

Shades of white: an examination of whiteness in sport

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Apart from millennium concerns about what it means to be English, ‘whiteness’ has largely escaped examination, particularly in the leisure literature. Where ‘black’ people have been seen as the significant other in British sport, ‘whiteness’ could be seen as the ‘silent’ other. This paper begins to redress this by drawing on the experience of a suite of studies conducted by the Centre for Leisure and Sport Research into racism in sport. During those we solicited self-definitions of ethnicity and explored perceived characteristics not just of Asian and African-Caribbean, but also of white footballers and cricketers. From this we examine personal identity in the context of normalized, privileged ‘whiteness’ and demonstrate the processes by which these operate in sporting environments. Examining ‘whiteness’ more closely should allow researchers to make it visible and open to discussion. Moreover, an understanding of its construction generates the possibility of a clearer understanding of the processes of racism, hence a better chance of disrupting them. The paper demonstrates the complexity of these processes and their interpretation, which cannot, of course, be achieved independently of the researchers’ own blackness and whiteness.

Introduction

Solomos and Back (1996) observe that there is surprisingly little analysis of how race and cultural difference are represented in popular culture, and further note the failure to link theoretical debates with detailed research on specific aspects of race and racism in both national and local contexts. We would extend that to argue that there is surprisingly little analysis of race and cultural difference in sport and leisure. Teamwork, rules, codes of behaviour and supporting your team might be expected to mitigate the worst excesses of racism, but competition, aggression, rivalry and physicality might exacerbate the situation. Moreover, sport is one field where biological distinctions continue to reappear in people’s analysis of performance – e.g., Bannister (quoted in Connor, 1995), MacKay and Campbell (1999) and Entine (2000). While drawing attention to people’s perceptions of such supposed characteristics, we want to extend our analysis here to the cultural constructions involved and explore their link to issues of identity.

The interest of the government’s football task force has helped to focus attention on the continued presence of racism in sport. This has drawn on and helped to give greater credibility to a growing research literature on the

topic. The emphasis though is on black characteristics and black identities. Despite the recent, post devolution, millennial angst that prompted a spate of agonising about what it means to be English, ‘whiteness’ has historically escaped sustained examination. Part of that whiteness, of course, is the racism that the government’s task force, among others, is concerned to address (Mellor, 1999, p. 73; see also Bassam, 2001, p. 7).

On racial identity

One of the most popular themes in post-modernist theory is the construction of identity and some time ago Barth (1969) helped to explain ethnic groups as social constructs. Further, Solomos and Back (1996, p. xiv) argue that:

Race and ethnic categories are ideological entities that are made and remade through struggle. In this sense, race can be seen as a discursive category through which differences are accorded social significance. *But it is also more than just a discursive category since it carries with it material consequences for those who are included within, or excluded from, a particular racial identity.* (Emphasis added)

Identity can readily be seen to be operating through differences. Part of the process is the labelling of the other while typically denying the labelling of the self. That is, until some crisis of confidence when an expression of collective identity becomes important. Wallman (1978) sees ethnicity in terms of ‘their’ difference being used to define a sense of ‘us’. However, Parekh (1995) is dismissive of the notion that identity is equated with difference. Rather, he argues that identity is logically prior to difference, because ‘we do not cease to be who we are when others cease to be different from us’. The intuitive appeal of this is immediate, but beyond that absolute position there are clearly dimensions of our identity construction that are products of our part as social beings.

In trying to understand national and social identity, Cohen (1995, p. 36) has suggested that it is ‘continuously constructed and reshaped in its interaction with outsiders, strangers, foreigners and ‘aliens’ – the ‘others’. You know who you are only by knowing who you are not’. On its own this is not a satisfactory basis for identification either, because of its hollowness in offering nothing of what *is* the self. A more sophisticated understanding of difference needs to take account of role, status and context – in this case, the part played in the sport (function), standing (closely linked to power) and the interactions of sport and society (social relations).

Part of the context is clearly the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups in the local population – something that has commonly been raised in discussion of campaigns to combat racism in sport. Proximity clearly alters the nature of experience, though it is not so clear what impact this has on perceptions of identity. Barth (1969) insisted that cultural contact did not result in any less cultural diversity. This left him open to the criticism of adopting an excessively rigid conception that did not allow for modification through socialization, but he has also been criticized for underestimating the

power of ethnic conflict and the capacity of powerful groups to 'label' less powerful ones (see, for example, Solomos and Back, 1996). Conceptions of power continually re-emerge in this debate. Hence Wallman (1978, p. 308) has insisted that 'it is English ethnicity that determines the boundary of "them" and determines its significance' through the power of the dominant to set the terms of the debate. Behind the colour lie unmarked and un-named cultural practices which promote structural privilege (Dyer, 1997) and the unchallenged norms that underpin white racism (Bonnett, 2000). Behind the colour lie invented traditions and symbolic boundaries that Spracklen (2001) has explored in rugby league. He argues that the symbolic boundaries let in those who resemble the hero, but exclude those who do not.

Asian and Black people are denied access to the symbolic boundaries because people in the game fear that their own identities will be compromised if the power to change those boundaries is shared. (Spracklen, 2001, p. 77)

This implies that if the game is no longer cast in their image, their image must change. However, as he so ably demonstrates, this exclusion is not quite true; 'the other' is admitted conditionally, a bit like 'lady members' of certain golf clubs.

By way of contrast, Modood (1990, p. 95) has urged that, rather than identity being externally set, 'everybody is somebody, not just a victim' – a challenge to both Wallman and the political anti-racist activists of the 1980s. A more pragmatic, political view sees identity(ies) as being utilized and manipulated by the identified and the identifier. Hall (1996), talking of black identity, argues that identification is the most compelling descriptor of the process that individuals and groups go through as they are never fully identified by the identifier nor are they fully identifiable in the way they would like to locate themselves. What he describes is a fluid, contested process:

Groups, movements, institutions . . . try to locate us for the purpose of regulating us; try to construct us within symbolic boundaries in order to locate us, to give us resources, or take resources away from us. And in order to exist within that kind of symbolic framework, we try to manipulate or respond to it by saying 'well, I'm sort of like that, if there's enough money' or 'I refuse to be like that, as you call it' and 'instead I call it like that'. (Hall, 1996, p. 130)

The processes of defining a white identity, however, are rather different because of the dominance of whiteness in our society. The discursive power that is embodied through the 'discourse of othering' (Riggins, 1997) causes whiteness to be 'inside', 'included', 'powerful', the 'we', the 'us', the 'answer' as opposed to the problem, and most important of all, unspoken. Gabriel (1998) suggests that whiteness is reinforced through a series of discursive techniques that includes the power not to be named, 'exnomination' and 'naturalization', where only whiteness can make sense of an issue. Even the universalization of whiteness contributes to understanding white identity as it makes sense of 'our' news, 'our' television, important dates in 'our' calendar, and 'our' sport. Where individuals associate themselves with social phenomena that represent them positively a process of identification will occur. The

process of identity formation, and being identified, for white people becomes less problematic than in Hall's example as associations are more positive, less open to question and, to a certain extent, taken for granted. So both identifiers and those identified as white have rarely in the past engaged in what it means to be white in a white society. Therefore unrehearsed explanations cause, for most people, the insecurities that come with not having an adequate response. The research studies that we have conducted in football, cricket, and rugby league all lend credence to this notion.

White as normal

As we have already suggested, by far the majority of the attention given to the construction of 'racial' characteristics has examined features ascribed to black people. These are directional constructions reflecting the balance of power.

In addressing race, in the law, in literature, in popular culture, in communication studies, in religion or other areas of our lives, whiteness is privileged, normalized, deified and raceless. (Johnson, 1999, p. 1)

The black is the 'other', the peripheral, while the white commands the centre, if for no other reason than this process of 'normalization'.

... as long as race is something only applied to non-White people, as long as White people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. (Dyer, 1997, p. 1)

Representations of 'black' crime, black entertainers, black sportsmen/women, are commonplace while their 'white' equivalents go unremarked. Media reports rarely take the form: 'the white footballer, David Beckham ...', 'White muggers have today robbed ...', 'White rock star, Noel Gallagher ...', and in the not too distant past 'the all white team, Everton ...' (Polley, 1998, p. 135). Considering such a scenario makes more apposite Martin Luther King's parable in which he observed: 'Ten drunks, one black, the other nine white. "Look at that Black drunk", says the indignant observer' (cited in Terkel, 1992, p. 6). Unlike 'the fact of blackness' (Fanon, 1992), historically whiteness has been taken to signify the 'raceless', normalized identity (see also, Frankenberg, 1993; Wong, 1994; Bonnett, 1998).

This normativity is both the product of power relations and a source of differential power. Frankenburg notes the co-construction (and would probably add 'reconstruction') of whiteness with other racial/cultural categories, class and gender. She also argues that this co-construction is:

... fundamentally asymmetrical, for the term 'whiteness' signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage. (Frankenburg, 1993, p. 237)

In sport this is commonly recognized by players from minority ethnic groups, but when given voice is interpreted as them having 'a chip on their shoulder'.

Those adopting a Foucauldian position might argue that power is not possessed but is something that all exercise. However, as this shows, the structures of our society, founded on uneven distribution of access to the networks of power, mean that it is easier for some to exercise it than others. To introduce a sporting metaphor, while some people are straining to get the ball uphill others are easing it downhill. The significance of white privilege is that when doing nothing the ball continues to roll in the direction that favours the white males of this study, even though we acknowledge that a complete analysis has to be informed by class, sexuality and other factors.

In the sporting arena

So, is it possible to identify characteristics that will place someone on one side of the boundary or the other, especially if we want to be able to accommodate the idea that boundaries may shift or that identities are fuzzy (Cohen, 1995; Back, 1996)? Who is in and who is out, and when? As we shall discuss below, there is inevitably some measure of contestation in the construction of identity. What we try to do in this paper is to explore the ways in which the contestations represented through racism shape, and are modified by, cultural identities associated with sport.¹ Where 'black' people have been seen as the significant other in British sport, 'whiteness' could be seen as the 'silent' other. As Carrington (2002, p. 141) notes:

... sports contests ... act as a key signifier for wider questions about identity within racially demarcated societies in which racial narratives about the self and society are read both into and from sporting contests that are imbued with racial meanings.

We have now conducted studies of the nature and extent of racism in professional rugby league, local league cricket and grass roots football (Long *et al.*, 1995, 1997, 2000). These have included postal and telephone questionnaires to club officials and administrators of the sport, site surveys of spectators, focus groups with match officials, in depth interviews with players (black and white) and case studies of clubs. Starting from a consideration of black stereotypes we have *begun* to redress the absence of whiteness by soliciting self-definitions of ethnicity and exploring perceived characteristics not just of Asian and African-Caribbean, but also of white footballers and cricketers.

Some of the most revealing insights came from an unexpected source. Not wanting to offend sensibilities and alienate people by asking them to tick what they might consider an inadequate description of their ethnic status, we asked secretaries of grass roots football clubs an open question: since this questionnaire is predominantly concerned with the involvement of ethnic minorities in football, how would you describe your ethnic background? The pilot gave no indication of what was to come.

In the event, our black respondents (6%), having probably been asked this question on scores of occasions, gave fairly conventional responses, though some qualified it with an observation about where they were born or length

of residence in this country. The single most common response from white respondents was a simple 'white' label (15%), though some (3%) chose Caucasian or Anglo-Saxon as alternatives. Others commonly chose an expression of nationality: English (including one who described himself as 'plain English'), British or UK (13% in total). In combination though, it was common to make reference to both nationality and whiteness (33% in all such categories). Four made special reference to being Scottish or Irish, and four asserted their 'Yorkshireness', including one who described himself as 'Roman Catholic White Yorkshireman'. One other respondent drew attention to his religion (Church of England) and six chose to emphasize their sex (male). Another made a class statement: 'white middle class'.

Here a hierarchy of ethnicity can be identified which begins to throw light upon the core indicators of white identity. The notion of an imagined community comes under the microscope although it is still vague. However, it does clarify what the football secretaries see as symbolic indicators of their identities: (1) nation and whiteness; (2) locale and gender; (3) religion and class. Some of the less conventional responses to the same question included disclaimers: e.g., Not a problem from our team; No prejudice; I have been brought up to treat all races equally; Very social and treat everybody in the same light. Others sought to distance themselves from the issue by asserting, 'a human being' or 'a footballer', in an attempt to suggest that there are no ethnic distinctions in sport. This was emphasized by someone who insisted that he was a poor simple northern country boy (colour doesn't come into it, nor religion).

Finally, some treated that question rather differently and offered more discursive responses, perhaps in another form of disclaimer:

- If good enough *they* play.
- My club plays in an area of high mixed races, but we never have any *problems* on or off the pitch.
- I am a white person, but mix with all *ethnics*
- I have played football at junior and senior levels for 25 years *and associated with numerous Black, Asian and ethnic players* over this period. (Our emphasis)

Such forms of (non)engagement with their racialized or ethnicized identity suggests an unwillingness or inability to locate themselves. In some cases where implicit disclaimers are used there is an attempt to distance themselves from contemporary issues concerning racism in sport at the same time as taking account of rehearsed political correctness. Wetherell and Potter (1992, p. 3) suggest that academics should look beyond the overt messages from respondents and consider how discourse can be used to institute, solidify, change, create and reproduce social formations. The language used in the responses above racializes 'others', and stereotypes and pathologizes the African-Caribbean and Asian in football. At the same time there is a relative silence about who 'we' are. Other responses reflected the 'taken for granted' nature of being White by replying 'no' or 'none', or more worryingly,

'normal' (this last response is one of the clearest examples of pathologizing minority ethnic groups).

There is a big difference between those labels that are self-selected and those that are imposed by others. Burley and Fleming (1997) note how the footballing folklore of the 1980s fostered the flawed perception of the unintelligent black soccer player. This was associated with populist images of black players being poor trainers, no good on muddy winter pitches and lacking the 'bottle' to be defenders. In examining the role of black players much attention has been given to the attribution of particular sporting characteristics and the subsequent 'stacking'. We followed a long line of researchers since Loy and McElvogue (1970) to examine the case of rugby league (Long and Spracklen, 1996). Although challenged by many of our respondents (players and officials), the idea that there are racially distinct characteristics still has currency, and many in rugby league, cricket and football thought they could identify some particular aspects that set racial groups apart.

Most of the black rugby league and cricket players rejected the idea of biological differences, though white players were more divided in their opinions about the relevance of presumed racial physiology to playing ability. One Asian cricketer sought to identify a psychological distinction:

I think West Indians and Asians play the game more freer. English people play in a totally different way. That's one reason why they can never compete with us, because they're not flamboyant . . . They're a good team, but have nothing special. (Respondent C11A)

Not only is this interesting for its valuing of flamboyance as offering the potential for winning, but in so doing it also represents a reversal of the more usual argument about mental aptitude, reflected by one white cricketer: 'Mentally, English players handle pressure better, but they are not so naturally talented and are less physical' (Respondent C24W).²

The importance of context was demonstrated by the differences between white players from East Yorkshire, an almost exclusively white cricketing environment, and those from West Yorkshire, where there is a much stronger presence of black players. White players in East Yorkshire were quite clear that there are differences between the way Asian, African-Caribbean and white players play the game:

The overall impression was that East Yorkshire players believed that stereotypes . . . reflected more than an element of truth, and was a self evident non-issue . . . In contrast White players from West Yorkshire were much less convinced that there were differences between the racial groups in terms of playing characteristics. The major issues raised tended to focus on style, motivation towards the competitive aspect of the game, and the relative importance of group or team cohesiveness . . . Very few mentioned the influence of racial characteristics on specific skills such as batting bowling or fielding (this was in stark contrast to the respondents in East Yorkshire). (Long *et al.*, 1997, pp. 19–20)

Most of the attempts to articulate perceived differences were expressed in terms of presumed characteristics of the minority ethnic groups; white

characteristics were typically implicit. White cricketers struggled to identify collective characteristics that distinguished them, but it was fairly clear that whatever may have been the position in the past there was no assumption of natural superiority in terms of physical ability or skill.

I don't really think there's much credibility in this characteristics thing, but if I'm generalizing I'd say fairly solid batsmen, not particularly wristy, plays fairly correctly. (Respondent C31W)

More flamboyancy with Asian or ethnic players than you get with the stodgy English performer. I think it's the way people are coached in England. Players who don't play in the expected way don't catch the selector's eye in the first place and then the natural ability is coached out of them anyway. (Respondent C17W)

Mentally English players handle pressure better, but they are not so talented and are less physical. (Respondent C04W)

White English players have to rely more on technique and tactics because we are physically inferior to the West Indians. (Respondent C34W)

Such views from players still draw heavily upon biologically essentialist ideas (Kane, 1971). The resultant characteristics/stereotypes foster views of sports performers which themselves reveal (dis)empowering processes and practices in sport (Bains and Patel, 1998).

The black players found it easier to describe white players, though these images were still less clearly formulated than those they held of Asian and African-Caribbean players. Moreover, they tended to address the nature of the relationship with the game rather than playing skills. One Asian cricketer remarked of his white contemporaries:

I think that the way they've been brought up – it's like brain washing – whatever they do, they're the best at it. They always seem to have that edge that they're just that bit superior to you. It's not always their fault, they're just brought up that way. (Respondent C12A)

Another drew attention to the social role of cricket:

A white English cricketer – basically they play their cricket hard, but it's basically about socializing and getting to know the opposition after the game. It all sort of revolves around beers and if you're involved in that sort of thing it's all well and good, and if you're not you do feel slightly out of it. (Respondent C02A)

This was mentioned by some of the white players as one of the negative characteristics of Asian cricketers who did not want to mix and socialize after the game: 'It's important to get on socially as part of the team' (C07W).

Despite cricketers struggling to articulate white playing characteristics, we tried again when we turned our attention to football, where the pattern proved to be very similar. Players were able to reflect upon clear stereotypes of themselves and others except when it came to white players. The white players struggled to 'see' any similarities or stereotypes when looking at themselves. Knowledge of the rigidity of the England team's playing system

was the clearest indication of 'white characteristics'. Again, recognition of cultural and personal characteristics was conspicuous by its absence. The white players offered little conscious articulation of whiteness and identity, and the African-Caribbean and Asian players also struggled to name characteristics attributable to white players. One African-Caribbean player did comment that white players 'tended to be more rigid – see the national team, not as aggressive as blacks' (Respondent F10AC), and an Asian player maintained that there was 'no difference, more enthusiastic, get the breaks' (Respondent F16A).

In football too, the use of physical attributes was negligible in comparison to the observations of the processes operating in the game. Goldberg's (1994) work emphasizes the way knowledge is reproduced in society. The way that common-sense racialized issues and ideas find their way into football through broader social forms gives the notion that ideas and practices are not produced and reproduced in isolation. Our work suggests that identity construction and the construction of whiteness are rarely consciously considered as issues, and yet are constantly reproduced in football, cricket and rugby league. This is a simple point but one which usually seems to be overlooked.

These processes do not simply constitute an innocuous game of word association. The manifestation of these processes of directional labelling allows racism to operate as a protection of the white norm. Essed argued that 'when confronted with racist hate messages, speech, epithets, graffiti or propaganda, the typical reaction of non-target groups is to consider these incidents an aberration' (1997, p. 131). Similarly, our recent research into grassroots football concluded that where officials and players heard racist abuse in a game or even on the terraces they generally rationalized it as a 'heat of the moment' exchange. Black players were resigned to accepting this abuse as 'part and parcel of the game' because if they were to respond to it they would lose their concentration and therefore lose the game. The consensus was that although there is racism in the sport, 'good' footballers, cricketers or rugby players have to be able to shut out these things and get on with the game, which arguably compromises the scope for challenging racism.

In the cricket research we found whiteness being defended through a cultural essentialism. 'Tradition' was being used as a way to resist different ways of behaving in the game. One of the most common grievances levelled at Asian cricketers (and footballers) was that they had the effrontery to talk in their own language. The presumption is that 'the spirit of the game' requires the use of English. One white cricketer talked about the perceived challenge: 'The real issue is that English people feel put upon. This leads to frustration then anger and strife' (Respondent C13W).

White privilege in sport

Many of our respondents found it difficult to recognize as racist the language and incidents around them. We argue that this is because of the process of

normalization that promotes a white privilege. The processes are insidious, the outcomes so apparently natural that they go unremarked. Just as gender prompts us to react differently to baby boys and girls, so perceptions of 'race' steer daily interactions on a micro level (Wildman and Davis, 1997). The historical, conscious and unconscious privileging of white people over black people finds its way into legal processes (Delgado, 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 1995, 1997), education processes and knowledge production (Gordon *et al.*, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998), language and dominant discourses (Essed, 1997; Gabriel, 1997) and gender relations (Frankenberg, 1993). It would be remarkable if these processes were not to extend to sport and the way it is experienced by minority ethnic groups across the UK on a less than level playing field. These processes lead to what Maynard (1994, p. 20) has identified as the 'taken-for-granted everydayness of White privilege'.

Everyday white privilege in sport can take many forms. Let us try to illustrate this by adapting McIntosh's indicators of white privilege to our specific arena of sport. McIntosh (1997) identified 46 outcomes of privilege *vis-à-vis* her black colleagues that she could attach to her whiteness. She described her white privilege as an 'invisible package of unearned assets' that indicate this subtle but ultimately destructive process of power relations. Table 1 suggests 10 parallels as default positions in which white people find themselves in sport.

These largely unseen facets of whiteness illustrate the commonplace world of white privilege that reinforces difference and 'race' at the same time as normalizing this advantaged position for White people in sport. There is generally nothing out of place, illegal or radical about most of the associated

Table 1. Indicators of white privilege in sport

1.	I can be fairly sure that wherever I go to play sport people will be neutral or pleasant to me where 'race' is concerned.
2.	I can go to any county or district association and find myself represented in its administration and management.
3.	I can be fairly sure that when I go to the annual awards dance there will be refreshments that reflect my culinary preference.
4.	I do not have to educate my teammates on the existence of institutional racism.
5.	I can do well in sport without being presented as a role-model to my 'race'.
6.	I am never asked to speak for all of the people of my racial group.
7.	I can be fairly sure that talking to the 'person in charge' will mean talking to someone of my own 'race'.
8.	I do not have to worry about racist behaviour putting me off my game.
9.	I can express myself in sport without people attributing it to my 'race'.
10.	I can play in a single 'race' team without accusations of separation over integration.

behaviour, which is what makes these actions and privileges the norm and therefore difficult for most to stand back and identify. In fact Mahoney (1997) suggests that a privilege of whiteness is to not-see whiteness and its privileges.

Identifying racism and white privilege ought to lead to questions about what to do about it. Perhaps it is the complacency associated with white privilege that allows the institutional response to racism in sport to be tokenistic, or worse still to ignore or deny the evidence (Long, 2000). This need not, of course, be attributed to conscious, malicious action; Feagin and Vera (1995) have identified the 'sincere fictions' by which whites create a self-definition that disavows racism (a process not dissimilar to the creation of traditions already observed in Spracklen's work). Wildman and Davis (1997) argue that for us to effectively tackle discrimination we need to highlight the power systems and the privileges that create and make them evident. Even those white players and officials trying to challenge racism are beneficiaries of this white privilege (in an instrumental rather than humanistic sense). Being white in grassroots football means to be advantaged before a ball is kicked (see Wellman, 1994, p. 208). This advantage is reasserted through the composition and structure of the game's administrative committees and officials, which will be discussed later.

Whiteness is being reformulated and readjusted every weekend on the parks of England. The social processes representing whiteness defend institutions, power relations, the 'normal' and the 'other'. But it is a very particular form of whiteness worked out in a tough, heterosexual, predominantly working/lower middle class domain (Williams, 1994, pp. 158–160). Importantly, this racialized discourse that benefits some people in grassroots football can also be reinforced by those it does not, through their contribution to the way whiteness is played out in each sporting context. So the normalization of whiteness continues, even where resistance from campaigns is making a difference (e.g., Hit Racism for Six and Let's Kick Racism Out of Football).

White in the stands

Irrespective of levels of black participation in a sport, spectating at professional sports events in the UK is still a predominantly white experience (with the possible exception of basketball). For example, in our study of rugby league, the matches we surveyed attracted an aggregate crowd of some 31,000. Survey staff were asked to keep a record of how many black fans went past them, and produced an aggregate total of just 24. However inaccurate the recording, this is several orders of magnitude below a proportional representation (Long *et al.*, 1995).

The fragility of some white identities can be exposed by something as simple as proximity of difference. Identifying with a rugby league club still very much means identifying with a particular geographical location. Some of those locations may themselves become identified with minority ethnic groups because of residential patterns (e.g. Bradford in the case of rugby league). The

supporters though are still overwhelmingly white and sometimes suggest that they are worried that they come from places seen to be ‘taken over’ by an immigrant community, thereby threatening their ‘Yorkshireness’. They have two ways of asserting their position in the world of rugby league:

1. by re-emphasizing their whiteness through attacks on ‘the other’. The reasoning associated with this might be that attacking the black other can forestall the ‘white other’ (the opposing fans) finding them guilty by association and impugning their whiteness;
2. by ironically assuming the mantle of ‘the other’ in order to ‘take the wind out of the opposition’s sails’. The associated reasoning here is that it is difficult to attack someone through abuse when they have already done so in a self-mocking way (except, of course, it is not self mocking) by constructing an image, a ‘grotesque’, that is not ‘real’.

The following extract from a field diary gives an example of this distancing embrace:

When buying a programme one Bradford Northern fan [they had yet to become Bradford Bulls³] said to another, ‘It’s no good, it’s not written in Urdu so we won’t be able to understand it.’ There were further similar comments from other Bradford fans, and when a message for Bradford supporters appeared on the scoreboard an opposition fan made the same reference. This was obviously a sign of a more educated crowd than one might encounter in other circumstances, where the reference would surely have been to ‘Paki’ rather than ‘Urdu’, but it was still clearly intended as a put-down. There were also several comments about not eating pork – again from both sets of fans.

Using this approach the white fans cannot lose:

1. it allows them to make an indirect attack on the ‘other’ Bradford;
2. it pre-empts abusive attacks from other fans – re-establishing parity (and perhaps common cause) with the white opposition; such that,
3. even if other fans do resort to racial abuse, it is the ‘other’ Bradford that they are attacking because the Bradford fans know they are not like ‘them’, the Asian residents of Bradford.

Agendas, rules and regulations

As we have already demonstrated, once we try to establish some notion of whiteness in terms of playing characteristics it falls apart in our hands, just like any monolithic blackness. Even before we arrive at individual characteristics there are intervening collectivities like nationhood (here predominantly Englishness) or regional ascriptions of northernness. However, perhaps more significant in terms of the perpetuation of norms is the whiteness of sports administration.

At the time of our research there was a marked absence of minority ethnic groups on the committees of the professional rugby league clubs (though one

respondent (RL03W) noted that four members of the Board are Jewish), and the Rugby Football League itself had no black employees. Less than one in five of the cricket clubs had any committee members from minority ethnic groups. And in local grass roots football too there is a system of committees that has virtually no black representation, and none at all at the senior levels. To this can be added a marked under-representation of black match officials in all three sports. One of the major concerns among the case study football clubs was that some of the people who make up the structure of football at the grassroots were 'the players who were calling me Paki bastard in the 1970s' (Respondent F32A).

For many 'outsiders', a meeting with the key committees in the three sports outlined could appear to be an alienating experience. When most people meet their committee members during the season they know they are at a compulsory meeting or are about to be fined. What black people see on these occasions is an array of white faces. It is a whiteness that is exercising authority to discipline them. These white faces not only represent grassroots football, but they also reflect 'the establishment', a white establishment that is allowing black players to play its white game. The hierarchy of privilege between black and white people impinges upon agency and freedom to act even at the grassroots. Through the research we were able to observe how power processes can consort to reinforce the dominant white hegemony as the tensions of oppression and resistance unfold in regular interactions between those in power on the inside and those outside these networks. A number of Asian and African Caribbean footballers complained of unfair treatment by white committees. These complaints often arose from complaints they had about the way they had been treated in incidents on the pitch. The players felt that because of their background they had already been disadvantaged by referees who argued that 'there is little evidence of racism on the pitch, at least not that they hear' (Long *et al.*, 2000, p. 29). In the end these players invariably refused to attend disciplinary committees as they expected an unfair hearing. As a result of their non-attendance guilt would be assigned by default, but the black players would save themselves the extra fine that is levied when players attend a hearing only to be found guilty. They effectively plead guilty by not turning up to defend their case, but have adopted a symbolic position that allows them to resist further oppression, humiliation and confrontation; and the committee can satisfy itself that 'the system' works in dispensing justice. In practice though both 'sides' lose as a consequence.

What we have then, in these otherwise different sporting environments, is a white establishment. It is in this environment that the President of the County FA, which espouses racial equality, can express surprise when he is reproached for cracking racist jokes at an end of season dinner. It can be deduced that in these sports it is all right to be white. Moreover, if we return to our previous consideration of power it is not difficult to see how black clubs distanced from the core of the institutions (networks of power) are less able to influence decisions in their favour.

Conclusion

We might have as our goal a 'race' blind society in which 'race' plays no part in determining opportunity, but while 'race' blindness posits whiteness as the norm that goal will be frustrated by the misapplication of its principles. In our studies black players have accepted that racism will occur. In addition, they recognize that to be 'good players' they have to adopt the attitude that they cannot allow the opposition to put them off their game, otherwise they will lose out. Our data help to show how the interplay of racist practices and processes with racial coping strategies (and dominant hegemonic masculinities) influences the formation of sporting identities.

The way language is used in sport reflects the way it is practised in other social networks, thus giving us a clear picture of the oppressive character of a society structured on racial lines. Far from being a reason to deny the responsibility of those in sport to tackle racism, we argue that wherever there are structured differences and privilege because of whiteness and blackness we need to establish a critical gaze to emphasize and then challenge these powerful inequalities.

Having turned attention on white identity, whiteness and its construction, a rather different research agenda suggests itself for the future. With a few exceptions like Frankenberg (1993) and McIntyre (1997), the white experience in sport is under-researched and under-theorized. Any such conceptualization has to be made more subtle through a consideration of shades of white by taking into account, in particular, the dimension of nationalism.⁴ However this agenda cannot be allowed to distract attention from urgent practical measures to address the continuing problems posed for black people in sport. Nor need it, as the study of whiteness is integral to the challenge to racism in sport.

Examining 'whiteness' more closely should allow researchers to make it visible and open to discussion and challenge. Moreover, an understanding of its construction generates the possibility of a clearer understanding of the processes and practices of racism, hence a better chance of disrupting them. The paper demonstrates the complexity of these processes and their interpretation, which cannot, of course, be achieved independently of the researchers' own blackness and whiteness (hence the importance in our projects of having a team comprising researchers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds).

Although they may be elided in the minds of many (especially white English) we need to distinguish between notions of race, ethnicity and nation. When players did feel able to distinguish between African-Caribbean, Asian and white players they were typically referring to white English players and sometimes made the point of not attributing the same characteristics to white Australians or South Africans. Because of the privileges bestowed by whiteness, moving in and out of identities (on the lines suggested by Hall above) is in fact easier for whites than it is for blacks. Importantly, it is not just a case of what white sportspeople might take to themselves through these processes of identity formulation, but also what they are able to impose upon

others. The machinations of whiteness allow some to protect what they have, and breaking down the associated barriers suggests a political agenda to challenge networks of power and control.

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Notes

1. This is largely a male account and we recognise that it does not as yet offer a gendered analysis.
2. It is not easy to think of evidence from recent test matches of this ability to handle pressure better.
3. Steaming [a colloquialism for excessively drunk] Pigs, their traditional nickname, was hardly the happiest choice in a city with so many Muslim residents. It would, of course be very effective in setting the dominant white culture apart from the minority ethnic culture.
4. Nor must we fail to recognise that the whiteness we have identified here also makes 'others' of Jews, the Irish, travellers and refugees from Eastern Europe.

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