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## **Sport and ethno-racial formation: Imagined distance in Fiji**

Significant research depicts the implications of sport's role in racial formation located mainly in the 'Global North'. Yet, there has been less attention afforded to the related role of sport in the 'Global South', particularly in divided societies, where the consequences of sports' influence on ethno-racial relations, are also significant. This study relies on empirical evidence gathered during an in-depth exploration into the role of soccer and rugby in Fijian intergroup relations. Sport is analysed as an arena that not only plays host to ethno-racial groupings but one which is also instrumental in their maintenance and reimagining. In Fiji at least, the organisation and positioning of sport in popular culture and discourse means that it becomes an emblematic sphere, active in the reconfirmation and preservation of ethno-racial division. Through this discussion, this study contributes to sport and racial formation theory, widening the gaze to diverse and divided socio-cultural settings.

**Keywords:** ethnic division; Fiji; racial formation; sport for development and peace; Global South

### **Introduction**

Racial and ethnic groupings remain among the most common categorizing tools employed to understand who we are and where we belong. Cornell and Hartmann (2006, 12) believe ethnic and racial descriptors to be 'among the fundamental organising concepts of the modern world'. However, given that the consequences of ethno-racial grouping continue to be significant worldwide (Harf 2018), away from the Global North, knowledge around the socio-cultural influencers (inclusive of sport) on such categorising is underdeveloped. In response, this paper

focuses on a context in the Global South<sup>1</sup>, Fiji. Categorised by the World Bank as a Low and Middle Income Country (LMIC) - Fiji is a diverse society comprised of two main ethnic groups, Indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*<sup>2</sup>) (57%), and Fijians of Indian descent (hereafter Indo-Fijians) (37%), as well as Indigenous ethnic minority Rotumans, Europeans, Chinese, and people of mixed ethnic and other Pacific island ancestry (6% in total) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2017). By focusing on Fiji and speaking in general about the experience of Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian communities, this research depicts how sport is active in the formation, maintenance and (re)imagining of racialised groupings and ethnic division. In doing so, the paper aims to better and broaden understanding about the role of sport in ethno-racial formation, as both an asset to racial formation theory and a counterbalance to sport for peace praxis.

## **Context**

Since independence from British rule (1970), Fiji has struggled with its divided population, resulting in a tumultuous modern history marked by political instability and increased poverty (UNDP 1997; Lal 2012a; Robertson 2012). Fiji's post-independence history can be defined as Indigenous dominated. Indeed the current government seized political power through a military coup in 2006, but have since gained partial legitimacy by winning the first elections in 14 years held in September 2014 (Lal 2014; Fraenkel 2015) continuing to dominate in the more recent poll. Power in the island nation is highly centralised with a political culture subject to corruption, nepotism and ethnocentric manipulation (Naidu, Matadradra and Sahib 2013; Naidu 2016; Ratuva 2014). Such centralisation has engendered a lack of ownership over the

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Global South' is a term that has been emerging in transnational and postcolonial studies to refer to Lower and Middle-Income countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> *iTaukei* is a Fijian word of colonial origin that denotes 'Indigenous Fijian' or 'Indigenous landowner.'

decision-making process, felt particularly among the Indo-Fijian community due, in part, to historical precedent (Gillion 1962; Lal 2012b).

From 1879-1916, it is estimated that around 60,000 indentured labourers were brought over from India and other areas to work in Fiji's cane fields (Lal, 2013). The workers agreed to come based on the promise of freedom and access to equal citizen rights after five years of labour to pay off their passage from the sub-continent (Gillion, 1962). Thus the ethnic makeup of the Islands was drastically altered, along both ethnic and class lines, for good. Equal rights and representation for Indo-Fijians remained elusive, despite a second wave of wealthier, predominantly Gujarati, Indians<sup>3</sup> who arrived in the 1960s (Lal, 2012b; Trnka, 2005).

Although hobbled by ethnic division, racial separatism in Fiji is not overt, there has been no civil war and its return to democracy was coupled with a welcome back by some sections of the international community (Lawson 2016). Sport is pivotal here as a valuable cultural commodity, with rugby<sup>4</sup> occupying a place of huge significance in Indigenous culture and, by extension, the nation itself (Presterudstuen 2010a; 2016). Consequentially rugby has become a bastion of a muscular Indigenous identity, an ethno-nationalist symbol both at home and overseas (Presterudstuen and Schieder 2016). Participation reflects this reality with rugby fields across the islands mirroring that of the army barracks and the governmental chambers in their indigeneity (Kanemausu and Molnar 2013a). Soccer<sup>5</sup>, on the other hand, provides a centre for Indo-Fijian identity.

Soccer is very much backstage in Fiji (as is female sport), it enjoys a relatively mixed base of participation and support yet: "Football in Fiji takes on a racially charged outlook that it is an Indo-Fijian sport" due to the sport's history and the fermenting of "racial myths and

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<sup>3</sup> Gujarat is a state in the Western part of India.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter 'rugby' will be used as an umbrella term for rugby union, rugby league and rugby sevens unless otherwise stated

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter 'soccer' will be used to refer to association football. 'Football' may appear in the interview excerpts but generally I use the unique classification of soccer.

narratives of ethnocentrism” (Prasad 2013: 25). A situation brought about due to the separate development of Indigenous and Indo-Fijians influenced heavily by the machinery of British colonialism (Ratuva 2007).

Organised soccer in Fiji grew into the ‘Fijian Indian Football Association’ (FIFA<sup>6</sup>) on October 8th, 1938 (Fijifootball.com). The ratification of this solely Indian, formal national organisation was an important step for many Indo-Fijians, and not just as soccer fans, but as citizens who were being side-lined in the macro corridors of power:

Between 1938-61, the first generation of Indo-Fijian lawyers clamoured for the presidency of the Fiji-Indian FA. Their aspiration, it can be argued, was based on the recognition that the football body was the closest thing to a national assembly for the Indo-Fijians (Prasad 2013: 36).

Like the FRU, the FIFA also emerged as a product of the mission in sports; an integral part of Victorian morals based on discipline, healthy exercise and order (Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005). Having the two ethnic groups in separate camps in terms of work, life and sport fitted well with the colonial policy of ‘divide and conquer’ evident in Fiji during the period of British rule (Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Robertson, 2012). The FIFA was officially racial, intended for players of Indian descent only (Prasad 2013). It remained The Fiji Indian FA until 1961 when an application for membership of (global) FIFA was rejected on the grounds that the organisation was ethnically biased. The ‘Indian’ was then omitted, and it became the Fiji Football Association (FFA). Up until that stage, participation in football had remained clearly associated with Indo-Fijian ethnicity and; ‘As part of the official and universally understood

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<sup>6</sup> Not to be confused with the Fédération Internationale de Football Association – association football’s global governing body.

colonial policy and practice, both “Indians” and “Fijians” accepted and promoted this separation’ (Prasad 2013, 32).

Due to the nation’s status as a low-and middle-income country in the Global South, its tumultuous history of division and the centrality of sport, Fiji is an ideal context for examining the influence of sport in both ethnic and racial relations, albeit one from a male perspective (see Kanemasu and Molnar 2013). However, before detailing how this was achieved some conceptual clarity is required, along with an understanding of the prevailing knowledge regarding sports’ role herein.

### **Racial formation**

Conceptually, race and ethnicity are widely debated across many disciplines and are often used interchangeably (Mason 1995; Hall 1996; Wade 1997; Letki 2008). However, there are differences, race is grounded in the biological differences between groups: skin colour, eye and body shape, along with perceptions of cognitive and physical ability (Kinder & Dale-Riddle 2012). Ethnicity, on the other hand, is regularly defined in cultural terms: common language, socio-historical or national experiences (Omi and Winant 1994; 2014). Yet, despite these differences, it is argued that both race and ethnicity are conjoined social and ideological constructs (Cornell & Hartmann 2006). With this in mind, and to reflect the ways in which ethnic and racial beliefs are both operationalised in group categorisation, the two are melded for this discussion, the genesis of which is racial formation.

Racial Formation Theory (RFT) explains how ethno-racial categories are formed in one’s own mind and in the minds of others. As ‘the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed’ (Omi and Winant 1994, 48), RFT is based upon the sociological consensus regarding the social construction of race (Staiger 2004; Feagin &

Elias 2013; Saperstein, Penner and Light 2013). Applied mainly to race relations in North America, alongside other theories regarding structural, systemic and institutional racism that depict racial inequality (Golash-Boza 2013), RFT has been credited with ‘enduring intellectual force’ (HoSang, LaBennet and Pulido 2012, 21).

However, Hochman (2018) challenges the hegemony of RFT arguing that it overlooks the nuance of categorical formation and the intersections of social and biological race. Instead, pointing to the companion conception of the ‘racialized group’, maintains the focus on the process rather than the outcome of RFT. Garcia (as quoted in Hochman 2018, 10) views racialization as ‘something that is done to a group, by some social agent, at a certain time, for a given period, in and through various processes, and relative to a particular social context’. Feagin and Elias (2013, 958), also criticise RFT for ignoring the transformative outcomes of racial formation and the wider, systemic, forces that contribute to and maintain racialization through the language and hierarchies of the ‘contemporary white frame’ in the USA. Again, such discourse is distinctly North American, but these theoretical tools support an understanding of ethno-racial beliefs as socio-political products that are continually occurring within and among ethnic groups. The focus on process is important as such beliefs can be strong but also dynamic in their capacity to change over time (Saperstein et al., 2013). As noted by Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers & De Leeuw (2010, 827), ‘racial and ethnic categories do not exist but are constructed by people and influenced by power relations and historical contexts’. Therefore, sociological scrutiny is worthwhile in asking: What contributes to the process of racialization and, how is this shaped by the socio-political context? There are surely many answers to such questions, but one is potentially located in sport.

### ***Sport and ethno-racial formation***

The role of sport in the formation and maintenance of ethno-racial groupings is particularly salient among studies on sport and racial formation in North America, Europe and, more

uniquely, South Africa. In Hoberman's (1997) seminal work, *Darwin's Athletes*, he highlights the significance of sport in maintaining damaging stereotypes about (largely black) athletes' sporting abilities and intellectual inabilities in the USA. Buffington's (2005) discourse analysis around American Football also confirmed how sport is operationalised in the perpetuation of ethno-racial stereotypes (see also Staiger 2004; Rada and Wulfemeyer 2005). In the UK, Peeters and Van Sterkenburg (2017), found that televised football promulgates a natural physicality discourse that (re)constructs black football players as physically rather than mentally able, in comparison to white players. While in South Africa, Booth (1998) wrote how the highly visible policy of segregation in sport during apartheid, maintained a colour line in the reality and (crucially) the consciousness of the rainbow nation.

The racialisation of South Asian individuals across Western sporting discourse is also significant in its uniformity. British Asian athletes, for example, are regularly constructed as 'illegible' in relation to normative conceptions of British sportsmen/women (Burdsey 2015). Similarly, Thangaraj's (2015) study of South Asian male basketball players in the US depicts their 'othering' in relation to hegemonic notions of American masculinity. While, Indo-Fijian golf professional Vijay Singh encountered difficulty while actively resisting attempts by the US media to Other him as an unlikely success, a rags to riches subject of colonisation from the Global South (Pandya 2013). South Asian women also face, arguably greater, difficulty in gaining access to sporting cultures where they are a minority; due to the pervasive stereotypes that place them as non-sporting in contexts such as Australia (Sawrikar and Muir 2010), and the UK (Ratna 2011).

In the above sport is the field in/on which ethno-racial stereotypes are played out. Other research is tangential explicating how and why, mainly black and minority athletes, are used and portrayed in such a way as to entrench their subordination to white hegemony (Burdsey 2011; Carrington 2010, 2013). This explains how stories of race and ethnicity are remade with

sport as a powerful ‘narrator’ (Carrington 2010, 67). Carrington (2010) sees sport as a ‘racial project’ whereby ‘Sports become productive, and not merely receptive of racial discourse...*sport helps to make race make sense, then work to reshape race*’ (66, emphasis in original).

It is clear then that groups are categorised through sport, and sport is operationalised in the construction of ethno-racial stereotypes (see Feagin and Elias 2013; Phillips and Platt 2016). The way athletes and the sports they play are displayed to both local and global audiences, can feed widespread perceptions about both the participants and the audiences, adding to the broader socio-cultural milieu contributing to ethno-racial beliefs (Rowe 2003). Again, the formative process is key, such categories and beliefs are not made in a vacuum. Evidence suggests that ethno-racial formation is a complex circuitry of socio-cultural and ideological influences, that can be made and remade through sport.

Yet, such discourse orientates towards the Global North, often understood through black-white binaries originating in the USA (Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and De Leeuw 2010). The Global South hosts innumerable ethno-racial groups, racialised via their own complex socio-cultural and/or ideological forces, yet there has been less attention afforded to the related role of sport herein, particularly in contexts beset with division. Sport’s potential to reduce intergroup distance in deeply divided societies, through fostering inclusive ‘imagined’ communities, has been given well-deserved attention in global praxis (Sugden and Tomlinson 2018). Yet it's important to acknowledge that due to its highly visible and emblematic nature sport can be at once a tool for the preservation and reconfirmation of both national archetypes and subnational group identities (Bairner 2015). In recognition, this paper seeks to investigate and acknowledge the potential of sport in reinforcing and maintaining ethno-racial categories, along with the implications this might have for societal harmony in contexts facing problems with diversity outside the Global North. The ethnically divided nation of Fiji, in which soccer

and (particularly) rugby are central, presented such an opportunity. To achieve understanding a carefully planned methodology was implemented.

### **Research method**

This research originated following years spent working in sport-for-peace in some of the world's most deeply divided societies. Fiji emerged as a focus due to its history of division and the central role that sport has played in the story of the nation. Initial research and conversations with Fijian based academics and sporting stakeholders, however, revealed a more nuanced reality in Fiji that went beyond the perception of the islands held in the global imagination, one has been significantly and purposefully shaped by the tourist industry along with Fiji's international rugby acumen. Soccer also holds a unique place in the national narrative. The aim of the research was, therefore: **To understand the role that soccer and rugby might have in Fijian ethno-racial formation and its related impact on intergroup relations.**

To achieve this an in-depth research journey was undertaken that centred on the following research questions:

- 1) How are Indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian group identities influenced through rugby and soccer?
- 2) What roles do soccer and rugby play in intergroup relations in Fiji?

Ethnography was deemed an appropriate method of enquiry due to its use in foregrounding contextual realities (Gobo 2008; 2011). Yet, there is widespread belief that to do justice to the method and its foci should take months and even years of immersion in a given context and this has limited its use (Lassiter 2005; Crabtree 2006). There is an argument that the contemporary time pressures of modern academia act as a further barrier (Hammersley 2017).

In answer to this, I employed an approach labelled ‘Short-Term Ethnography’ that juxtaposes a shorter time in the field with depth in experience and detail (Sugden et al, in press).

I spent a total of 10 weeks in Fiji – a one-week fact-finding trip that laid the groundwork for a longer spell in the field months later. During the latter I lived, ate, trained, exercised and socialised with a variety of Fijians dwelling in their homes. Due to my own reasonable soccer and rugby acumen, and British nationality, I was also able to embed in those worlds as a player, fan and coach. My goal was to participate in sporting culture(s), and devote as much time as possible to the exploration of unstructured and naturally occurring events allowing for a careful interpretation of meaning and detailed description (Willis and Trondman 2000; Gobo 2008; 2011).

I found my ‘outsider’ status not to be a total limitation, it allowed me a degree of independent sociological scrutiny while simultaneously allowing me to build a closeness with Fijian people who were incredibly open and willing to share their stories, even on the sensitive topics of race, ethnicity and division. My own identity (white British) meant that I stood out but was able to communicate in the English national language, along with our shared languages of rugby and soccer. It was not uncommon for me to be invited back to homes and villages after training and put in touch with others to assist with the research. In this regard ‘snowball sampling’ occurred in a distinctly Fijian way, which became more theoretical in accordance with emergent themes and local recommendations of focus and place (see also Noy 2008). It is important to note that the help and openness of both communities left a profound impression on me as a person and a researcher. Fijian communities can be markedly boundless, in opposition to Western/Urbanised settings, approaching individuals, families and clubs to learn more about their worlds was welcomed and encouraged. This lends itself to a way of being that is more open and transcendent, as I travelled across Fiji it became less about knowing and respecting boundaries as a (Western) researcher, but more about matching the kindness and

grace in which I was received. ‘Letting go’ in this regard led to a depth in the research, that I never thought possible.

Much of the research took place on the main island of Viti Levu, where I trained with teams in Suva and dwelt in Nadi during the Fiji FACT soccer tournament. I also spent a week in the soccer-mad town of Ba – evidenced by the museum with a dedicated soccer section and a café in the town centre which has its kitchen built inside a giant football. Ba is somewhat unique in Fiji in that soccer is the number one sport across the ethnic divide. Fandom is centred around the infamous Govind Park, home to Fiji’s most successful district side in recent times, named simply ‘Ba’ or the ‘Men in Black’, and where I stood in as coach for their under 12s team during a summer tournament. The research also took me to Labassa, on neighbouring island Vanua Levu, which rivals Ba in soccer obsession embodied through a loud and committed fanbase, and Taveuni which has produced some of Fiji, and the world’s, finest rugby talent.

The study benefited from 47 conversations with sporting stakeholders and non-stakeholders. These are depicted in *Table 1* which (broadly) categorises the participants by ethnicity, main sporting affiliation and the level at which they operate in regards to rugby, soccer or elsewhere in sport.

[Insert table here]

The conversations that took place are loosely defined as semi-structured interviews, which informed further exploration into 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 that involves “personal encounter(s) where people ‘story’ their issues, their

realities and aspirations” (Vaioleti 2006, 21). It is characterised by oral traditions and very open, emotional dialogue, and in research on sport in the Global South it can play a crucial role in de-centring the researcher and decolonising the process through prioritising local ways of knowing (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu and Richardson 2017). I took part in approximately 15 such discussions (included in the 47). These experiences were carefully noted in what grew to a 15,000-word research diary, supported by other tools, inclusive of discourse and policy analysis that helped develop an understanding of how public sport policy documents and print media both informed and reflected the lived realities of Fijian sporting cultures. Together with a commitment to self-conscious introspection, this allowed for the construction of ‘thick description’ to be concentrated into the research findings (Geertz 1994).

The interplay between my own, academic, and local ways of knowing was an intentional and concurrent theme. As an outsider co-constructed understanding was key with local voice and knowledge essential in shaping the conditions and consequences of further study (Charmaz 2006; 2014). To disrupt a monopoly on interpretation, locals were involved in the clarification and crystallisation of findings both in context, around dinner tables, through *Talanoa*, and later through dialogue via social media and over the phone. This entailed the initial coding of the data by myself, employing thematic analysis and then checking these themes with key participants whom I had developed close relationships with throughout the research. These retrospective conversations allowed me to measure my own interpretations of Fijian sport against their lived realities, the initial themes acting as further points of discussion and clarification. This approach allowed for an expansion of ‘multivocality’ in the research that aimed to de-centre the researcher and foreground local accounts and agency, whilst uncovering further, implicit, meanings missed during the field research (Tracy 2010).

What emerged was a three-dimensional impression of Fijian sport and society that has shed enough light on the Fijian sporting context, at a particular point in time, to reveal the tacit

role sport plays in ethno-racial formation among across Fijian sport and society. However, there are some important limitations to note, mainly that due to access the sample was predominantly male (75%) although a variety of stakeholders and non-stakeholders in sport were sought out. The sample is slightly skewed towards practitioners and fans of soccer and/or rugby. Yet the findings were both extensive and informative, what follows is a summary of key data and information representative of the wider themes, that emerged in the field, through NVivo coding and the re-checking processes outlined above.

Where possible, direct quotes are used so that participants themselves can edify the research claims. The findings are organised into three sections, the first and second explore the stated meanings that rugby and soccer hold for Fijian ethno-racial identities, focusing on Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians respectively. Based on this understanding the third section explores how such meanings and beliefs are active in Fijian intergroup relations.

## **Findings**

### ***Rugby and Indigenous Fiji***

Rugby codes in Fiji are places where pre-colonial traditions of masculinity and indigeneity can be performed anew. The ritualistic and role-specialised nature of team rugby is even said to complement older ways in which men in tribal settings worked together, negotiated leadership and established bonds (Presterudstuen 2010). Status, hierarchy and codes of conduct are therefore significant. As a top rugby administrator put it:

We [Indigenous Fijian] are warriors, we have a war mentality among the guys, now we have modernised we still have that grit, that fight, we still want to do things, if we are not playing rugby we are being mischievous...(Samu).

There is a pride in this warrior past and many see this fitting to the physicality of rugby. Fiji's inordinate success on the international stage, in rugby Sevens especially, has proved an ample platform on which to display a purely Indigenous version of national identity that counters the demographic reality. There is an expectation around Indigenous men/boys that they *should* be interested in rugby as a confirmation of masculinity (Presterudstuen 2016). This expectation was evident in players and teams encountered; "*In terms of social, it's just what we do*" stated one Indigenous player (Temo), "*...it was how we were brought up*" said another (Peni). From a very different perspective, an Indo-Fijian headteacher emphasised to me that: "*the sport (rugby) is like a culture to the Fijian (Indigenous) people*" (Lal).

Although the national team are supported with more verve among Indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians also make up the fan base of a team yet to feature an Indo-Fijian name. This is in part due to ethno-racial beliefs that help to preserve rugby as an Indigenous space as, according to Samu (above), they must play to avoid innate mischief. As for Indo-Fijians, Desh (Indo-Fijian male) explained: "*if you see an Indo-Fijian person holding a rugby ball it will be like 'oh wasting your time...what will he do'*". The absence of Indo-Fijian players is normalised and 'natural'. As an Indigenous player told me:

There are barriers - firstly in their [Indo-Fijian] physical attributes... plus there is their confidence to play the sport is not there... they do not have the drive that we have, the local, the Fijian, the iTaukei have to play the sport (Temo).

Summarising how many Indigenous Fijians felt, Temo references a lack of "*physical attributes*" drawing from a popular assumption of Indo-Fijians as 'small' and 'weak', so less likely to compete effectively in rugby. He then points to a perceived lack of "*confidence*" and

“*drive*”, negative stereotypes that generally position Indo-Fijians as poorly equipped in relation to the iTaukei.

The perception, part fact and part exaggeration, of differences in physical size and muscularity between Indigenous islanders and those of Indian descent, have been discussed (see Ricciardelli et al. 2007; Presterudstuen 2010; 2016). Indeed, both Indo- and Indigenous-Fijians referenced differences of somatotype (i.e. physical size and shape); but this was compounded by contrasting group attitudes to the aggression, power and pain often associated with rugby. In other words, the ‘physical being’ attributed to groups was not a complete explanation; divergent attitudes towards physicality in a collision sport were also pivotal. “*They [Indo-Fijians] don't really like playing the sport*” (Temo, Indigenous male) or; “*only some they would play [sport]. A lot of them just take their books and read*” (Jimi, Indigenous male). A young Indo-Fijian field hockey player said of the prospects of more Indo-Fijian rugby players; “*they would get thrashed because their physique is not so big*” (Rajesh). This is, however, counter to the experience of Indo-Fijian football players such as Julie and brother Vimal Sami who, despite their comparatively wiry appearance, thrived at the top of the rough and tumble Fiji national soccer league in the 1980s and 1990s (James & Nadan 2019).

However, more popular and entrenched beliefs have at times manifested in prejudice, particularly where rugby is concerned. For instance, one respondent told how his son tried to get into the rugby team in school and “*they told him to go and play soccer because he is Indian!*” (Ashan, Indo-Fijian man) thus continuing the cycle of separate ethnic categorisation through sport. Despite these barriers, there are many Indo-Fijians who do compete, but they are often met with negativity. Indigenous players can make it hard for them. This emerged when I spent time socialising and training with the Suva rugby team (Pseudonym), one of the few top clubs with Indo-Fijians in the squad (three). An Indigenous team member was proud of their

involvement; he believed that they were one of the “*friendlier teams*”, as Indo-Fijian boys often faced difficulties:

When they [Indo-Fijian players] play [other teams] they get it! All the other boys are like yeah let’s kill them!! Haha... it’s just...Fiji you know they say ‘it’s not your sport’ believe it or not some people here believe that rugby is an iTaukei sport, it’s not an Indian sport...it’s pretty sad really...not many people have tapped into it (Peni).

An Indigenous journalist described his perspective also:

I have been to rugby games where Indo-Fijians have played and I feel sorry for them because they play normal rugby but the verbal abuse coming from the side, especially from iTaukei people, it hurts their moral[e] ... there is no support from both sides especially the Indigenous Fijians (Luke).

This was confirmed by a veteran Indo-Fijian rugby player who had experienced racial prejudice in rugby “*a lot of times*” himself (Ashan). The belief that ‘Indians’ don’t belong in rugby – “*that sport’s for them (soccer), this sport’s for us*” (Markus) - is actively reinforced from a young age, thus hindering Indo-Fijian involvement in the game. As an Indo-Fijian journalist explained:

For the national Sevens team if you see Indians going for trials people would be like ‘really!?’ In a place like Fiji, we are behind when it comes to integrating

and stuff so we are still caught in the olden days. Indians are hesitant because they feel that is not their field, for whatever reason, and Fijians [iTaukei] are like ‘no that's our sport!’ (Arjun).

For Indo-Fijians the boundaries to the field of rugby are both mental and physical due to the strength of the ethno-racial categorisation that draws them. This perception becomes reality when Indigenous stakeholders in rugby employ ethno-racial stereotypes as an excuse for exclusion “...*they are a soft kind of people*” stated a senior official, when quizzed on the lack of outreach to Indo-Fijian communities (Samu). The government has shown little effort to encourage Indo-Fijians to take part in the sport. What is more, the Fijian Rugby Union (FRU) seems apathetic, as one Indo-Fijian player complained: “*We approached the FRU and we asked them can you provide us with trainee referees to officiate at the game ... I mean we are trying to develop, but the FRU said no*” (Ashan).

A prominent woman’s rights figure (indigenous) was critical of such perceptions, “*the Fiji Rugby Union is racist... it’s racist... it promotes racism, they talk about the fact that it’s inclusive but that's all bullsh\*t. It’s really about... strengthening this whole Fijian male macho identity*” (Silvia). Whether the organisation promotes racism is debatable, but at the very least the way rugby is framed in Fiji does little to discourage the popular ethno-racial discourse that portrays Indigenous Fijians as physically gifted and Indo-Fijians as less so. It is no wonder then that many Indo-Fijians prefer to watch at home or retreat to ‘*their sport*’ – soccer.

### ***Soccer: An Indian sport?***

Soccer in Fiji is a significant cultural artefact for the Indo-Fijian community (Prasad, 2013). In 1961, the Fiji Indian Football Association became the FFA, thereby removing the ‘Indian’ assignment, but its distinctly Indian character remains. However, this contrasts with the playing

ranks which include a significant number of Indigenous players, indeed, they form the majority at the elite level. At the Football Association Cup tournament (FACT), the national soccer coach commented that although Indo-Fijians dominated the administration of the sport, in terms of the national team *“my players are 90% iTaukei”* (PC 08/05/15). So why is it still considered an ‘Indian sport?’.

From ground staff right up to the FFA president, the organisation of soccer is managed and controlled by Indo-Fijians. This has contributed to the perception that *“soccer in Fiji is from the Indians”* (Lomu), it is *“their sport”* (Peni) or *“our sport...it is mostly Indians who are putting in all the effort, the time, the money”* (Krish).

The FFA is run by an ethnically exclusive Indo-Fijian group (overwhelmingly male) who protect and enjoy the status and power of their roles. There is a real sense of ownership that is especially potent given that Indo-Fijian power and ownership in Fijian society has been blocked in the past (see Ryle 2016). The dominance of Indo-Fijians in soccer’s administration has meant that soccer in Fiji has kept its ‘Indian’ label in all but name. As a Fijian sociologist and former sports journalist pointed out: *“To be honest it’s because these Indian officials they want to monopolise their position they want respect, and it’s not just a race thing it’s also a group thing, it’s very hard for someone from the outside to get in”* (Samir).

This collective closedness, that also finds logic in social class, cutting across ethnicity and race due to the money involved, lends support to the status quo. An Indo-Fijian sports administrator informed me that the dominant Indigenous presence of players at the elite level was uncontroversial: *“the dynamic is that they [Indigenous Fijians] are just interested in playing and having a good time, very few get involved in the administration”* (Arjun). From this perspective, Indians are the custodians and guardians of the game, while the iTaukei – though not unwelcome as players - find few opportunities in managing soccer. Key coaching and administrative positions are often advertised and awarded in house, and this has

condemned former players to lives of poverty with a profound sense of loss and exclusion from the game, a situation not dissimilar to that of black former basketball and American Football players in the US (Rhoden 2006). Back in Fiji, a former international player complained that while he had formed some important bonds with Indo-Fijians on the field, the mono-ethnic organisation of soccer was fomenting dis-integration by favouring Indo-Fijian appointees: “*they are splitting us up!*” (Henry). There is also evidence that the FFA has negated support at crucial times for more indigenous based (village) teams, leading to their absence at the elite level currently (see Dyer 2014). All that said, with the popularity of both rugby and soccer in Fiji, there are occasions and areas when both communities share in the enjoyment of these sports, in rugby fandom and in soccer participation.

Joint participation in soccer is one of the few areas in Fiji where Indo-Fijians and the iTaukei share a commonality in sport. Across Fiji, there are examples of soccer acting as a site for shared participation, and there were some very real examples of inter-ethnic friendships that had been formed through the game. Soccer’s heartland is Fiji’s west, from the ethnically mixed town of *Nadi* through Indo-Fijian dominated *Lautoka* to *Ba*, completing a 62-kilometre-long coastal stronghold for the sport (plus *Labasa* on neighbouring island of *Vanua Levu*). Through visiting and spending time in these places, it became clear that ethnic separatism in soccer was less evident. These areas are hubs for the sugar-cane industry, with high working-class Indo-Fijian populations, the fortunes of Fijian soccer tied deeply to that of its sugar industry (James 2015). As a result soccer is popular in these areas and, partly as a result, coexistence through mixed participation and fandom is also far more common than across the rest of Fiji, where the iTaukei population is higher and the influence of rugby more evident.

But soccer is still organised on Indo-Fijian terms, just as rugby is framed, even more so, in the image of Indigenous Fiji. Yet this still counters the historical narrative of Indo-Fijian exclusion in sport and society (Prasad, 2013). So how is this explained?

## **Sport and ethno-racial division**

Indo-Fijian participation in a range of sports is typically ‘recreational’ rather than ‘serious’. As discussed, there are relatively modest numbers of high-performing Indo-Fijian soccer players, while few of their ethnic peers represent the nation at the Olympic Games or similar events (FASANOC 2016). At a community level, Indo-Fijians certainly take part in soccer, netball and volleyball to a degree,<sup>7</sup> but the prime emphasis appears to be sporadic involvement for socialisation and exercise. Why so? There is a strong Indo-Fijian cultural emphasis on education and career development. While they have faced historical exclusion across Fijian society Indo-Fijians have grown to enjoy hegemony within the business community. Sport does not tend to figure in those aspirations and can also be positioned as an unhelpful distraction. But beyond such thinking, some Indo-Fijians are being dissuaded from sport because of how they are seen by others.

This begins at school, all the way up to elite sport organisations. Dali, a rare Indo-Fijian woman athlete, told of how she was prevented from playing netball at a young age; when asked why: *“they would see us as the weak and delicate ones, that's how they would see us as not the strong ones”*. Arjun (Indo-Fijian) also told of how in *‘Indian schools there was only soccer’*, compounding separation from rugby. Meanwhile, in the ethnically mixed schools visited there was less encouragement of Indo-Fijians in sport. The compound effect these beliefs have on the Indo-Fijian community is that many have accepted their position on the side-lines; a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, with pejorative attitudes perpetuating to marginalisation.

If Indo-Fijians are going to be involved in sport, it will be ‘their sport’ – soccer. But even here there is scepticism. As a leading Indo-Fijian soccer coach explained: *“if you go to an Indo-Fijian family and ask them to play, then no interest. Just support for support”* (Desh).

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<sup>7</sup> Both netball and volleyball are sports dominated by Indigenous female and male participants. However, it was beyond the scope of this research to look further into these sports.

Another coach saw Indo-Fijians as clever and strategic, but best placed on the side-lines because “*only Indians can read the game*” (Amir). A part indigenous, part European ex-player offered a similar sentiment: “*They are better with the whiteboard*” (Henry), reinforcing perceptions about Indo-Fijian’s supposed facility for strategy and planning. This bolsters the ‘clever’ and ‘strategic’ stereotypes about Indo-Fijians that find a logic through coaching more so than competing on the field. Observations in Fiji confirmed that from the elite competition to a girl’s under-14s tournament, Indo-Fijian coaches were common, but Indo-Fijian players less so.

Conversely, an Indigenous athlete spoke about the relative absence of Indigenous persons in the administration. “*I dunno why there hasn’t been any [indigenous] Fijian representatives in the management part but I guess we are just the foot soldiers. We just like to be in the sport to play the sport, leave all the politics and the bureaucracy and whatever to those people [Indo-Fijians]*” (Temo). Again, Indigenous Fijians are racialised as physically gifted but not mentally. As Silvia mentioned, speaking about the technical aspects of rugby: “*they [Indigenous] are not as good at it as they could be because they rely too much on their brawn rather than their brains*”. This was also used as an excuse for why soccer is coached and managed by Indo-Fijians – because it is considered more tactical (in Fiji) than rugby.

Even on the field, according to Indo-Fijian coaches and players, the key positions (i.e. centre, midfield) where much of the decision and play-making are made, should be occupied by Indo-Fijians based on their ‘intellectual’ gifts (e.g. Arjun/Peni/Krish). I spoke at length to a top coach who firmly believed in the ‘inherent’ differences between the two groups in soccer:

Indian players have a more tactical approach to the game. They can see their game in a visionary way in terms of creating things, Fijian [iTaukei] players are

more physical in the way they approach the game ... the coaches that are in charge of the teams have to guide the [Indigenous] players ... if you relax a bit then they will break all the rules (Arjun).

In this regard, broad ethno-racial categories formed in society are given logic though sport, as one academic and former sports journalist described:

I mean [Indigenous] Fijians are gifted sportspeople, and Indians are gifted business people, this might sound foolish. But Indians are seen to be gifted in education, gifted business people, but these again are perceptions, who is to say that [Indigenous] Fijians aren't gifted in business (Samir).

Ethno-racial stereotyping like this – both between and within groups – is by no means new to Fiji (see: Trnka, 2005). It has been referenced elsewhere as part of the ‘muscular native’ stereotype connected with the Fijian tourism industry. However, in sport there is a complexity: these stereotypes about ‘body’ and ‘mind’ are both maintained and reinforced. Such beliefs have a primordialising effect on Indigenous Fijians, labelling them as strong and powerful – yet lazy, unintelligent and more prone to trouble than Indo-Fijian counterparts. This creates a culture that channels young Indigenous men towards sport, and Indo-Fijians away from it<sup>8</sup>.

These ethno-racial perceptions are detrimental to a broad-based education: One headmaster complained that convincing young Indigenous boys of the value of education in

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<sup>8</sup> Due to Fiji’s diversity there are exceptions to this. A participant in this study Henry Dyer, for example, is an ex professional soccer player who is ethnically part European and part indigenous, and therefore did not fit into the local informal racial hierarchy.

the face of these stereotypes and aspirations was “incredibly hard” (PC 14/06/15). On the other hand, for Indo-Fijians, the widespread acceptance of these stereotypes serves as a barrier to sport. It is evident in their lack of acceptance into the rugby sphere, in the unequal approach in government sports outreach, in the way that physical education is delivered, and through a ‘mind-set’ among Indo-Fijians that de-prioritises sport. This all maintains a degree of ethno-racial separatism in Fijian sport that informs and entrenches the dominant mindsets and beliefs of both groups.

### **Discussion: Imagined Distance**

Anderson (1983) talks of ‘imagined communities’ and how relational networks can be socially constructed and perception managed as part of a group, or otherwise. This is operationalised in sport-for-peace praxis with research highlighting sport’s utility in building such communities, where ethnic, racial and religious divides become of reduced consequence (Schulenkorf 2010). This occurs sporadically in Fiji through the shared fandom of rugby Sevens, and, more robustly, through joint participation via soccer, mainly at grassroots level<sup>9</sup>. However, Indo-Fijian fandom of Sevens tends to be more passive and they are a rare sight at 15s (full pitch rugby union) games and events. Generally, it is shown that rugby and soccer in Fiji do more to divide its two main groups than to bring them together. Through sport, ethno-racial, social and cultural differences between groups are maintained and re-produced. ‘Imagined distance’, then, occurs when similarities are muted, and differences normalised even exacerbated, in this case through ethno-racialised practices in two Fijian sports.

To further interrogate sports’ role in ‘Imagined distance’; many mixed friendships, sports teams and clubs, were encountered throughout the research, along with several thriving

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<sup>9</sup> Cricket in Fiji emerged as a sport which appears to be further ahead than soccer or rugby in terms of inclusion, alas it was beyond the scope of this research to delve deeper into this sport.

mixed schools where children played together with abandon. This suggests that the two groups that have shared the islands now for over 100 years need not be routinely distanced after all. Furthermore, in many areas and aspects of Fijian society, across different cultures, good fences make good neighbours and people are happy living in their separately preserved ethno-racial silos. However, the research revealed few culturally neutral opportunities to explore their commonalities. The sheer popularity of rugby in Fiji and its centrality to the story of the nation means that the public is exposed regularly to the discourse of Indigenous sporting hegemony. Forrest & Dunn (2010, 99) highlight the ‘considerable and compelling’ influence of media and mass audiences in relation to ethno-racial stereotyping of groups. Such effects impact on the popular imaginations of majority and minority ethnic groups in a given context. In this sense, members of both ethnic groups are encouraged to see themselves, and each other in the narrow form in which they are described. For example, McDonald & Rodriguez (2014, 240) argue that Fiji’s international success and reputation as a rugby nation have meant that stereotypes about Fijians have had an impact beyond the nation – a ‘language of the dominant logic’ played out externally. Fiji is rugby, rugby is indigenous, therefore Fiji is indigenous. Internally, though, this dominant logic manufactures distance between Indo-Fijians and Indigenous islanders that both feeds and draws upon popular ethno-racial stereotypes of the physical and mental attributes and shortcomings of both groups (see Trnka 2005). This reinforces an ‘imagined distance’ in Fiji between its two main ethnic groups.

In terms of ethno-racial formation then this reconfirms sports’ role as a conduit through which ethno-racial beliefs are formed and upheld, whilst acting as a reference point for separate categorisation of groups. This is inclusive of stereotypes, narratives of ethnocentrism and racialised discourse more broadly. As Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers note (2012, 129) ‘One-sided representations of race and ethnicity in the sporting context can have meaning and consequences far beyond the boundaries of the sporting world itself’. Sport can frame

subconscious thought about racial/ethnic groups in non-sporting situations, making existing ethno-racial beliefs make sense by reshaping and/or racializing groups in ways that coexist with hegemonic discourses around colour that coexist with dominant systems of exclusion and marginalisation. Referring to a dearth of black quarterbacks in American football, Buffington (2005) for example, found that sport can entrench difference by portraying some groups as 'fit' for athletics and labour, but not for leadership and management positions. In Fiji, the indigeneity of rugby feeds into a narrative whereby Indigenous Fijians are seen to have an abundance of brawn, but a deficit of brain. The lack of Indo-Fijian participation/representation also reaffirms ethno/racial labels limiting their access to sport. Intergroup perceptions are therefore managed and reproduced via sport in a cyclical manner. For example, Indo-Fijians are weak so don't play sport, Indo-Fijians don't play sport so they are weak. An internalisation of inferiorities across different planes that can justify and perpetuate the status quo.

### ***Sport and ethno-racial formation in divided societies***

This limiting of participation to certain groups has wider consequences, such as the touted physical and mental benefits of sport, particularly in a nation like Fiji, beset with NCDs (Gyaneshwar et al., 2016), along with the social development opportunities associated with participation (Burnett 2006). But crucially, for this discussion, sport is complicit in maintaining an imagined distance between groups in a context that has struggled with the consequences of ethnic division (Robertson 2012). The way in which sport contributes to ethno-racial formation and separate categorisation is both benign yet powerful. Speaking on how African diasporic people have come to be viewed, by themselves and their surrounding communities in the Global North, through their experience as 'black athletes' Carrington (2010: 4) states:

It is sports assumed innocence as a space (in the imagination) and a place (as it physically manifests itself) that it is removed from concerns of power, inequality, struggle and ideology, that has, paradoxically, allowed it to be filled with a range of contradictory assumptions that have inevitably spilled back over into wider society (parenthesis in original).

It is due to sports' perceived 'innocence' as apolitical, detached from ideology, that its influence on the popular imagination can be veiled. Such pervasive and culturally embedded forms of social conditioning can also endorse ingroup identity. Herein, ethno-racial categories are identified and applied, labelling groups in such a way that they become part of a group's 'self-concept', whilst shaping and entrenching their feelings towards others (Mackie & Hamilton 2014). This has further implications for Fiji, as a divided society in the Global South, where rugby and soccer affirm separate categorisation, more so than reduce it. This makes it difficult for groups to envisage a shared future, an important step towards harmony in diverse societies (Dovidio, Gaertner and Saguy 2009) and why the related role of sport in societies struggling with diversity elsewhere might be worthy of further attention.

In this sense, sport is implicated in reconfirming separate identities but also in maintaining imbalanced power relations. In Fiji, the Indo-Fijian's perceived inability to partake in the Fijian past-time of rugby is a barrier not only to participation but their entry into mainstream 'Fijian' identity. The likelihood of 'imagined distance' overshadows 'imagined community', except in the rhetorical sense of its application to rugby and national identity. Critical appraisal of the Fiji microcosm then reveals sport as active in racial formation once again, not just a vessel but a conduit for ethno-racial categories. This is arguably more damaging in divided societies whereby (re)imagining narratives of separatism, through the way

in which sport is organised, displayed and embodied, groups are re-racialised, and the status quo preserved, to the detriment of both groups.

## **Conclusion**

Efforts to build ‘imagined communities’ through sport in the name of harmony and/or coexistence are well known (Sugden and Tomlinson 2018). Yet this research highlights sport’s opposed potential in categorising rather than de-categorising groups. Focusing on Fijian soccer and rugby depicts this duality, sport acts as a social meeting point in some areas while fomenting ‘imagined distance’ in others. In divided Fiji, this has a detrimental effect on societal harmony by limiting Indo-Fijian access to sport and placing limitations on those, of both groups, who wish to transcend ethno-racial categories that fuel division. The multifarious ways in which racial categories are reproduced and maintained through sport in Fiji mimic the complexity of racial projects that occur at every level of society elsewhere (Omi and Winant 1994; Hylton 2010). Yet not every context suffers from division or ‘imagined distance’ in the way that Fiji has/does. In this context at least, sport not only forms but re-informs ethno-racial beliefs, in a way that contributes to a divided status quo in sport and society. Therefore, this study has shown that it is not just in the Global North that sport is operationalised in ethno-racial relations. The indication that this also occurs in divided Fiji, reinforces and broadens the scope of knowledge regarding the role of sport in the construction of ethno-racial groups and associated hierarchies. Pragmatically speaking, problematizing sport’s role in ethno-racial division contributes to sport-for-peace praxis by scrutinising division that is given logic through sporting cultures. This, in turn, seeks to inform our collective work informing more open sporting communities that are real, not imagined.

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