

## **Brief Immersion, Rich Engagement: Researching Sport And Intergroup Relations In Fiji**

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### **Aim**

This paper discusses a post-colonial, ethnographic research journey based on sport and intergroup relations in a lower and middle income country (LMIC). The context is Fiji, where two sports embody different group identities: rugby = indigenous, and soccer = Indo-Fijian. These cultural forms co-exist, but embody ethnic separatism. The study focused on the basis for isolationism and exclusion, then asked locals whether they were content with ethnic silos in the two sports or envisaged a need for change. In pursuing that aim, this paper explores how scholars might carry out short-term ethnography in uncovering locally-driven responses to sport management problems in LMICs. It is centred on the experience of planning and conducting sport-for-development and peace (SDP) research into ethnic separatism in Fijian sport.

### **Theoretical background**

Post-colonial SDP scholarship is understandably replete with criticisms of simplistic ‘outsider’ frames of reference: top down, one-way thinking is hardly conducive to the articulation of nuanced approaches to complex challenges in LMICs (Collison & Marchesseault, 2016). Such paternalism has been associated with ‘othering’ or ‘orientalising’ communities under focus, symbolically diluting their status as equals in the research process. It is a surprise, then, that ethnography is largely absent from the methods employed in the SDP field, for it is an approach that foregrounds local agency and seeks a holistic understanding of local realities (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). Ethnography’s limited application in SDP can be explained, in part, by the assumption that researchers need to be immersed in a society and culture for several months or even years, residing among locals for the duration. It is often not logistically feasible for scholars to spend these amounts of time in a host society (Hammersley, 2017). The question then becomes how researchers optimise an opportunity to undertake ethnographic field research, notwithstanding temporal limits imposed upon them — whether by universities, grant funding bodies, and so on.

### **Method**

‘Outsider’ ethnographers have multiple challenges in terms of negotiating the spatial and temporal dimensions of their field work, as well as pursuing appropriate and authentic local engagement. The length and breadth of the present study was shaped by an adapted version of ‘short term ethnography’ that intensifies research to account for shorter periods spent in context than in longer ethnographies (Pink & Morgan, 2013). This approach allowed me, as an ethnographer, to frame a study that optimised use of available time, and — within those confines — establish rapport and trust among those with whom I engaged. The primary research took place in Fiji for nine weeks in the middle of 2015, but preceded by a 10 day ‘reconnaissance’ trip intended to establish contacts and prepare for ethnographic engagement over three months. For that duration I lived, ate, talked, trained and socialised with local people. I also travelled across selected regions of Fiji in an attempt to maximise time and space, while gleaning a rich variety of perspectives, meanings and realities. This journey involved a combination of research methods: semi-structured interviews, observation and policy analysis were complemented by local ways of communicating and revealing, such as by Talanoa (Vaioleti, 2016) in Kava circles (informal conversation circles centred on the consumption of the Kava drink). The project generated 49 interviews, 15 Kava circles and a 15k word reflective field diary.

### **Results**

My ethnographic journey was intended to stay true to key aspects of the approach such as immersion and the positioning of local people at the centre of knowledge construction: thick description on the part of insiders, even if conveyed to an outsider. The data highlighted inclusion but more pronounced and damaging patterns of exclusion within Fijian sport — Indigenous dominated rugby and Indo-Fijian controlled soccer. While locals provided commentary as to whether they were content with ethnic silos in Fijian sport, or whether they anticipated a need for change along with potential solutions. In this regard the research objectives were achieved during the specified period. Notwithstanding my brief immersion in the research field, a significant bank of data was garnered, due to the effective and careful application of research strategies that maximised time, research quality and local agency. A methodological framework also emerged

from this endeavour that is now ready to be followed and/or tested in like contexts. In sum this research suggests that shortened ethnography — if strategically designed — can be an effective methodology in researching sport in LMIC settings, and therefore a useful addition to the SDP milieu.

## References

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