For the Community: A case study of Jewish junior basketball identity

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Abstract:
An ethnographic approach was used to investigate the significance of basketball participation to the development of Jewish identity in Melbourne, Australia. Informants suggested that participation in sport generally, and basketball specifically, allowed them to exemplify an identity that countered stereotypical views of Jewish people as non-sporting and bookish, held by many Australians. Sport also provided an attractive, and economic, site for many in the Jewish population to identify as Jewish with safety.

Popular sports media commentators in Australia often suggest that local sporting competitions are both egalitarian and a useful practice for producing tolerance of different cultures and races. Legally, Australian sport institutions are required to be tolerant of religious or racial differences, and accommodating to the needs of all those who wish to play sport whilst maintaining their religious beliefs and customs.

The elite junior basketball league in Victoria, Australia, conducts its competition on Friday evenings, a choice that does not permit some young Jewish basketball players to be concordant with all of their religious beliefs. Thus, many talented Jewish junior basketball players find themselves excluded from this elite league without an option to compete at that level, unless they choose to abandon parts of their religion and tradition.

The proposal was made by the Maccabi [peak Jewish sports body] basketball club to Basketball Victoria to allow the Maccabi junior teams to play their games in this
competition on a Saturday night. This would allow Jewish players to observe Shabbat. The organising committee of the junior basketball competition rejected this proposal. The Maccabi club then consulted a Queens Counsel to judge whether it would be worthwhile to go forward with a case of indirect discrimination against Basketball Victoria regarding their treatment of Jewish participants in the sport. The Queens Counsel decided that such a case would not be successful because the Equal Opportunity Act only requires that some form of a particular competitive sport be offered to the group who feels discriminated against.

This study investigated this issue of basketball participation amongst the Jewish community in Melbourne, Australia. We shall commence by explaining the perceived significance of sporting participation to the maintenance of a Jewish cultural/religious identity in Australia. We will move on to explain the importance of elite level sporting participation within both the Jewish community, and for the Jewish community to express an esteemed identity within the broader Australian community.

**Jewish Diaspora in Melbourne**

The Jewish community in Melbourne makes up approximately 1% of the total population of the metropolitan region, a figure that has remained fairly stable since European settlement (Rubinstein 1986: 20). The Jewish population in Melbourne is concentrated in two regions. A large community exists in a band of Southern suburbs from South Yarra to Glen Iris with an impressive array of day schools, synagogues and Jewish institutions in this area. A smaller community exists across the Northern and Eastern suburbs from Doncaster to Malvern.

Most Jewish immigration before the end of the nineteenth century came to Australia from Britain, which added to their acceptability in a mostly White, Anglo-Saxon society. Rubinstein comments: “Jews have thus never been considered to be aliens to quite the same extent as elsewhere” (1982: 163).

A second wave of Jewish immigration occurred in the 1930s and 1940s as refugees from Germany and World War II (Rubinstein 1986: 18). According to Rubinstein (1986: 10-12), two distinct periods can be observed in the relationship between the Jewish community and Australian society from 1788 to the present time. The first period from 1788 to the 1930s was broadly assimilationist with the Jewish community
asserting that there is little cultural or practical difference between it and the general community.

The period since 1940 has been marked by an increasing assertion of both Jewish difference and the necessity for tolerance towards this difference. This has resulted in an expanded participation by the Jewish community in Jewish institutions, clubs, synagogues and especially day schools. The establishment and growth of Jewish day schools has been instrumental in asserting Jewishness in the face of assimilationist forces. Within Jewish communities, there are also a variety of institutions, clubs and organisations that contribute to the maintenance of some form of Jewish identity in the Diaspora (Goldlust 1993).

**Jewish sport in Melbourne**

The Judean tennis club of Melbourne, Victoria was established in 1923 and interstate sporting carnivals commenced shortly afterwards in 1926 (Rutland 1988: 156-157). A prime motivation in this development of Maccabiah sporting festivals in Australia was a concern that a distinctive Jewish identity would die out because of assimilation and intermarriage. Jewish community leaders of the 1920s came to realise:

> The value of sport as a tool in increasing the social interaction of their youth in a Jewish environment. Around the world, Jewish spokesmen had proclaimed the value of physical activity in fighting the traditional anti-Semitic view of the Jew as weak and bookish (Hughes 1999: 378).

In 1929, the Judean League and the AJAX sporting body established the ‘Sabbath Sport Statute’, which enabled Jewish athletes to participate in sport on the Sabbath (www.macvic.com.au). Many members of the Jewish community rejected, and still reject, this opportunity, yet this statute allowed Jewish sporting teams to participate in metropolitan sporting leagues across Melbourne.

The AJAX basketball club in Victoria was established in 1951. Initially it was located in East St. Kilda and serviced Jewish basketball communities in both the south and northeast. In more recent times, these communities have been serviced by two separate organising committees, and play in two separate local region competitions. Both organising committees remain under the control of the governing body, Maccabi basketball. This research is limited to participants in the larger southern basketball
club that has a number of teams that play in the local competitions in the south central Melbourne metropolitan area.

The development of Jewish sporting clubs in Australia spanned the change from assimilation to assertion of Jewishness that was described in the previous section of the paper. Many of these sporting clubs grew out of a desire to assert and protect Jewish identities from total assimilation, whilst maintaining harmony with the wider society (Hughes 1999: 381). The ‘Jewish rule’ in these clubs explains that non-Jews are not permitted to play. The justification for this exclusion is that sport is seen as an important site to knit the Jewish community together and reassert a separate Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with a representative sample of Maccabi basketball players, coaches and administrators. The interviews endeavoured to investigate the experiences and beliefs of informants regarding sports participation issues among the Jewish community in Australia, as well as the views and beliefs of informants regarding aspects of the Jewish religion such as Sabbath observance. Observations complemented the interview data and assisted in capturing the Jewish character of Maccabi basketball. The sample of informants was large enough to approach saturation on the issues addressed in this paper. The research was constantly shaped and reshaped as the data was collected and analysed, and new aspects of the study emerged from interviews and observations (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993).

Discussion

Because our sample was drawn from a very small community basketball club, we have used the concept of identity amalgams to protect the individual identities of our informants. These amalgams are made up of comments from a number of different interviews, but the comments selected reflect general ideas that emanated from a number of sources.

Importance of the Jewish sporting community in Melbourne

Our research indicated that members of the Maccabi basketball club also believe in the importance of a strong assertion of a distinctly Jewish identity. When asked about
the significance of being a Jew in Melbourne, players who had played in both Jewish and non-Jewish clubs asserted:

If someone has a problem with me being Jewish he can just get over it. It doesn’t stop me from doing anything, because I… I don’t hide it either. If someone asks me I’ll tell them. You need to know where your roots are… Judaism should still be a big part of my life. So, yeah, it’s very important. I think we have to observe the chagim [Jewish holidays], and I think my kids would eventually have to go to Jewish schools, because I want them to grow up like I did… I think a Jewish education is important because from that comes your Jewish identity, if you learn more about it.

Another common theme that emerged from our informants was that they all displayed great pride in being in a Jewish sporting team. An official of the basketball club expressed this wider purpose of Jewish basketball in the following way:

The aspect of the club that I like the most is that it’s community-based… It brings our community closer together which is very important. As a community we need to stay together…There are a lot of Jewish people in Victoria, 45,000 Jewish people… and a number of them do not attend Jewish schools, sometimes because of the cost of private school fees and sometimes for other reasons. Maccabi basketball is a community club that allows all Jewish people to be part of the community through sport.

Whether sport is esteemed as much as success in other pursuits in the Jewish community is debatable. Our informants suggest that sporting capital still does not carry as much weight within the Jewish community as academic, artistic and business capital.

At the same time, many informants explained a changing position for sport in the Orthodox and Progressive Jewish day schools (not Ultra-Orthodox) over the last few years. All of our informants had gone to a Jewish day school. Whereas they thought that previous generations of students had not had sport promoted within the curriculum because of an emphasis on academic achievement, all of our informants argued that the day schools they attended had begun to promote sporting achievement as an important part of a holistic education. One of the largest Jewish day schools, Bialik College had recently announced that they were building a $14M sports centre that will be [Jewish] community sports oriented.
The wider Jewish community had also taken up this tentative endorsement of sporting participation as worthwhile practice. One informant suspected that this promotion was related to the need to promote a distinct Jewish identity that was not threatening to, and perhaps successful within, mainstream Australia, as well as being an exciting and achievable point of identity attachment for Jewish youth. This informant said about his community:

They love success, they greed for success, they want success all the time… So I think, in terms of, what I’ve said, if you’re successful and you’re good in something, they will like it anyway, and it will promote the game. So, if we are on the back page of the “Jewish News”, they’d say: oh, basketball on the back page, one of my sons is interested in that, I’d love them to do that, or I’d love them to be in it, in terms of that.

Conflicts between sport and religion

It is important to understand that the Jewish community in Melbourne can be [not so neatly] divided into three categories with regards to the holding of different attitudes to the participation in sport on the Sabbath: ultra-Orthodox or strictly Orthodox, Orthodox, and Progressive. Within Australia, approximately 5% of practicing Jews are Chassidic Jews [ultra-Orthodox or strictly Orthodox] and approximately 20% are Progressive Jews (Rubinstein 1986: 2-3). Regardless of how strictly an individual observes the Sabbath, many Jewish players and coaches expressed some conflict over being required to play a sport on the Sabbath. A common sentiment that came from several of our informants as a response to the question of conflict between religious belief and sporting opportunities was expressed in the following way:

I know a guy called [name] who is a brilliant footballer, he’s very, very good, he was one of the better in the country, and because they used to do it on Shabbat and Fridays and Saturdays he couldn’t play any of the games on Saturday, which means he couldn’t be picked up by an AFL team so it did prevent him. But in terms of basketball…all the junior kids play the top league games on Friday nights. So it does… if they want to observe Shabbat then they can’t play at that level, and it starts preventing them from going further.

Even for those members of the community that compromise their strict religious identities to play or coach Friday night basketball, the decision is not made without conflict. Some of our informants had either played in the Friday night competition
whilst growing up, or now coach in the Friday night competition for teams other than Maccabi, or are parents of children who now play in the competition. All of these subjects expressed a problematic acceptance of their choices:

As a Jewish person, I think it’s the right thing, I think Shabbat is very important, and that everyone should have Shabbat dinners with his or her families... three years ago, if you would have asked me to coach on a Friday night, I wouldn’t have done it. And I didn’t play Friday night juniors because of that reason... I respect the Jewish family traditions. But I sort of compromised a little bit. I go to Shabbat dinner but afterwards I go and coach because I want to be the best coach. I want to, maybe one day, coach in the national league. That would be, I think, a goal for me. You have to sort of compromise. I don’t know if that’s a good thing. You know, I have a conflict about that, within myself... It’s a difficult thing for Jewish families to do. Friday night is family night.

Importance of sporting participation to tolerance of the Jewish community

Some of our informants reflected on the importance of sporting participation to producing tolerance for the religious and culture beliefs held by Jews, and in opposing stereotypical views about Jews held by the members of the wider community. A number of informants contributed to the following expression of this importance:

Q: You’ve played on both Jewish and non-Jewish teams. How does it feel to be the only Jew in the team?

A: Sometimes, you know, occasionally you’d feel a little bit strange, you know, if it’s for instance, during Pesach, I guess, you know, you can’t eat bread, and then you have to explain stuff... Usually everyone is quite friendly and inquisitive. They want to know more about it and want to understand it. Although occasionally you get people who... don’t like you because you’re Jewish, they are just ignorant, and they’ve just got a preconceived idea that, you know, Jews just … they’ve got big noses and they’ve got dark hair, and... it’s always about money, which isn’t true.

The necessity of sporting team friendships, or camaraderie, produced for many informants in non-Jewish teams, openness by teammates to explanations of the Jewish community and its practices.

Alternatively, in conversations with a group of non-Jewish basketball coaches who coach the Maccabi junior teams, there was a general experience of some anti-Semitic behaviours and attitudes. It was summed up after one game for one coach when a
parent from a rival team was overheard expressing great delight in ‘whipping the Jews.’ So the presence of Jewish teams in secular sporting competitions is again a conflicted one: it may produce a recognition of similarities and a tolerance towards differences, or, unfortunately given the competitive nature of sport and its propensity to exaggerate stereotypes and prejudices, it may not.

Conclusion

It may seem ironic to claim that a sporting club that excludes membership by anyone who is not a Jew should be able to claim that they may be the victims of indirect discrimination. Yet the aim of Maccabi Australia is “to promote Jewish identity through sporting, culture, Zionist and social activities” (Hughes 1997: 384). Sport plays an important role in identity promotion and maintenance in the Jewish community. This aim, according to members of Maccabi, is achieved both by exclusivity, and by sporting achievement in mainstream sports. As one of our informants eloquently explained:

I think it’s important that the community has a team because, we want to unite and stay together and also to show that we can be competitive, we are not disadvantaged, because we are from a different religion or race so... yeah, that’s very important.

Given the popular contemporary stereotypes that are attached to the Jewish community by some members of the dominant white Anglo-Celtic population, the twin hopes of protection of a Jewish cultural identity and development of a competitive and esteemed Australian-Jewish sporting identity, which is not viewed as deficient, is ‘very important.’ Elite Jewish basketball participation may both breakdown stereotypes held about Jews by other subgroups in society, and allow Jews to see themselves as strongly athletic.

References


