



## Intimacy, sport and young refugee men

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### ABSTRACT

This article is about research with a group of young refugee men from Sudan and their relationship to football (soccer) as they resettle in Australia. It provides evidence of the resilience, independence and autonomy that such young refugees possess and what these young men's intimate knowledge of these qualities can teach us. In other words, how can we as researchers learn from these young refugees about how they perform these qualities and how may we accommodate this during ethnographic research and in sports-based intervention programs aimed at empowering such young people? Further, the article explores the role of intimacy in this process by accounting for the role of affective connections on and off the sporting field. The argument is that intimacy can help those involved negotiate the power inequities present in sports-based intervention programs and in associated research.

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“Football is not a matter of life and death, its much more important than that”. Bill Shankly, in *Sunday Times* (UK) Oct. 4 1981

### 1. Introduction

This article is based on ethnographic work that I am doing as part of an Australian Research Council funded project: “The Well Rounded: the role of sport in shaping physical, emotional and social development”. Since 2007 this project has been investigating the impact that participating in sport has on the physical, emotional and social development of young people living in Australia.

In Australia there has been a boom in sports-based intervention programs aimed at developing the capabilities of young people from disenfranchised communities and challenging socio-economic backgrounds. There continues to be a prevailing assumption made by the hosts of these sports-based intervention programs that they need to define and teach qualities such as independence, resourcefulness, resilience, adaptability and competency to young people so that they can cope with everything from violence, school dropout, drug use, unequal access to education, limited employment opportunities, sexism, racism and other structural inequities (Gatz et al., 2002). The initial research findings of the Well-Rounded Person project indicate that it is worth paying

closer attention to that which is possible to learn *from* young people about how they already do, understand and modify these attributes as they negotiate the vagaries of everyday life.

This article addresses a concern that has come up during the ethnographic research arm of this project, particularly with a cohort of young refugee men who participate in a sports-based intervention program aimed at helping them resettle in Australia. The concern relates to how sports-based intervention programs and our concomitant research can reproduce unequal power relations. The argument I present here is that intimacy can provide a pathway to cope with these unequal power relations and produce a more equitable research exchange and involvement in a sports-based intervention program. By intimacy I am referring to a social, biological and psychological mediation, where authorial and hierarchical order can be scrambled.

### 2. Concerning sports

A popular assumption is that sport has positive impacts on physical health and fitness, on self-esteem, offers access to positive adult role models for teenagers and young adults living in disadvantaged communities, and fosters the capacity to build relationships across religious, ethnic and economic lines (Cameron and MacDougall, 2001; Collins and Kay, 2003; Morris et al., 2003; Olds et al., 2004). In a study by The Australian Institute of Criminology on sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour in youth it is claimed that participation in sports programs “reduce boredom in youth; and decreases the amount of unsupervised leisure ... there is

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consensus that if youth lack stimulation and have little to do they will seek their own, often antisocial, activities” (Morris et al., 2003: 48). What qualifies as ‘antisocial’ is not explained. It seems it is not what young people do, but what they *might do* that props up concerns. This discourse perpetuates a stereotype of young people as “threatening, at risk, vulnerable and in need of control, curbing, fixing, developing or cultivating” (Westoby and Ingamells, 2007: 54).

American sociologist Jay Coakley (2002) mounts a critique of using sports to help – read control – young people. Coakley explains that young people are identified as being possible ‘problems’ or even ‘threats’ to society and there is a perceived need to change their personal characteristics and behaviours “so that they can escape their immediate environments and become productive citizens in the very same social and economic system that gave rise to the conditions that limited their lives in the first place” (16). Sport rarely enables young people to escape their place in the political, legal, economic and social system. Sporting success does not end the challenges being faced. These challenges can include chronic ill-health, lack of housing and sanitation, unemployment, less than adequate education, social breakdown in many communities, substance abuse, a general feeling of purposelessness about life and high rates of suicide. Rather than address the social justice and the resource-needs that young people require to politicise and empower themselves what we end up with programs that focus on teaching ‘approved’ attributes that tell young people to “pull themselves up by their athletic shoelaces” (16). The young people most in need of ‘fixing’ usually come from socio-economically challenged and disenfranchised backgrounds.

While the benefits of sport are often espoused sport can also promote rigid gender stereotypes, class divisions, sexism, homophobia, aggression and even physical and sexual assault (Messner, 2002; Miller et al., 2001; Zakus et al., 2009). Racism and cultural intolerance are also within its ranks (Garland and Rowe, 2001; Woodward, 2007).

Simon Darnell is a critic of sports-based intervention programs, particularly those that target cross-cultural dialogue, because of the power inequalities they perpetuate. Darnell argues that

The [international] development through sport movement, a well-intentioned and benevolent ‘mission’ of training, empowering and assisting is not only based upon, but to an extent *requires*, the establishment of a dichotomy between the empowered and disempowered, the vocal and the silent, the ‘knowers’ and the known (Darnell, 2007: 561)[original italics].

Participants are required to learn the ways of the hosts and what the hosts qualify as worth knowing. Rarely is the reverse true. This is not a new situation. Sport has long been used to serve imperialist agendas and inculcate people into regulatory frameworks that give rise to the social and economic conditions that limit their lives in the first place (Coakley and Dunning, 2000).

Darnell argues that the act of doing good through sports-based intervention programs is always tinged by inequitable power relations that are inherent when conditions of possibility such as class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and dis/ability come together. According to Darnell the abilities of sport to promote cross-cultural dialogue and to serve developmental needs should be met with a healthy scepticism.

### 3. Football united

During my ethnography I have been working with a cohort of young football players who have a refugee background. In 2007 I became involved with a program called “Football United” as a volunteer driver, coach, facilitator and mentor. The Football United program assists recently-arrived humanitarian refugee

young people and their families during their transition into Australian society. A shared love of football (soccer) is used to present opportunities for mentoring, community integration, and sharing cultural capital and resources.<sup>1</sup> The Football United program runs throughout Sydney, Australia particularly in areas of high recent migrant settlement and those that experience socio-economic disadvantage.

The largest group of young people I have been working with through the program are young men less than twenty years of age and from Africa, particularly Sudan.<sup>2</sup> Many young migrant women from the same background experience cultural barriers to participation, such as the gendered expectation to be the primary person to do the housework and care for siblings.<sup>3</sup> As a result, my interaction with the young men has been by and large homosocial.<sup>4</sup> It has become evident that male homosocial relationships are remarkably transversal and resilient, and can persevere over ethnic, cultural and economic lines.

Many of the young men I interact with have fled from civil conflicts, and the trauma of loss, separation, as well as family and community breakdown. On top of “adjusting to life in a new country, recovering from trauma, and navigating education, employment and complex bureaucratic systems, refugee young people must also negotiate family, peer, individual and community expectations within the context of adolescence” (Olliff, 2008: 53). The Football United sports-based intervention program aims to make facing these challenges a little easier.

There has been no analysis in Australia of football programs targeting social and human development that provide evidence of whether they have any useful impact or outcomes. Measurements of impact tend to be based on anecdotal evidence, such as testimonials. It is quite possible that any positive effects resulting from sports-based intervention programs are actually the intervention coinciding with broader economic and social gains (Tacon, 2005). Isolating benefits to the sport is far too simplistic and ignores the complexity of people’s engagement with their conditions of possibility when they are participating *and* when they are not. Given this, Football United and the University of New South Wales are currently undertaking a three-year study to evaluate this particular sports-based intervention program.

What I take from Darnell and Coakley is an awareness of the ethics of my research and volunteer encounter, an obligation to become intimate with the young people’s perspectives to the point of finding out not what the young people ‘need’ to know but what these young people’s skills at life, settlement and well-being may teach *us* as researchers, as sports facilitators, as youth workers, as community development officers, volunteers, and the like. And how this knowledge can politicise and empower them to be effective change agents working on behalf of their communities” (Coakley, 2002: 16). It is not a case of simply giving the young

<sup>1</sup> [www.footballunitedprogram.org](http://www.footballunitedprogram.org).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship database 52% of settlers are between 0 and 19 years old, and 28% of these are men. Information from <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/settlement-database>.

<sup>3</sup> When they do participate the young women favour forming friendships with the women volunteers in the program.

<sup>4</sup> In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) literary theorist Eve Sedgwick calls the whole spectrum of social bonds – friendship, mentorship, camaraderie, brotherly unity, rivalry, economic exchange – between men as ‘male homosocial desire’ (1–3). This homosocial ordering of men’s lives means that for some men male-to-male relationships take priority over male-to-female relations. This male homosocial desire may be the desire for the company of other men, but it is meant to be a strictly platonic and asexual desire rooted strongly within ‘the patriarchal structure ... of obligatory heterosexuality’ (3) of which ‘homophobia [becomes] a necessary consequence’ (3).

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