It’s in the Blood: Negotiations of the Australian Rugby ‘Field’ by Pacific Islanders

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Abstract

In the past decade, government at all levels has attempted to utilise sport as a vehicle for achieving a range of social ends including improved public health, intervention for ‘at risk’ youth, and inclusion and integration of various migrant groups. A key premise behind the belief in the power of sport is its capacity to create social capital for those who play it. Pacific Island and Maori men are grossly over-represented at most levels of rugby in Australia suggesting the sport’s enormous success at achieving its aforementioned aims. Drawing on life histories, this paper investigates the stories of these migrant men and their experiences of rugby union in Australia. Specifically we examine how they account for their own and other Pacific Islanders’ involvement and success. We find that the central theme of ‘blood’ is variously utilised either in terms of biological determinism or cultural history to make sense of Pacific Islanders’ performance in rugby. As bodies inscribed from a variety of contexts, we suggest that rugby reproduces a relatively narrow and short term species of capital from the perspective of Australian society whilst simultaneously producing more enduring power and identity within the field of Pacific Island diaspora. When performance in sport is underpinned by a bio-racist logic and specific cultural history the overwhelming commonsense that ensues is experienced at an embodied level.

Keywords: Pacific Islanders, rugby, blood, capital, the ‘natural’

Pacific Islanders and Sport

Over the past decade local, state and federal governments have increasingly turned to sport as a strategy for achieving a range of goals including increased public health, community development and cohesion, and intervention into ‘at risk’ groups (for example; The National Action Plan to build on social cohesion, harmony and security 2007; Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2009; Victoria’s Multicultural Policy 2010; Australia’s Multicultural Policy 2010). Whilst one should not necessarily be surprised in strength of the belief in the social and multicultural capacity of sport, it is a position that has little empirical
evidence to back it up (Hoye & Nicholson 2009; Spaaji 2009). The central premise in the capacity of sport to affect social change is grounded in the belief that the egalitarian level playing field of competition is a site for individuals to develop and accrue valued forms of social and symbolic capital. Presumably this species of capital holds its value or is transferrable in other social fields and hence the physical ability to ‘play the game’ is recognized and appreciated outside of the game (Bourdieu 1998).

Based on the logic of sport as a vehicle for achieving the goals of Australian multiculturalism, the massive overrepresentation of Pacific Islander and Maori men in the professional rugby codes decries the success of such logic. Considering that less than 1% of the Australian population identify as having Pacific Islander or Maori ancestry (Census 2006) the fact that approximately 28% of NRL and 31% of Super 15 players are from this ancestry is, on the surface, cause for celebration. However we would be cautious to accept such ‘skewed success in sport’ as an unproblematic victory for 21st century Australian multiculturalism (Grainger 2008; Hokowhitu 2004). Similarly with research into the over-representation of indigenous Australians in the NRL and Australian football (see for example Coram 2007; Hallinan 1991; Hallinan et al. 1999), the representations of players ‘of colour’ buttress the ‘dominant meta-narrative’ of ‘White Multiculturalism’ (Hage 2000). Pacific Islanders fit into ‘white multiculturalism because they fulfill the reductionist expectations of ‘white’ biological discourse; the Pacific ‘other’ or a ‘Pacific exotica of the friendly savage, the native entertainer, the physically gifted athlete and/or body’ (Grainger 2006: 53).

Building on Besnier’s (2012) observations of how the movement of athletes across national boundaries’ has local effects on how these athletes are viewed, we would suggest that this ‘view’ can be more broadly applied to other migrants who share the same ethnicity. The implication of the reductionist view of majority ethnicity means that one need not be an elite athlete to fall into similar expectations of performance and behaviour. As a result many Pacific Islander and Maori boys and men focus (and are focused by others – consider for example the emphasis on physical education and sport in schools for Pacific Islanders and Maori (Hokowhitu 2004a) on rugby and the development of a body for rugby.

The ongoing investment in bodily projects such as rugby indicates the players’ ‘prolonged immersion’ in the field, not only to the skills and bodily mastery required from the game, but as Wacquant (1995: 88) notes, to its specific doxa which creates an ‘unconscious fit’ between the rugby habitus and the field that produced such habitus. The central interest of this paper is to consider what leads agents to so heavily invest in ‘body work’ such as rugby (Wacquant 1995: 73).

Stories about Rugby

The interviewees in this paper were initially recruited based on snowballing techniques from the larger ethnographic project. The fourteen men interviewed were either current or retired rugby players between the ages of 22 and 37. These men identified themselves as being Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islander, or Maori. All had been born in New Zealand or one of the Pacific Islands and had subsequently migrated to Australia as children or young adults. Whilst some had played
at national representative level, all were recruited based on their involvement with club rugby in Melbourne.

The interviews utilised a life histories approach and focused particularly on the participants’ experiences of rugby. Through talking about their rugby history it was clear how the sport had been and still was a central part of their life and their identity. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was then transcribed, de-identified and coded for themes. A variety of themes arising from the interviews revolved around education, employment, migration, injury, racism, and family. In each case the centrality of rugby to these themes is indicative of deeply embodied subjectivities. These themes were then interrogated further for axial codes. This paper will discuss one of these codes; that of blood.

Bloodlines

Brendan Hokowhitu (2003: 22) argues that the Pacific Island and Maori athlete is ‘depicted as a neo-racist representation because it is an optimistic portrayal of empowerment that ironically serves to further limit people of colour to their embodied physicality and limited intelligence’. The key premise to Hokowhitu’s argument is the acceptance within societies such as New Zealand and Australia of an understanding of physical performance based on a form of bi-racism; that is that these athletes are successful based on their ‘genetically advantaged bodies’ (see also Rodriguez 2010). In keeping with this ‘common-sense’ understanding of ‘race’ and performance and its corresponding discourse (St Louis 2003, 2004), is the collective acceptance and consent to such logic (see for example Adair and Stronach 2011). The implication of genetic predisposition logic is particularly salient in activities of the body, especially as structure is onto the body and ‘it is through the body that agents experience and generate structure’ (Besnier 2012: 492). The rugby body is never just a rugby body, rather it is a far more complex entity based on the contexts within which it is embedded. Social class, age, gender, and especially in this case ethnicity, produce overlapping and blurred social fields within which the agent ‘plays the game’ (Besnier 2012).

There can be little doubt that for our interviewees’ rugby plays a major role in their lives especially in relation to their identity and their role in community. Rugby was consistently positioned after family (and sometimes religion) as a central part of their lives. During the course of these discussions on rugby, our interviewees were given an opportunity to consider their own, and Pacific Islanders, success in rugby. Nearly all our respondents explained the involvement and success of Pacific Islanders in rugby based on some form of relationship to ‘blood’. The first form of which relates directly to genetic predisposition, for example:

‘I didn’t like rugby at all whatsoever, until genetics kicked in about the age of 15 – that’s when I started to play rugby’ (Bill).

‘I think genetics wise, it’s just more suited to an Islander sort of body shape, because we’re all big boned, we’re explosive off the mark, we can take impact and you know, got hard heads. So it’s probably more suited, that’s why I think they’re natural talents, because their bodies are suited to the sport. Where you’ve got your normal European kid
is a bit smaller, has to work harder, like has to go to gym hard and that sort of stuff to build the body mass to equal these (Pacific Islander) blokes’ (Michael).

‘Samoans have that natural ability for sports and things like that, physically we mature a lot earlier than most other nationalities’ (William).

‘It’s definitely in the blood for Pacific Islanders, this sport is definitely in the blood of Pacific Islanders. I think that’s why I struggle with footy (AFL), because we’ve got – and it’s been proven in some studies that we’ve done that we have a larger makeup of fast twitch fibres, which allows us to sprint faster, be stronger, on short distances, versus running long distances, we just burn out too easily. So structurally this game suits us better’ (Malcolm).

These responses tie directly into the most basic form of commonsense; the natural. Rugby is ‘in the blood’ in a way that infers an inevitability of performance, and is justified via spurious racial science (St Louis 2003, 2004). Further such advantageous genetics suggest that the rugby pathway is easier for Pacific Islanders than for the ‘normal European kid’, inadvertently reproducing the physical/cognitive dichotomy central to much of the commonsense logic of race. The next use of ‘blood’ draws on an environmentalist perspective, combining history and culture as justification for rugby prowess (Hokowhitu 2003).

‘It’s built into our bloodstream now. If you go back to New Zealand’s history as well, a lot of Samoans were brought over for pure labour, labour work, because it was cheaper and because they were good at physical labour. Here in Australia now you look on the roads and stuff like that – a lot of those island boys work in construction and stuff like that, because that’s just built into our blood, into our family, into our community, like the hard work, stuff like that’ (Sam).

‘we’re so gifted in sport. It’s a God-given gift. Any sport and we pick it up and we excel at it. But rugby is like – It’s second religion in our country. Man, it’s our ticket out. It’s our meal ticket, because all of us, you know, we love the physical stuff and rugby is like, it sort of shows your manhood. That’s how the majority of the Islanders play it. Like you see a lot of kids on the street - you know, the first year into rugby they could be 17, 18 and they’ll make the rep sides, because it’s just, it’s just built in us; it’s a God-given talent’ (Mark).

In both cases here blood stands to signify histories of manual labour, masculinity, and social mobility (meal ticket). The concept of ‘blood’ is something deep inside the body, that cannot be denied and that is inescapable. The following use of ‘blood’ points to players longevity and continued investment in the sport.

‘Once you are a rugby player, it’s very hard to separate it, you know. Because my wife didn’t want me to go back to rugby but it’s very, very hard. It’s in your blood. It’s very, very hard when you have been given the talent and when you look at these – there’s some very good players coming up, but you know, not too many resources out there’ (Tim).
‘When I came here I was just trying to stay away from rugby, but once in your blood it’s a very hard thing to let go. I’m trying hard to keep it all out, and go play golf. Honest…but even though I’m that old I’m still running around and I’m still trying to beat against the young boys – you know, we still enjoy it and rugby is in my blood, so I just can’t stay away from it’ (Bill).

‘Blood’ creates bonds that tie the individual to a greater sense of obligation to other members of the Pacific Island community. ‘Blood’ suggests not only sacrifice but also a form of addiction, something that cannot be escaped nor denied.

**Blood Capital**

Blood is a species of symbolic capital that can and is employed across the social field of rugby. However the multiple contexts of rugby affect the volume and structure of this capital as agents negotiate the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Rugby (whether grass roots or elite), as a social field within the context of multicultural Australia, recognizes the symbolic capital embedded in the bodies of Pacific Islanders and values it highly. To maximise his chances in the game the player invests himself to the point whereby structure is onto, and agency is through, the body (Besnier 2012). The ‘natural’ is anything but this, however the structuring logic of ‘blood’ obscures the reality of bodily investment and labour, hard work and perseverance (species of symbolic capital in themselves), and therefore endures only so long as the body is ‘playing the game’. Pacific Islanders do not enjoy the same trajectories as their Anglo-Australian counterparts at the end of their playing career and often live ‘precariously in bottom of the ladder employment’ (Besnier 2012: 495).

Within the context of diasporic community, ‘blood’ capital endures longer and is recognized differently. Currency may be found as the expression of valued forms of masculinity, as status and therefore respect, and as a form of knowledge. Within Pacific Island community ‘blood’ capital accrued through rugby enhances the legitimacy of one’s position and authenticity as part of that community. The ‘perception and assessment of intrinsic and extrinsic profits’ of rugby in terms of the habitus inscribed on the body (Bourdieu 1984: 212) therefore varies according to the location of the field.

Inscribed in the body, the capital accrued ‘in the bloodstream’ would seem to reproduce players’ social trajectory. The biologically deterministic position of ‘the natural’ facilitates opportunity, albeit narrow, to gain status in the broader context of Australian society. However, playing the game in this way has a tendency to operate as a double edged sword as the commitment to the game (*illusio*) simultaneously excludes players from other social fields and becomes somewhat of a self fulfilling prophecy reproducing that Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that underpins the ‘natural’ (Hokowhitu 2003). The real strength of ‘blood’ capital is found in its convertibility within Pacific Island diasporas in Australia. Here the intrinsic rewards are an enhanced sense of Pacific Island identity and belonging to that community. In this way structure and agency, as defined by the intrinsic and extrinsic profits of rugby, become so entwined the capacity for agents to engage with other fields becomes highly problematic and unlikely. When engagement
in sport reproduces both bio-racist logic and cultural history the symbolic capital accrued is one that has limited recognition from mainstream Australia and actually serves to strengthen ties to the migrant diaspora.

References


