrating immigrants, which makes the issue all the

more sensitive (Frisken and Wallace 2002).

Here, we would like to cite the findings of our research into municipal sports and recreation services, and complement them with those of a more recent survey of the way special requests are dealt with at public pools (Germain, Dansereau et al. 2003; Billette 2005).

As we will see, municipalities are adapting to diversity in a pragmatic, ad hoc fashion, particularly in the area of recreation, where municipalities are no longer the only stakeholders. For our purposes, we will first examine Montréal municipalities' awareness of diversity in sports and recreation. We will then look more closely at adaptation mechanisms, using the example of swimming pools. Lastly, we will note that immigration raises new questions about ethnicity, religion, and gender relations and that these aspects, which have acquired an especially pronounced urban resonance in recent years, correspond to what, in the view of some commentators, unites or divides contemporary societies—cultural differences (Wieviorka 1997; Touraine 2005).

# 1 - Sports and recreation activities in Montréal municipalities: partnership and recognition of diversity

For the purposes of our inquiry, we selected municipalities in Greater Montréal with different characteristics, including different recognition policies, but which all have significant concentrations of immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

In 1989, Montréal adopted a declaration against racism and discrimination to underpin the introduction of an equal access program, the object of which was to promote the hiring of people from cultural communities (Valcin 2001). Moreover, through the creation of an intercultural affairs division, Montréal acquired a support unit with the expertise to develop and assist the implementation of municipality policy.<sup>5</sup> This horizontal unit offered support to municipal departments through training and management tools.<sup>6</sup> We chose to look at the Montréal situation by targeting two very different multiethnic neighbourhoods: Park Extension, with a 61% immigrant population from a wide variety of countries, and Saint-Michel, with a 40% immigrant population that breaks down into a few groups, with Italians and Haitians in the majority.

Saint-Laurent, with nearly 80,000 residents, was the largest municipality on the Island after Montréal itself, with a 46% immigrant population. It had also won an award of excellence from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation for its intercultural policy, adopted in 2000.

LaSalle, a small middle-class suburb, also on the Island, had fewer immigrants (23%) and no intercultural policy. Laval, with a population of over 330,000, the largest suburban municipality off the Island, had only a 15% immigrant population, but they were mostly concentrated in one neighbourhood—Cho-

medey—where they constituted almost a third of the population (29%). Laval had adopted at quite an early date a relatively clear policy on the management of diversity. Thus, while most of Montréal's municipalities recognize diversity as an asset, they have developed different management strategies.<sup>7</sup>

How is this reflected in recreation service availability? It must be noted at the outset that the meshing of sports and recreation policies with the management of diversity was not systematic. There are two main reasons for this lack of linkage. First, diversity management policies are sometimes limited to the impact of an announcement that conceals a lack of political will, if not a lack of resources.8 Second, while municipalities define orientations in relation to sports and recreation, they are free to leave execution to recreation associations (management in partnership) or retain the responsibility for implementation (stewardship). Thus, while in the smaller municipalities, services were still managed directly by the municipal administration, in the larger ones and more particularly in Montréal, municipal activities had become a game with many players, based on partnerships with local and mostly non-profit organizations. Thus, in 1995, the City of Montréal initiated a reorganization of its services, with special focus on sports and recreation, outsourcing program implementation and service delivery through agreements with community agencies, while retaining responsibility for developing an overall framework. For the City of Montréal, this partnership approach in recreation emphasized the dimension of proximity, a characteristic of this sector of activity, where roots in the community are vital.

How, therefore, did the municipalities and their partners address management of the diversity of their sports and recreation clientele?

In fact, the evolution of municipal recreation services followed a course parallel to that of the welfare state (Harvey 2002), moving from a paternalistic model (recreation as charity) to an interventionist model (recreation as a right) (Frisken and Wallace 2002). The present day is marked by a corporatist or neo-corporatist model in which municipal programs are subject to consumer choice. The manner in which recreation is managed—partnership or stewardship—is thus characterized by a client-centred approach, which seeks to match the supply of recreational services to users' preferences. This approach affects how diversity is reflected in the management of recreation.

# 2 - The various models and levels of municipal involvement

Given both the context in which diversity (the recognition of diversity, whether or not a policy exists) and recreation (the development of the client-centred approach, with or without partnership) are managed, what about the actual practices followed by municipalities?

The municipalities actually have to cope with two main issues.<sup>10</sup> The first concerns the changes in sports activities that result from immigration. The range

of sports enjoyed in the neighbourhoods has greatly diversified: from soccer to cricket and from basketball to bocce, these new and increasingly popular activities required the redesign of playing fields, sometimes at the expense of activities held in less regard by minorities, such as baseball. Yet these changes had to be reckoned with in order to guarantee a certain level of use of the facilities. How were these sometimes delicate judgments made?

Second, what was to be the attitude toward activities practised by a single ethnic group? Would a field be set aside for an exclusively Greek soccer association? Would support be offered for the organization of Tamil Olympic games? How would ethnic groups be treated, given that getting together with others from the same ethnic group is often a way of escaping discrimination (Richardson 2004)? For some, this distinction is justified not as a way of encouraging communities to turn inward, but as a way of avoiding the de facto or systematic exclusion of specific groups, within reasonable constraints (Dyck 2001). Thus, Saint-Laurent advocates closer intercultural relations, and reasonable adjustments.

For others, municipalities have to ensure that public spaces retain a measure of neutrality and have to position themselves as the guarantors of equality. For example, Laval takes a firmly universalist approach designed to promote participation and prevent identity-based withdrawal.

In some cases, the responses of the municipalities are dictated not by pre-established principles, but by various considerations, such as the availability of space and the political clout of the community. In LaSalle, a case-by-case approach is followed, with an awareness that communities are also voter pools.

Note also that in many cases, recreational organizations like the YMCA—which, by the way, do not always share the attitudes of the municipalities whose partners they are—often serve as buffers, either by circumventing municipal rules to provide services, or by allowing the municipality to avoid making difficult choices. Such situations were observed in almost all the municipalities studied.

Although in the case of the City of Montréal, partnerships are more closely supervised, and although municipal practices do after all vary widely from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, many municipal agencies in Greater Montréal appear to share two characteristics. First, municipal actions often resemble ad hoc responses to special needs or requests expressed by ethnocultural groups, organized or not so organized, and are notable usually for their pragmatism. Second, the attitudes of municipal officials are closely tied to the local dynamics of the contexts in which they are working and to their own individual experience in the area of intercultural relations.

# 3 - Ad hoc management: the case of the swimming pools

The case of pool management illustrates particularly well the pragmatism and ad hoc nature of the municipal practices we encountered throughout our research

in the various sectors of municipal administration. We saw how municipalities respond when ethnoreligious groups make special requests concerning the use of community recreational facilities. We therefore conducted an exploratory study of this type of request in relation to municipal pools.

We inventoried all the public pools within the metropolitan boundaries, and chose 12 for a preliminary field survey (Billette 2005). We should say at the outset that in Montréal, few pools seem to have received special requests from ethnoreligious groups. However, while the number of pools concerned remains marginal, the types of response and argument elicited are characteristic of the situations encountered both in sports and recreation and in other areas, particularly the design and construction of places of worship. We did not attempt a quantitative study of these requests; we preferred to explore the types of response made by municipalities and their partners to requests that in general concerned scheduling separate swims for men and women, with supervision by lifeguards of the same sex; the wearing of clothing that covers more of the body than the usual swimsuits, or the wearing of certain symbols, such as a kirpan or a turban; the installation of curtains to protect bathers' privacy; and to a lesser extent, restrictions concerning nudity in change rooms. Requests relating to the celebration of special events, such as baptisms, are much less common.

Our survey covered nine public pools, and three private pools that had no agreement with the City of Montréal; the latter were chosen because they had received special requests of the kind described above. They are located in 10 boroughs in Montréal and in Longueuil. Because some immigrant neighbourhoods in Montréal are strongly multiethnic, requests can concern a number of ethnoreligious groups: indeed, there are Muslim women and Hasidic Jewish women who share women-only swims together. Interviews were conducted with spokespersons for ethnoreligious groups<sup>k</sup> that had made requests, and with those responsible for aquatic or sports centres and borough development officers to establish the ins and outs of these requests, and the responses they received. We also observed public swims in order to complete our exploratory survey.

In Montréal, the requests in question usually come from groups linked to the Muslim, Hasidic and Sikh communities, the most organized groups in this respect being the Hasidim. The Jewish community is the only one to own its own sports centre. Thus, the Hasidim can always swim in compliance with their religious code, although registration fees are payable. In the case of requests from Muslim groups, the requestors included "converted natives": these were women who held clothed swims reserved for Muslim women and their children. These swims are also opportunities for getting together, socializing and enjoying religious fellowship, and there is a strong demand for them in Muslim communities.

The responses to such requests on the part of the pool authorities—administrators, lifeguards, monitors and so on—vary widely, sometimes even at the same

pool. Without attempting an exact count of requests accepted and requests refused, we will merely say that acceptances seem to exceed refusals. Again, however, what most interested us were the reasons cited in accepting or refusing. What were they? What types of argument were offered to justify refusing or accepting a special request?

The refusals basically fall into five categories according to the nature of the reasons cited. The reasons most often mentioned to justify refusal of a request to wear special clothing have to do with health and safety. The reason most often given for refusing to schedule separate swims for men and women have to do with logistics and pool attendance (which, for example, might make it impossible to make such special arrangements), or with the difficulty of coordinating the lifeguards' schedules (for example, to have females monitoring the women's swims, and males monitoring the men's). Also in the area of logistics, there is reference to the risks to the equipment (for example, the water filtration system) associated with the wearing of bulky clothing. Less common were respondents who said that they did not want to offend their other clients. Even less common were those who referred to an organizational philosophy, or "house rules," although without always specifying what this philosophy entailed. In essence, this was how they expressed the feeling of a mismatch between the values of the clientele, and those of the organization.

The reasons for acceptance were of three kinds: those accommodations that expressed a wish to respond to users' needs, those that were presented as a concession to a group complaint, and those that resulted from political pressure.

Therefore, with respect to the reasons for refusal or acceptance of special requests, our respondents are clearly wedded to pragmatic accommodation (meaning that negotiation is always a part of the equation) and hardly ever stray into the area of principles or values. In general, pool staff and employees merely respond ad hoc to the requests they receive. Even in strongly multiethnic neighbourhoods, they do not plan ahead for such requests; they wait until they are asked to make the exceptions required.

The types of response seem to vary with the personal conceptions of our respondents. In many cases, they seemed to keep their own counsel, or to know little about their clientele. They are not familiar with the concept of reasonable accommodation, although many of them do in fact put it into practice. Some supervisors count on their staff, who are multicultural, to respond appropriately.

In the pools, therefore, as in our other research into municipal practices in the management of diversity, there seems to be some measure of improvisation in the response to special requests from ethnoreligious groups. And these groups do not always seem to be very practised in the formulation of such requests. Both sides therefore attempt to play things by ear. Moreover, ethnoreligious groups often prefer to rent swimming time in private establishments, rather than to have

to negotiate a change in the rules governing the use of public facilities—as long as the total number of dilemmas faced by the managers of public pools across Greater Montréal remains relatively small. It seems, therefore, that we are still far away from the excesses that some people decry in the media. The facts is that these accommodations, whether numerous or not, continue to be discussed.

#### 4 - Conclusion

What are we to deduce from the pragmatism we observed in how the recreation sector adapts to diversity in the Montréal conurbation? Do we credit this result to the flexibility of the social fabric, imbued with a pragmatic spirit that readily adjusts to manifold accommodations? Are the demographics of international immigration in Montréal still of too recent origin for the occurrence of real problems in living together?

It is admittedly surprising that in such a multiethnic metropolis as Montréal, despite some efforts by the City of Montréal to give its people guidance on reasonable accommodation, they seem often to proceed on an ad hoc basis in their management of diversity, particularly religious diversity, unlike Toronto and Vancouver (Tate and Quesnel 1995; Sandercock 2003). However, this apparent improvisation is perhaps not without some merit, since the complexity of situations emerges only gradually, particularly as those involved are often dealing with situations with relatively few precedents.

A good many requests by ethnoreligious groups for special arrangements at public pools are in a sense on the borderline between religious issues and cultural issues. The question of where to draw the line is doubtless debatable, but we shall most humbly leave that debate to other experts on religious issues in the strict sense. It is obvious in any case that the protagonists negotiating an accommodation do not always share the same concept either of the line between religion and culture, or even of the very possibility of drawing such a line. A number of researchers have in fact shown the importance of the concept of "cultural comfort" (McNicoll 1993) in the mutual process of adjustment among people of diverse origins, for example in the establishment of neighbourhoods with concentrations of immigrants. The question, then, is whether these practices are exclusive or inclusive in their effect. In this connection, note that some women who could be described as Quebeckers born and bred (or not of immigrant origin) also enjoy swim schedules that separate the sexes. The cultural comfort of some can coincide with that of others, even where they do not share the same definition of the concept.

The line between issues of religion and those of gender is also very fine. Many special requests by ethnoreligious groups in fact concern relations between men and women. In Quebec, where the women's movement is especially strong and has served to expand access to many sectors of social life, transforming them into

mixed environments, gender relations are an extremely sensitive area, but one that is still in the grip of change. Are we not restarting the debate over the wisdom of separate schools for boys and girls?

Requests by ethnoreligious groups are thus made in a context in which the host society is examining the values by which its members live together, reaffirming some and changing others. The immigrants placed in the midst of this society are also contributing to its transformation from within. Thus, ethnocultural diversity is going to bring fairly significant change to municipal management practices, particularly management of the supply of recreational services. Success in this process will depend strongly on the intercultural skills of the various participants. In this sense, diversity is a major challenge for municipalities.

At the same time, the growing multiethnicity of Montréal's population may be seen above all as an opportunity to expand and diversify recreational activities, to the greater benefit of the host society. Moreover, a number of immigrant communities are especially enthusiastic in their dedication to sports.

Furthermore, studies of the process of ethnic concentration in sports activities suggest that such concentrations do not result not so much from the attraction exerted by an ethnic group as from negative experiences in multiethnic organizations (Germain and Poirier 2005). This means that we sometimes tend to perceive a retreat within a community solely as a failure to integrate or even as a rejection of the values and ways of the host society.

The fact remains that at the practical level, those involved have to make judgments, impose limits that reflect the collective will, and try both to enable users to assert their identity and to allow for possible discrimination that people may suffer, based on their origin or their ethnic or racial background. Thus, the approach in matters of recreation has to vary constantly between two goals that may seem contradictory: respect for differences and individual development, and the promotion of social integration through participation (Arnaud 1999; Dyck 2001).

Those involved will still have to take a position on these issues, since the benchmarks remain inadequate, despite the existence of policies and management tools. The many areas of activity involve different visions and attitudes towards pluralism. There is cause to wonder how these differences will be expressed and what effects they will have in the context of decentralization of authority to Montréal's boroughs.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We want to thank the evaluators for their valuable suggestions.
- <sup>2</sup> Program funded by the SSHRC.
- <sup>3</sup> We chose three sectors of municipal activity that seemed to us likely to reflect these practices, given both their importance to immigrants and their families, and the various aspects of municipal involvement. In our case it was how immigrants are received in social housing (Bernèche 2005), management of the supply of sports and recreation services, and urban planning issues as they relate to the construction or expansion of places of worship (Gagnon and Germain 2002, Germain and Gagnon 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> Some are now part of the City of Montréal as a result of the mergers of 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> This unit survived municipal amalgamation.
- <sup>6</sup> Note in particular a guide detailing the various steps towards a reasonable accommodation, which, in addition to being based on the legal principle enshrined in the Canadian and Quebec charters of rights and freedoms, could be used by officials in dealing with potentially discriminatory management issues.
- <sup>7</sup> In one of the municipalities studied, moreover, the intercultural policy was a response at least as much to a need to reassure the majority population, beset by an identity crisis, as to a need to guide municipal actions in dealing with minorities.
- <sup>8</sup> Note that Quebec municipalities have limited authority and jurisdiction in various areas, resulting from the centralist thinking of the Government of Quebec, regardless of which party is in power.
- <sup>9</sup> In most Western countries, in fact, the institutionalization of recreation peaked in what is known in France as the Trente Glorieuses, the expansive years from 1945 to 1975 when governments invested massively in the development of sports and recreation. Beginning in the 1980s, with the disengagement of governments, particularly in Canada and Quebec, the management of mass-participation sports was left to municipalities and recreational organizations. In Quebec, the policy of the Ministère des Affaires Municipales, dating from 1997, is entitled Un partenariat à renouveler, or "a partnership to be renewed," and stresses decentralization to the municipalities and their partners.
- <sup>10</sup> A series of interviews was conducted with local elected representatives, officials and partner community organizations in order to understand how they planned their range of recreational services, and how they responded to any special requests they received.
- <sup>11</sup> We were hesitant about using the term 'groupes ethnoreligieux', or ethnoreligious groups, in our analysis, as some religious groups are associated with more than one ethnic origin. These requests, which may at first seem to be dictated by religious considerations, cannot really be dissociated from the broader phenomenon of ethnocultural differentiation of the make-up of Montréal referred to at the beginning of this article. Because we were interested in the effects of recent and earlier immigration on the urban fabric and on municipal practices, we addressed those issues with strong religious connotations. Moreover, it is not always easy or even possible to draw a clear line between what is a religious matter and what is a cultural matter. We therefore chose the expression "ethnocultural groups" as a broad, all-encompassing category to describe the requestors in our surveys.

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