Imagined Distance: The Role of Sport in Shaping and Maintaining Group Dynamics

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Aim

This paper discusses the role of sport, and those that shape it, in reinforcing and maintaining group dynamics in the context of societal division. The study asked what role sport plays in the prospects for integration in a divided society, Fiji, where two sports embody different group identities: rugby = indigenous, and soccer = Indo-Fijian. The papaer builds on and expands our knowledge regarding how the organisation of sport impacts ethno-racial formation and what this might mean for a changing world.

Theoretical background

Ethno-racial beliefs are employed regularly in sense making, their formation relating to the socio-historical process within which such categories are created, maintained or evolved (Omi & Winant, 1994). A significant amount of research has depicted the implications of sport's role in racial formation in the USA (Hoberman, 1997). Spawning further research on sports instrumentality in reconfirming and normalising ethno-racial stereotypes, and indeed barriers, in line with dominant racialized discourses (Carrington, 2013). Yet much of this discourse is clustered around North America and the experience of black athletes, and there has been less attention afforded to the related role of sport in more diverse locales, particularly those beset with division. While sport has the potential to reduce intergroup distance through fostering inclusive 'imagined' communities. Its highly visible and emblematic nature means that it can be at once a tool for the preservation and reconfirmation of both national archetypes and subnational group identities (Bairner, 2015). In this respect, it is important to investigate the way in which the framing of sport might maintain ethno-racial categorisations and the implications this might have for societal harmony. The ethnically divided nation of Fiji, in which soccer and particularly rugby are central, presents us with such an opportunity.

Research design, methodology and data analysis

This research is tempered by an awareness of traditional 'eurocentrism' in sport management research, that necessitated an in depth and post-colonial research design (Singer 2005). The researcher spent a total of 10 weeks in Fiji, where he lived, ate, trained, exercised and socialised with a variety of Fijians dwelling in their homes. Due to his own reasonable soccer and rugby acumen, he was also able to imbed in those worlds of soccer and rugby as a player, fan and coach. The goal was to participate in culture, and to devote as much time as possible to the exploration of unstructured and naturally occurring data allowing for a careful interpretation of meaning and detailed 'thick' description. The study, which was ethnographic in nature, benefited from semi-structured interviews, informed by policy analysis, with (non) stakeholders at the macro, meso and micro levels of Fijian sport. These were intersected with local ways of speech and knowing in the form of Talanoa methodology. Talanoa is an in-depth and un-pressurised form of group dialogue indigenous to the Pacific islands, in research on sport in lower income settings it can play a vital role in de-centring the researcher and decolonising the process (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, & Richardson, 2017). The project generated 49 interviews, 15 'Talanoa' circles and a 15k word reflective field diary. The data was analysed via a constant comparative method and finally through the use of NVivo software.

Results

Through the way in which soccer and rugby in Fiji is organised and managed separate categorisation and narratives of difference are re-told through patterns of exclusion so that division is preserved. It backgrounds ethnocentrism in sport policy, in terms of preferences towards elite sport, and with outreach to indigenous communities only. It is evident in the lack of inclusivity in rugby development generally, but also in the hierarchy of soccer administration. While it is also visible in normatively separate group participation and attitudes towards the two sports at community levels. These realities both inform, and draw from, an ethno-racial landscape in sport and society where separate categorisation of both groups is deeply-rooted

Conclusion, contribution and implications

In Fiji at least, the organisation of sport and its positioning within popular culture and discourse means that it is at once an emblematic sphere for the reconfirmation and the maintenance of separate identities. Sport is revealed as an arena that not only plays host to ethno-racial groupings, but one which is instrumental in their maintenance and 'reimagining'. This paper reveals how both social and managerial cultures in sport can be implicated in preserving ethno-racial beliefs and narratives of separation. This adds to existing sociological knowledge on sport and ethno-racial formation (Carrington 2013), expanding the scope to a new context and highlighting its impact on societal division. While it also connects to the structural role that sport management plays in both division and harmony. The implications are that together such findings can pave the way to a more holitistic and global understanding of the role of sport in ethno-racial formation.

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