

The Ambiguities of Sport and Community Engagement

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Introduction

Sport is a powerful social institution in Australia. Many Australians derive a great deal of enjoyment from playing, watching or following sport. Sport is also believed to be an educative context capable of facilitating the development of positive social values, life skills and pro-social behaviour among young people. Moreover, policymakers and practitioners articulate the public value of sport in terms of its contribution to community cohesion, a view that is reflected in popular commentary that refers to sport as the social cement or glue that helps bind families, communities, regions and the nation. The idea of building social cohesion through sport has surfaced at all levels of government. In its policy statement *Australian Sport: Emerging Challenges, New Directions*, the Australian Government (2008) notes:

At the community level, sport brings people together, break downs [sic] barriers and unites those who may have nothing else in common. Sport has a unique ability to transcend race, religion, gender and creed. It is truly a tool of social cohesion (p. 2).

Yet, for many casual, dispassionate observers, Australian sport conjures up a very different picture. Violence, doping, corruption and sexism are all part of the game. Sport is the site of some of the most visible expressions of aggression and violence both on and off the playing field. The recent Australian Crime Commission (2013) report on organised crime and drugs in Australian sport underlines the fact that sport is certainly no panacea for social problems. Indeed, sport often reproduces social problems and even generates anti-social tendencies of its own as part of a sport ethic of winning at all costs and masculine domination. Sport as a social activity divides as much as it unites.

Sport is thus imbued with different meanings. How can we make sense of the contradictory tendencies in sport? And what does this mean for the use of sport as a community engagement strategy? This article explores these questions by examining how recreational sport participation affects – or can affect – the settlement experiences of

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people with refugee backgrounds in Australia. Newly arrived migrants and refugees are a key target group of sports programs that seek to leverage positive social impacts. Their sporting experiences will be discussed here as a way to reflect on the promises, pitfalls and limitations of sport as a vehicle for community engagement and settlement.

Refugee settlement: a role for sport?

The federal government's Multicultural Youth Sports Partnership Program (MYSP) is indicative of the growing use of sport as a policy tool for promoting the engagement and wellbeing of migrants and refugees in Australia. This initiative, which is part of Australia's new multicultural policy, recognises sport as a way to learn about and connect with a new culture and an avenue to facilitate community cohesion. The objective of MYSP is to 'create sustainable opportunities for youth from new and emerging communities and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to participate in sport and physical activity within local communities' (Australian Sports Commission, 2012, p. 3). In a similar vein, advocacy groups such as the Refugee Council of Australia, Settlement Council of Australia and Centre for Multicultural Youth identify sport as a settlement priority for newly arrived migrant and refugee youth. Their perspectives on the value of sport in relation to refugee settlement include the following:

- Sport is a major form of civic engagement in Australia;
- Sport is what many young people focus on in terms of their heroes and role models;
- Playing sport is what young people, especially males, do quite spontaneously as a way of occupying themselves and socialising with each other;
- Sport strongly appeals to young people with refugee backgrounds, especially young males, as a way to 'make it' in Australia;
- Sport is often the one recreational activity that is available in refugee camps.

The findings from my ethnographic research among community sports clubs in Melbourne from 2008 to 2010 give teeth to these perspectives (Spaaij, 2011, 2012). The research focused specifically on Somali and Eritrean Australians and their involvement in sport. A major theme that emerged from the research is the opportunity sporting activities provide for rebuilding social networks that have been eroded or disrupted by war, displacement and resettlement. Faced with the threat of social exclusion, many respondents regard their local sports club or program as an environment where they can come together, hang out, and develop friendships, trust and mutuality. Sport can also serve as a means for dealing with the stresses of everyday life. Where participants experience tense social relations in other societal domains, such as education or the labour market, a sports club or team can serve as a safe space that provides a temporary escape from such tensions. Indicative of this are descriptions of one's club as a 'second family' or a 'home away from home'.

Another important element in the experience of sport among respondents is the social significance of 'mono-ethnic' sports clubs – clubs that are established and run, by and large, for and by members of a particular ethnic group. The meaning of this type of sports practice is contested. There is a long-standing belief that multi-ethnic sports clubs, which comprise different ethnic groups or identities, stimulate the settlement of newly arrived migrants in ways that mono-ethnic sport organisations do not. Pooley (1976), for example, argues that the practices of mono-ethnic sports clubs typically inhibit the connection of their members to the wider society. However, this argument ignores the fact that such clubs are often relatively well suited to facilitate social networks within migrant communities on which new arrivals rely for practical and emotional support. It also under-values the desire among several people with a refugee background to spend their leisure time with those with whom social interaction is uncomplicated, symmetrical and meaningful. Indeed, close relationships with members of one's ethnic group and a common language can be important for a sense of belonging, for social learning and for accessing support. Mono-ethnic sports clubs can also provide a greater sense of ownership and access to leadership positions for people with refugee backgrounds (Spaaij, 2012). Mono-ethnic sports clubs should therefore not automatically be viewed as working against settlement – they can have distinctive advantages for new and emerging refugee communities.

People with refugee backgrounds who play sport in Australia typically support the idea of building multi-ethnic sports clubs. However, personal experiences such as discrimination and other negative social encounters can lead them to join mono-ethnic sports teams instead. For example, a senior soccer player described how his encounters had been mixed:

Last year we had many issues with many clubs. Again in my experience it was not a surprise, but for some of our players it was a big shock... Once the game starts they [opposing players or spectators] will fall back to their name calling, racial abuse... it was an issue and still an issue and sometimes, although you really want to move on, sometimes it holds you back.

Other players and volunteers expressed similar concerns. Their experiences suggest that if we want their participation in 'mainstream' sports clubs to increase, it is critical that barriers to equitable participation are addressed and community sport organisations are seen as genuinely valuing and encouraging cultural diversity.

Sport as a multicultural meeting point?

Sport has the capacity to bring people together and unite those who may have nothing else in common. Yet research shows that the policy ideal of sport as a harmonious multicultural meeting point proves unrealistic (Spaaij, 2012). Young people often use sports facilities to strengthen already-established friendships with their peers, rather than to build new social relationships with other users. Moreover, although intercultural interactions do indeed take place on a regular basis within sports, these interactions tend to be structured by perceived similarities

such as a shared cultural background, language, religion or skin colour. Thus, several research participants reported how engaging with 'other Africans or Muslims' is 'more comfortable' or 'easier' because 'you have something in common'. My research further suggests that where intercultural interaction does occur, it is often confined to the sports activity itself and does not usually transfer to other life domains. The lack of durable and transferable social connections created between members of different ethnic groups in the sporting context was explicitly noted by some respondents.

In terms of the *quality* of intercultural engagement in sport, it is important to note that the internal structure and logic of sporting competition can highlight and even exacerbate difference, rather than overcome it (Hutchins, 2007). Sporting encounters can provoke hostility and confrontation between opposing sides. In so doing, they can reinforce group boundaries and inter-group tensions instead of breaking them down. Experienced discrimination, aggression and violence on the playing field can even lead to the reinforcement of group boundaries outside of sport, with negative implications for community engagement and settlement (Spaaij, 2012). In this context, Hutchins (2007) proposes that rather than ask how sport can contribute to social cohesion, we should consider how sport can help negotiate the inevitability of cultural conflict and difference.

What about the women?

Sport is a powerful gender regime. Entire sports are gendered, particularly at the professional level, but also at the junior and recreational levels, where boys and girls, and men and women, are funnelled into playing particular types of sport. Sports that women predominantly participate in tend to be less valued in society than those that men participate in (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2012). Although sporting masculinities are arguably becoming more inclusive (Anderson, 2009), gender is still a structuring principle of everyday interactions in sporting spaces. Yet, sport is also a setting where orthodox masculinities can be challenged or even subverted. There is often a tension between dominant masculinity and the potentially empowering dimensions of sporting activity for women.

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The gendered nature of sport is reflected in the experiences of culturally diverse women in Australia who often face amplified barriers to recreational sport participation. In previous research, women identified multiple barriers that could reduce their desire to participate or change the kinds of sport activities they would choose: a lack of culturally appropriate facilities, high costs, family responsibilities or a lack of transport (Cortis et al., 2007). The women who participated in my research identify similar barriers, as well as some additional ones. One such barrier is the perception that may exist within their community that organised sport is not an appropriate activity for women. Often it is not the woman herself who sees sport participation as inappropriate but rather others in her family or social environment. Indeed, several young women indicate that they would like the opportunity to take part in sports just like their brothers, cousins and other male relatives.

In the mono-ethnic sports clubs that I have studied, there is limited support for the provision of game-playing activities for girls or women. Where such support does exist, it is often conditional upon the activity being done in religiously and culturally prescribed ways, for example through gender-segregated provision where women can play sport in a closed environment where men would not be watching. Cultural and religious notions of female physicality and dress, such as wearing a *hijab* or full-length sports clothing, can also clash with the norms and requirements of sport organisations. To fill this void, local NGOs and community organisations offer low-threshold sport and physical activity programs to culturally diverse women, such as indoor soccer, basketball or swimming. These programs seek to build trusting relationships with the women's families and assure them that appropriate and safe provision is being made. These experiences underline the need for a critical and gender-sensitive reading of sport as a community engagement and settlement strategy.

The cost of sport

Sport is a meaningful and pleasurable activity for quite a few young people with refugee backgrounds living in Australia. Young males' enthusiasm for sport is fuelled by their desire to express themselves, to connect with their peers or to become a professional athlete. Their enthusiasm for sport may be an indication of their selective adjustments of family cultural values to accommodate personal preferences, with Australian popular culture offering them an alternative to their parents' view that sport represents a distraction from academic pursuits (Dodds et al., 2010). The latter view holds that sport participation can come at a significant cost. Pursuing a sporting career as a way to 'make it' in Australian society can lead to the neglect of more important pursuits. As a multicultural youth worker puts it: "These are kids that aren't performing academically... but then you want to take time away from them to play soccer or basketball? If you don't understand those benefits [of sport] ... then fair enough, it's taking away from academia."

Responding to these concerns, some local sports clubs and programs work with parents and carers to make young people's sport participation conditional upon school attendance and homework completion. If they fail to attend school or complete their homework, they are not allowed to play on the weekend. This approach to encouraging children and

young people to doing homework and getting good results at school is considered effective because, as one soccer coach stated, 'kids love soccer and hate missing the game'. One club had also established a partnership with a homework program run by a local charity to leverage positive educational outcomes for young people with refugee backgrounds.

The perception of sport as potentially holding young people back in their settlement is in line with the critical sociological perspective that argues that the popular view of sport as a social mobility escalator is not only naive, but actually detrimental to disadvantaged groups because it exacerbates their disadvantage (Messner, 2007). From this perspective, sport can be regarded as a false front that reproduces inequality by trapping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into a belief that sport is the ticket to a better life, diverting their attention and energies away from more likely pathways to upward mobility. Although family attitudes to sport participation are slowly changing among Somali and Eritrean Australians as more parents come to value its potential social and health benefits, their reservations indicate how recently arrived migrants and refugees tend to prioritise other means of successful settlement: education and employment. Sport, then, can be perceived as a distraction from these pursuits.

Conclusion

The idealistic notion that sport, by and of itself, can somehow fix social problems or transcend cultural divides ultimately proves unrealistic. Sport can have important social benefits, but it is no panacea for social problems. Any attempt to use sport to promote community engagement and settlement must be informed by a critical awareness of its strengths and limitations as a social practice and cultural form (Hutchins, 2007). This article has outlined some of the positive and negative aspects of sport as experienced by resettled refugees in Australia. Their narratives demonstrate how involvement in community sporting spaces can fulfil social, emotional and physical needs, yet there is always a risk that playful competition that appears healthy and constructive degenerates into hostility and confrontation or exacerbates cultural difference and inter-group boundaries. These ambiguities present a clear challenge to those who seek to use sport as part of a community engagement and settlement strategy.

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