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Dr Karl Spracklen and Cliff Spracklen
Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education, Leeds Metropolitan University

Contact details:

Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education, Leeds Metropolitan University
Cavendish Hall, Headingley Campus, Leeds, United Kingdom, LS6 3QS

K.Spracklen@leedsmet.ac.uk

0113 2832600 x 3608

7728 words

Negotiations of Being and Becoming: minority ethnic rugby league players in the Cathar country of France

Biographical details:

Karl Spracklen is a Senior Lecturer in Socio-Cultural Aspects in Sport and Leisure at Leeds Metropolitan University, United Kingdom. His father Cliff Spracklen is the English Representative of the French Rugby League Supporters' pressure group *XIII Actif*.

Negotiations of Being and Becoming: minority ethnic rugby league players in the Cathar country of France

Abstract

This paper is based on new empirical, qualitative research with minority ethnic rugby league players in the South-West of France. Drawing on similar research on rugby league in the north and the south of England, the paper examines how rugby league, traditionally viewed as a white, working class male game (Collins, 2006; Denham, 2004; Spracklen, 1995, 2001) has had to re-imagine its symbolic boundaries as they are constituted globally and locally to accommodate the needs of players from minority ethnic backgrounds. In particular, the paper examines the sense in which experiences of minority ethnic rugby league players in France compare with those of their counterparts in England (Spracklen, 2001, 2007), how rugby league is used in France to construct identity, and in what sense the norms associated with the imaginary community of rugby league are replicated or challenged by the involvement of minority ethnic rugby league players in France. Questions about what it means to be (provincial, national) French (Kumar, 2006) are posed, questions that relate to the role of sport in the construction of Frenchness, and in particular the role of rugby league (and union).

Key Words

'Race', racism, masculinity, Frenchness, rugby league.

Introduction

In August 2007, rugby league in Great Britain returned to Wembley Stadium in London for its annual Challenge Cup. Ever since the decision to take the Challenge Cup to London in 1929, the annual trip to Wembley has been part of the symbolic, mythologised landscape of rugby league. Trips to Wembley are rites of initiation for young rugby league fans; for older fans, the return down south is a pilgrimage, where the colours of different northern English rugby league clubs merge in a generally well-behaved crowd. The Challenge Cup at Wembley is the north showing off to the south, the north coming together and ignoring local differences to display pride in working-class notions of community and masculinity.

Yet to the casual observer, something very strange happened in the summer of 2007 to British rugby league's weekend in London. Firstly, for the first time in the Cup's history, one of the competing teams was from France. Catalan Dragons, as they are known to British rugby league fans struggling to come to terms with the intricacies of the French language, came through to the final after beating Wigan in the semi-finals. Secondly, and again for the first time in the Cup Final's history, a Muslim – Moroccan-born French winger Younes Khattabi – crossed the line to score a try. And although St Helens, a club from a town a few miles to the south-west of Wigan, subsequently defeated this French team, the presence of the Dragons was not necessarily interpreted by those in British rugby league as a celebration of

globalisation and commodification. In the monthly magazine Rugby League World, ex-International professional rugby league player Garry Schofield, known for his “no-nonsense” working-class loyalties to Leeds and Yorkshire (and his general suspicion of those trying to expand the game to the south of England), reflected on the match by writing:

The south of France isn't expansion for Rugby League. They've beaten the Aussies in a series more recently than we have. The side down there is reaping the rewards of a competitive French Championship... whereas in London and Wales there aren't local players of a good enough standard.

(Schofield, 2007, p. 15)

From the outside looking in, rugby league in France is seen as part of the northern English imaginary community, to the extent that southern Frenchmen who play rugby league – even Moroccan-born Muslims who at various times call themselves *beurs*, *maghrebis* and *Arabes* – are more accepted in the minds of an ex-Great Britain International than southern Englishmen.

This paper is based on qualitative research undertaken in South-West France by one of the writers, where most rugby league in France is played. The research was supported by a Faculty seeding grant from our university. The reflexive nature of our research is clear from our own relationship to rugby league, and to each other: the second author of this paper is the father of the first author; the second author is also a rugby league journalist, the Chair of the Rugby League Supporters' Association, and the English rep of the French rugby league supporters' group XIII Actif; and the first author has edited a rugby league fanzine, written match reports for a rugby league newspaper and conducted academic research on the game. Throughout this paper we will reflect on the process and the tensions of our personal and professional relationships, as well as on the issues being raised within the research. The aim of the research was to expand on previous work on the construction of community and social identity in rugby league to examine how the game is used by minority ethnic players to develop their own sense of personal and social self. Previous work has examined the situation in the north of England (Spracklen, 1996, 2001) and the south of England (Spracklen, 2005, 2007). International comparisons seem to be the obvious development of this work and are the focus of this paper. By going to France and studying French rugby league players, comparisons with the situation of minority ethnic players in England can be made – with minority ethnic players in the northern English heartlands and London and the south of England. Also, crucial (and politically relevant) questions about what it means to be (provincial, national) French (Kumar, 2006) can be posed, questions that relate to the role of sport in the construction of Frenchness (Bodinas et al., 2008), and in particular the role of rugby union in creating a space for white French resistance to the realities of migration, hybridity and diaspora (Pociello, 1983; Saouter, 2000). The notion of hybridity here is key to a critical understanding of the role of rugby league in the construction of multiple identities, but I will argue that such construction, while demonstrating the agency presupposed by Brah (1996), Jacobson (1997), Solomos (1998) and others, is limited by the structures of French society (Wievorka, 2000) and the whiteness of French (secular, Republican) national identity (Wievorka et al., 1992). Diaspora, also, is problematic: as Anthias (1998, 2001) suggests, the concept uncritically supposes a model of new home/homeland that simplifies the multiplicity of identity construction and the complexities of racism and exclusion. In this paper I will argue, then, that rugby league offers these minority ethnic French players a space to define their

identities away from the limits of French society, but this space itself is predicated on accepting local and trans-national mythologies of working-class, small-town resistance and hegemonic masculinity. In positioning themselves against rugby union (the dominant version of rugby in France and indeed in most rugby-playing countries), these players challenge the (white) Frenchness of rugby union, the game that Saouter (2000) says is itself a site of white French resistance to inward migration. As Pringle and Markula (2005) have identified the construction of masculinity in New Zealand through rugby union, so Saouter (2000) has also demonstrated a similar role for the sport in France. But in France, rugby union's whiteness is explicit in the construction of the Other (Garner, 2006), those who do not belong to France, the non-whites, the outsiders, the individuals and communities that do not conform to the ideal (Noiriel, 2001; Silverstein, 2008).

Rationale for the study

This paper draws on previous doctoral and postdoctoral research by Spracklen (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2005) on the construction of social identity in rugby league through the creation of an imaginary community. This imaginary community is constructed partly through the process of being imagined historically (cf. Anderson (1983) on the use of myth in imagining community) and through the process of being lived through symbols and symbolic boundaries (Cohen, 1985). In France, the game has been associated with the small-town communities of South-West France and the long history of resistance towards the centre in these areas (Dine, 2001), with the myth of French rugby equated with the myths of Cathar country (Rylance, 1999). Unlike the neo-tribe of much postmodern critical discourse (cf. Maffesoli, 1996), the imaginary community gives to its members social identity and status in traditional structures of class, gender and ethnicity. For example, we are both white men who have used our involvement in rugby league to preserve and/or construct a working-class identity that is rooted in the terraced streets of a city where neither of us now live. Like the West Ham football fans in the work of Fawbert (2005), we use our sport to play at being working-class men with loyalties to an imagined community. Although we are both situated in politics of the left and philosophically and practically committed to anti-racism, our idealised, mythologised working-class heritage is a heritage of whiteness (Long and Hylton, 2002). We bonded as father and son through watching our rugby league team: one man and his two sons, clothed in rugby jerseys, scarves and bobble hats. The team we supported was our team, associated with the father's post-WW2 childhood, across the city in an area that suffered much from post-industrial dereliction in the 1970s and 1980s, the period in which the first author grew up.

In 1997, as a five-year old used to being taken every Sunday to the match by my dad, I recognised (and cheered on) a black person for the first time in the shape of local rugby league hero Rudy Francis. His blackness marked him out as an exotic Other, someone apart from the beer-bellied white men around him (Andersson, 2007) – even then, the ambiguity of the imaginary community troubled me (reflection: first author).

As such, belonging is more than just buying a Catalan Dragons jersey, even though such an act is a matter of free choice and a matter of great symbolic meaning. We will explore whether rugby league, traditionally viewed as a white, working class male game (Collins, 2006; Denham, 2004; Spracklen, 1995, 2001) has had to re-imagine its symbolic boundaries as they are constituted globally and locally (in England and in France) to accommodate the needs of players from minority ethnic backgrounds: and

whether, despite this, much of the game's working-class and masculine discourse and symbolism might remain.

In particular, we were interested in three connected questions. In what sense do the experiences and of minority ethnic rugby league players in France compare with those of their counterparts in the north of England (where rugby league is associated with white, working-class imaginary community) and the south of England (where the game is relatively new and there are no associations with any imaginary community)? How is rugby league used by the minority ethnic French players to construct and support their situated identities? And in what sense are the masculine, working-class norms associated with the imaginary community of rugby league (as expressed in the north of England and in the south-west of France) replicated or challenged by the involvement of minority ethnic rugby league players in France? This new research on rugby league will explore the tensions between the game's expansion (cf. Spracklen, 2005) – specifically the involvement of minority ethnic players in France – and the racism and sexism normalised by the symbolic boundaries and myths of belonging of the imaginary community identified in earlier research (Long et al, 1995; Long, Spracklen and Carrington, 1997; Spracklen, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2001; Spracklen, Long and Hylton, 2006), as well as the identities associated with white, south-western France (Bourdieu, 1980) and their relationship to national notions of Frenchness (Ungar, 1996; Dine, 2001; Noiriel, 2001; Kumar, 2006). 'Race', gender and class will be used throughout the research in a critically real sense, as constructs used in the definition of belonging and exclusion (cf. Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Ferber, 2007; Hylton, 2005), both within the imaginary community and in the wider networks of power in society (eg, the gender order, cf. Connell, 1987; Edwards, 2006). The intersectionality of gender, class and 'race' and ethnicity will also become apparent, as the research identifies and articulates the complexities of local, regional, national and diasporic identities (Wievorka, 2000; Anthias, 2001).

Research design

Our insider knowledge of French rugby league identified a trend in French rugby league towards clubs that act as focal points for particular minority ethnic groups. Initially, to pilot the interview schedule and to allow the second author to gain experience of interviewing in French, three minority ethnic rugby league players at a number of such clubs were approached and interviewed in France. This took place in 2005 while the second author was in France on other business. The pilot interview schedule was based on the schedule used by Hylton et al. (2005) in exploring experiences of racism and the construction of racial identity amongst minority ethnic sports participants. Following the work of Long et al. (1995), we used the initial preparations and negotiations, and the actual pilot interviews, to develop an understanding of the how ethnicity was articulated by minority ethnic players in French rugby league. Our key decision following the pilot was to identify three minority ethnic groups of interest, while being fully aware of the dangers of essentialism and reifying difference and rigidity over hybridity and change: black, Arab and Gypsy. These terms, of course, can only ever be partial and problematic social constructions (Bulmer and Solomos, 2004). However, in interviewing the players, and in speaking to contacts at French rugby league clubs, these were the terms through which minority ethnic individuals identified themselves.

At this stage the interview process was refined and a decision was made to transcribe notes in French as the interviews progressed, rather than take notes in English, as this would have forced the interviewer to switch languages and lose focus on the interviewees mid-interview. The players interviewed were all already known to the researcher, as were their coaches, so access was no problem. The second stage of the research, undertaken at the beginning of 2007, consisted of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with a further twelve minority ethnic rugby league players at four semi-professional French rugby league clubs in the South West of France – a level of serious participation immediately below the full-time professional set-up of Les Catalans, the French club currently playing in the British Super League. As the research aimed to examine the construction of masculine identity and the resistance to or acceptance of dominant norms of masculinity, these players were all men. The clubs chosen were all clubs that had a significant or dominant demographic of players and members from three minority ethnic communities in the region: black, Arab and Gypsy. Players were also selected to represent a range of experiences and ages to try to identify differences of experience and perception.

We deliberately eased issues of access through taking an overt, informed insider approach.

My son asked me to get involved because he knew I had good contacts with the XIII Actif supporters' association in France and I've worked with a number of French rugby league clubs organising exchanges and tours. This allowed me to call on a wide range of contacts where I'd been as an interpreter (reflection: second author).

I knew my dad could do a good job for me: throughout my childhood I'd been there whenever various French teams were brought over to Yorkshire by my him. It was part of the architecture of my youth, my growing-up (reflection: first author).

In addition, the second author was known by French clubs and officials, and officials at the Rugby Football League in Great Britain, as an informal go-between for French and British rugby league clubs and the respective governing bodies. Initial reconnaissance identified the clubs that were used in the research, and contacts were made there with leading members. These contacts were approached to provide access to their players, and a range of sampling techniques from following contacts to asking for volunteers through snowball sampling were used while the second writer was in the field in South-West France to ensure interviews took place according to our sampling demands.

The French transcripts were translated once the second author returned from South-West France. Analysis of the translated transcripts was then undertaken by the first author, using similar constant, comparative methods of inductive interpretation and reflection used in other research on rugby league (Long et al., 1995; Spracklen, 1996b, 2001, 2005). Although not strictly a grounded theoretical approach, the analytical methods of grounded theory were employed to construct analytical categories and develop a theoretical framework through which the findings are here represented and discussed.

I was concerned that the translation captured the essence of what the players said, and how they said it. I didn't want to fail them, I wanted to get it right especially since I was still in many ways an outsider. I'm English, I'm white, I'm older than these lads... rugby league was a point of contact, a code of honour about me. I didn't want them thinking I was going to distort what they said, to make them look good or bad, or say the game was this or that (reflection: second author).

I don't read French very well. I trusted my dad to translate it correctly, but ultimately there is always a (re)presentation in any translation (reflection: first author).

Ethical issues

All clubs and players will remain anonymous, with pseudonyms used in the discussions below. All respondents gave written, informed consent: a sheet explaining the research was provided to them in French, and the interviewer was trained to discuss the research and inform potential participants of its nature. We were naturally concerned as to how our whiteness and Englishness would inform the nature of the responses, but at the same time we believed, as others such as Burdsey (2004, 2007) and argue, that empathetic understanding and open discussion is not predicated on an identity of background, experience, or colour. So we ensured the respondents were aware of our critical position and our previous involvement in similar research.

The main ethical issues however, were our relationship and our wider non-academic interest in rugby league. To take the latter first, we both were and are rugby league fans and one of us still takes an active interest in the game. It could be argued that our commitment to rugby league makes it impossible for us to be objective about the contentious issues raised in the research. One of the weaknesses of much leisure and sport research is the way involvement in the subject is central to the reasons for doing such research, but the involvement is rarely explicit in published work. By recognising our attachment, involvement and commitment to rugby league, we want to argue that we take a critical, insider position to the game.

Our relationship as son and father raised other problems, ethically. We had to make sure that we both understood the parameters of the working standards associated with qualitative, social research. We had to make sure that we were both committed to the same set of values. And we had to transcend the familial for the professional in the way we worked together.

An overview of French Rugby League

As Robert Fassolette (2007) explains, rugby league in France owed its origins to discontented players, administrators and clubs in French rugby union in the 1930s. Before the Second World War, rugby league grew rapidly in France, particularly in the south-western areas of the country, with a high-profile professional league stretching across the entire country from Paris to Marseilles. But with the defeat of France by the Nazis in 1940, and the division of the country into a northerly occupied territory and a southern territory governed by the collaborating Vichy Government, came an incident infamous in rugby league historiography (Collins, 2006; Rylance, 1999). The Vichy Government, influenced by right-wing elements in French rugby union sympathetic to Vichy and the Nazis, banned rugby league in 1941. German

soldiers in Paris ransacked the French Rugby League offices at the same moment rugby league clubs in the South were being forcibly stripped of their assets (Dine, 2001; Fassollette, 2007). When the Vichy Government fell and the Germans were defeated, the ban on rugby league was soon lifted. However, seized assets were never returned, no compensation was given, and the post-War French Government, spurred on by De Gaulle's right-wing nationalist populism, protected and promoted rugby union as a national game and made no attempt to support rugby league (Dine, 2001). This establishment of white, secular Republican whiteness in rugby union came at the moment when such Frenchness was being challenged by the loss of its colonies (notably Algeria) and the rise in inward migration from colonies and former colonies (Ungar, 1996; Noiriel, 2001; Silverstein, 2004). French rugby league recovered in the post-War era, but only in its traditional (white, regional) heartlands (Dine, 2001), and after the excitement of the 1951 Champagne Rugby Tour of Australia, led by the iconic Puig Aubert, French rugby league faltered in a morass of internal politics, provincialism and disempowerment.

In the last quarter of the previous century the game generally struggled to maintain its levels of support and interest, even in the areas of the South-West and Provence where the game had a following (areas where mythologies of resistance against the Establishment were conflated with the story of the Cathars – see Bourdieu, 1980). This south-western area was also a stronghold for rugby union, and in some ways both codes of rugby reflected white, parochial, communal bonds of loyalty in such small towns (Augustin and Garrigou, 1985; Bromberger, 2000), as well as hegemonic notions of masculinity (Terret, 1999). Rugby union's status in France grew in proportion to the growth of the country's minority ethnic communities, and their increasingly vocal challenges to the (white) secular, Republican ideal of French society (Noiriel, 2001; Silverstein, 2004). In the mid-1990s, at the time of the global Super League struggle between Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and the Australian Rugby League, the French game was overshadowed by a national, summer rugby league competition established by ex-rugby union man Jacques Fouroux. The commodification of rugby league in France mirrored the professionalisation of rugby union (Terret, 1999; Saouter, 2000; Fleuriel and Vincent, 2007). Fouroux's summer competition, based on brand-new clubs across France, collapsed very rapidly amidst bitter arguments about the way forward for French rugby league (Rylance, 1999): in particular, the relationship with rugby union (in France, bigger and wealthier than league) and the dominance of Antipodean players in French teams. But a professional rugby league team in Paris was established in time for the first season of the Super League. This team, Paris St Germain, had some initial commercial and on-field success, but was soon caught in a cycle of losing its best players to rugby union and English Super League clubs and withdrew from the Super League in 1997. The success of the national football team in the 1998 World Cup demonstrated France's multi-ethnic contemporary society (Dauncey and Hare, 2000), but this did not stop the growth in racism and racial tensions (Leff, 2001; Bodinas et al., 2008). Away from the professional set-up in Paris, the French national winter league continued to be played out in the South-West and Provence by semi-professional clubs mainly based in small towns and villages (Bromberger, 2000, Dine, 2001). Inward migration, and internal movement of minority ethnic individuals from the big cities, had started to change the social demographics of these towns and villages through the 1970s onwards (Noiriel, 2001), although the gypsy communities in the south-west were longer established. In the aftermath of Paris St Germain, the French rugby league

encouraged its elite clubs to become more professional in adopting Australianised nicknames, modern coaching methods, and business plans, with mixed results. Then, in 2004, the English Super League, with the support of the French Rugby League, invited a French team to apply to join the Super League for the 2006 season: Villeneuve and Toulouse were strong contenders, but a new team created by the merger of two Perpignan-based sides, Les Catalans, won the bidding contest.

Minority ethnic rugby league players in France

First Phase

In the first, pilot phase, two of the players suggested the physicality of the game and the ability for them to be aggressive in a controlled way was part of rugby league's attraction. All three players recognised that within rugby league Arab players had a reputation for physicality: the Arab forward. The third player saw in rugby league the chance for him to demonstrate more refined skills. In talking about the physical nature of rugby league, this Arab player also tried to counter the stereotyped notion that all Arabs were big and strong, but in doing so reverted to stereotypes about the wildness of white Catalans:

Some clubs have a lot of North African forwards, big lads who seem to like the physical challenge. But I'm not big. I prefer to play a more ball handling, skilful less physical game. So you can't generalise. Anyway the Catalans, who are mostly white like the physical exchanges. It's in their blood.

All three players in the pilot phase were aware of racialised identities within France, and unlike English minority ethnic players were more explicit in their description of the faultlines across rugby league and (French) society. One noted that "from time to time you get right wing parties trying to make trouble. Just this summer there has been violence in Perpignan between the Gypsy and North African or Muslim communities. But these are the two poorest communities. When these things happen everybody gets labelled", but this same player also commented that "both [Arabs and Gypsies] are similar very proud peoples... AGIP the Gypsy team have a bit of a fiery reputation". The hesitation between North African (beur) and Muslim demonstrates the emergence but not the dominance of Islam as an identifier of belonging (Silverstein, 2008). Hybridity at a local/regional level was not evident: the players were gypsies, Arabs, not Catalan gypsies and Arabs. The language of their responses suggested a clear distinction between the white Catalans and the minority ethnic communities in the same area: the whiteness of some French rugby league clubs was seen as a product of them being from "villages up in the hills". However, the players rejected the idea that rugby league was something essentially white or identified with white national or regional identities.

Finally, the players in the pilot phase were aware that if rugby league did have a traditional association with whiteness in France, it was more a regional identity than a national one. As one black player suggested, when reflecting on why rugby league was only strong in parts of the south of France:

I think maybe people in the south see themselves as a bit different, a bit more like rebels. There is a lot of history of rebels in the south and maybe that is why... Rugby League had been banned by the Vichy Government and players had to play Rugby Union... when you go to Carcassonne there is a lot of history and they talk of Cathars who fought against the French kings.

What was interesting about this reflection on rugby league, the Cathars and the rebellious, individual characteristics of southern France, was that the black player moved from a discussion about the white people of the region to an identification with them and rugby league: for this player, the history of the South-West and the history of the banning of rugby league in the Second World War became his history, and explained his identity. Against the whiteness and power of the Republic and rugby union, this player saw his own identity as being tied-up with the mythologies of rugby league (working-class solidarity) and the Cathars (counter-hegemonic against the French state).

Second Phase

In the second phase of the research, all these themes were repeated and developed by the players interviewed. All the players expressed the view that rugby league was a man's game, played by men to confirm and reinforce their masculinity. This is a finding repeated in the work on rugby league in England, amongst its white working-class northern constituency (Spracklen, 1995) and amongst minority ethnic players up north (Spracklen, 2001) and down south (Spracklen, 2007). It is a finding also repeated in the work of Terret (1999) on French rugby union. Respondent 2-4, from the Gypsy community, discussed his relationship to the game in terms of the hyper-masculine nature of his Gypsy masculinity. In doing so, he identified a stereotypical view of women as well as men that for him explained the lack of women's rugby league teams:

We have a saying "Gitan aime le guerrier", which means there is a bit of the warrior spirit in the Gypsy. Rugby League provides that. I love the physical challenge, as I am sure do all gypsy players... As I said above, there is a bit of the "warrior" spirit in the game. I think it is a man's game in the way that it is tough and you all work for each other. I think the loyalty to team mates is attractive to the Gypsy community. Your team is like a community. As to women, they can be fiery, passionate off the field. On the field I am not sure.

Another respondent, 2-11, suggested that rugby league's physical and mental challenges allowed him to demonstrate his masculinity to other men (masculine prowess as status) and to women (cf. Guerandel and Mennesson, 2007):

I love it because it's a physical contact sport... That takes a lot of mental as well as physical energy. It gives a lot of mental satisfaction to achieve something like that. I think other people are admiring when you tell them you are a RL player. It marks you as a man. It also goes down well with the girls!

The normalisation of hyper-masculine, heterosexual male identities in rugby league was also connected to stereotypes associated with the game in France: in particular, the idea that Arab men were biologically and/or psychologically 'fit' to be forwards. This stereotype emerged out of the experiences of all the players, but has its origins in (post)colonial white discourses in France about the brutality of Arabs and Islam (Silverstein, 2004, 2008). This dehumanisation and demonisation has parallels in the claims about black physicality in rugby league and other sports (Long, Carrington and Spracklen, 1997): stereotypes that essentialise biology and culture and perpetuate historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion. Of course for the respondents who identified themselves as Arabs, the stereotype was something with which they could be playful and demonstrate their confidence in their French Arab hybrid identities. Their need to express their masculinity and demonstrate their fitness for rugby league was supported by their embracing of Arab strength. One respondent explained this by

suggesting that “Maghrebins are more aggressive, they like physical confrontation... I don’t mean they are dirty players but they get stuck in when the match gets tough”. Another respondent was even more precise in the stereotype of the Arab forward:

You find many Moroccans in the forwards... you do not seem to see as many Algerians... I think maybe you have to separate out Moroccans and Algerians here. Moroccans originate in small towns and villages, which are not too different from the small towns of southern France [where league is strong].

Every player interviewed raised the stereotype of the strong, aggressive Arab forward as something that was part of the game, part of the Arab involvement in rugby league; though a few were quick to point out that such a stereotype was open to challenge, or not so easily claimed of Arabs in rugby league in 2007. One of the players was an Arab scrum-half, but even he acknowledged the prevalence of the assumption – especially among white rugby league fans - that Arabs were big, strong, aggressive and naturally inclined to play in the pack.

What it meant to be an Arab in rugby league related to the Arab respondents’ own sense of self in wider society. They were aware of the historicity of their position in France: what it meant, to them, to be an Arab, or a French Arab. At school they had been enculturated into the invisible whiteness of the Republic, but at home they had lived Arab lives, Muslim lives, Moroccan lives. They saw no reason why they couldn’t be certain of their Arab identity and their French identity. The Arab respondents were mostly secularised, with only one expressing a strong sense of belief in and respect for orthodox practices of Islam. This respondent had suffered from racist abuse away from the game of rugby league, and admitted that his strong sense of French Muslim-Arab identity off the pitch marked him out amongst elements of French society, including the gendarmes. His adoption of an Islamic identity, however couched in the language of hybridity, challenged the myth of the secular state (Silverstein, 2008). But his experience was not typical: the other Arab respondents had only a nominal adherence to Islam, and two of them spoke at length about their alcohol-fuelled socialising in the game and amongst other secularised French Arabs. For these, unlike the respondent struggling to have his religious identity accepted, being a French Arab was essentially being French.

Other stereotypes were less obvious. Some of the respondents claimed that Gypsies were, like Arabs, naturally aggressive. But this aggressive nature was also extended by some of the respondents, as in the first phase of interviews, to the Catalans and Provençals of southern France. As respondent 2.12 put it: “we are all a bit hot-blooded down here”.

All the respondents in the second phase identified a strong feeling of belonging and community in rugby league, associated with the south of France, small towns and villages, and the working class. One player, for example, even described himself as being “born into Occitan culture”. Over half of the respondents recognised the Cathar history of South-West France as an exemplar of anti-establishment, anti-Paris resistance for contemporary times (Bourdieu, 1980). One player saw the history of Catharism in the 13th Century as something he, a self-styled black Frenchman, could own through rugby league: “At the time [of the Cathars] the region was independent from France... so the people here remain proud of their history, their spirit and their special culture, and perhaps we treizistes are similar”. Another, one of the Gypsy players, explained:

There are ruined Cathar castles all round here from the Middle Ages. The region was always proud and defiant. I think rugby league has that same defiant spirit, especially when you see the massive budgets of rugby union clubs like Narbonne... we have to fight much harder to survive, like Gypsies, in fact.

There was a feeling of solidarity between rugby league and wider left-wing, working-class politics. Respondent 2-9 said “all the southern regions were against Paris... rugby league is a bit more anarchic, anti-establishment, the poor or working man’s sport”. Another respondent contrasted rugby league with rugby union, “the sport of the system... rugby union treats us like shit, so there are a lot of similarities between the rebellious anti-system culture of the Midi and rugby league”. This working-classness was identified as a rural working-class culture, one of small towns and villages where rugby league was played. This rural working-class life was contrasted with big cities and the North of France (transposing the north/south divide of rugby league in England). One Gypsy player suggested that “we work outdoors and are close to the earth... rugby league fits that... I have never been to the north but it looks different on television, everybody too busy to notice their neighbour”. This identification with rugby league’s working-class mythology is interesting when compared with the evidence from Bromberger (2000), which suggests rugby league in France draws support from across social classes and that support is based on communal solidarity and local loyalties. The paradox is the same in England: the game in the north of England is defined through a sense of working-classness invented by people who no longer live traditional working-class lives (Spracklen, 1996a). What matters is the invented tradition, the mythology, the identification with the working class, in the south-west of France or the north of England. Despite the strong sense of regional belonging, all the respondents declared themselves to be French and loyal to the republican ideals of France, albeit French with multiple identities. Respondent 2.10 explained:

I support France because I am French. But at the same time I play for the Moroccan national [rugby league] team... I am proud to be French but also proud of my Moroccan roots.

The identity with rugby league and the rural, working-class culture of South-West France extended, in some cases, to an awareness of the history of rugby league in the Second World War. Four of the players spoke about the Vichy Government banning rugby league, and two more mentioned it indirectly when discussing the game’s distinctive history and character. The four who spoke directly about Vichy banning rugby league linked the ban to the wider oppression of the South-West and connection between rugby union and the white French Establishment, the connection articulated by Saouter (2000) and Fassolette (2007). One player claimed that “rugby union was also behind the banning of our sport and they continue to treat us like dirt”; another pointed out that “the Gypsy people were rounded up by the same [Vichy] Government... my grandparents were rounded up by the Vichy Police”. The struggle against Vichy, against fascism, against rugby union, and against the white Republican French Establishment in Paris and the north was a struggle still to be made fully public, and a struggle still underway (cf. Falcous and Silk, 2006). Respondent 2.1, who had played rugby union in the French Army, hinted that “even in the Army there are a lot of things not mentioned about the War”. As Silverstein (2004, 2008) argues, Frenchness is tightly delineated by whiteness, secularism and the processes of the

State, which in turn are related to the chauvinism endemic in French politics in the Twentieth Century.

The feeling that rugby league was a community to which they belonged was tempered by the experiences of racism the players discussed. All the respondents except one talked at length about racism as a problem in wider society, with some of them acknowledging the increased racial tensions in France and the presence of the Front Nationale (FN) in the south of France. There was agreement that the presence of the FN combined with increasing exclusion and poverty among disaffected urban communities challenged both French secularist ideals and the practicalities of social cohesion (Mignon, 1994; Noiriel, 2001). For one Arab player “race and immigrants” were “everyday discussion at the work or in the bar”. The same player expressed exasperation that a good white friend of his had also told him he was going to vote for the FN. Another Arab player said he noticed racism “at work when you have to do a job and somebody sees you are an Arab... not with most people, but just occasionally somebody looks at you almost surprised... and a bit mistrusting”. Respondent 2.11 felt that racism was directed more towards newer immigrants to France who suffered “from generalisations made by politicians, and the local population”. For the black and Arab players in particular, such everyday racism made their attempts to establish hybrid identities more difficult, as the Otherness of their diasporic identity was reified by racist discourses over their Frenchness (cf. Kemedjio, 2003). For the Gypsy players, the long history of exclusion and racism against Roma in Europe led them to identify strongly with their Gypsy identity as counter-hegemonic resistance, though they still insisted on the centrality of their Frenchness and their commitment to Frenchness as a national identity. Sadly, racial tensions were also recognised as happening between newer immigrants from Africa (black and Arab) and the existing French Arab communities (secularised Moroccans in particular), and also, as one respondent stated, “between young Gypsies and Arabs”. These struggles over definitions of ethnicity, between groups marginalised (whitewashed?) from the ‘mainstream’ nationalism of France demonstrate both the complexities of belonging and the way in which the marginal groups use and are used by the State (Wievorka et al., 1992; Wievorka, 2000).

For all the sense of belonging and solidarity mentioned earlier, racism in rugby league was still recognised as a continuing, low-level problem by some of the respondents. This racism was expressed verbally or (more often) through looks and feelings: for example, Respondent 2.4 said he had “heard the odd comment in bars”, and 2.7 felt “uncomfortable” with the coach at one of his first clubs, “nothing really overt... but you sense it in the same way you can sense it with looks in town”. One player told a story about a black friend being racially abused in a Championship match by the home team’s Public Address announcer. Another player described how white Catalan opponents would abuse him and others on the pitch by shouting “kill the Arab!”, though he also suggested the Catalans intimidated everybody and abused white Provencal players too. All the Gypsy players spoke of a perception that elements of the French Rugby League Federation and certain officials were discriminatory against AGIP, the Gypsy club. Respondent 2.6, an Arab player, spoke at length about his home club and some of its officials and backers: “some of the people who have worked hard for the club could be said to have racist attitudes... I have shown them, by sheer hard work, that I can contribute”. His struggle to challenge racist attitudes

through working hard to prove he belonged to the game was repeated in another story he told us:

I think there is a subtler kind of racism that is hard to pin point. It is not explicit, but it is real. It is about not making the effort, not encouraging. We have some very good Arab players in rugby league. The irony is that they ARE some of the best players. Where are the average players? It almost seems like you have to be better than the European player to get in.

Telling the stories – a final reflection

The frustration expressed by the respondents, especially when talking about continued racism and racial stereotypes in France and French rugby league, was mirrored by our own frustrations. We are both supporters of rugby league, and want the game to develop beyond its traditional boundaries. The sense of identity with - and belonging to - rugby league emerging from the interviews is encouraging, and it would be easy as fans to stress the communal, left-wing, working-class solidarity of the game. But the solidarity was weakened by the subtle patterns of racial exclusion and stereotyping identified by the players, and the unspoken discourse of hegemonic masculinity that makes the solidarity one of fraternity only.

Most of the people I interviewed are my friends, or people I've met through friends. That's the strength of rugby league, the way in which someone like me from a terraced house in Leeds can end up drinking a beer with a French Arab in a bar in Carcassonne. The game can bring people like us together. But some of the white people in their stories about racism are people I've known through rugby league. It really saddens me, but at the same time these stories however unpleasant need to be told (reflection: second author).

Our whiteness allows us to transcend historic rivalries between France and England to find commonalities with white people involved in French rugby league. The sport becomes part of a shared white history, albeit one where the commonality is based on working-class resistance to the rugby union supporting establishments of both countries. In the north of England, the imaginary community does not extend to the large, British Muslim population (Spracklen, 2007), so rugby league remains predominantly white. In south-west France, despite the challenges posed by the myths of French nationalism, minority ethnic people and populations

Conclusions

The experience of minority ethnic rugby league players in France exhibits similarities and differences with that of the London-based minority ethnic rugby league players interviewed by Spracklen (2007), and the northern English minority ethnic rugby league players in earlier research (Long et al., 1995; Long, Carrington and Spracklen, 1997; Spracklen, 2001). The working-class, heterosexual, physical masculinity expressed through northern English rugby league seems to be replicated in the masculine constructions of minority ethnic players in South-West France: rugby league in both these places is dominated by a mythologised (romanticised) identity of working-class men, where working-class maleness is the ideal identity symbolically constructed in the imaginary community. In this replication, there is also a tendency demonstrated in the new research to perpetuate stereotypes and myths of racial physicality – especially so in the discourse around Arab forwards in French rugby league. In terms of its role in the construction of hegemonic masculinity and communal identity, rugby league in

France shares a common purpose with rugby union (Pociello, 1983; Terret, 1999; Saouter, 2000).

However, the negotiations of belonging in the game demonstrate that there is nothing to stop players who aren't from the north of England (Spracklen, 2007) or who aren't white Catalans from becoming part of rugby league. Despite persistent low-level racism in England and France, these players have chosen to stay with rugby league because it gives them an opportunity to belong, resist and demonstrate their status as minority ethnic men (Falcous and Silk, 2006). In this sense, both the London and French minority ethnic players are challenging entrenched notions of whiteness and blackness - and the invisibility of whiteness in sport (Hartmann, 2007; Long and Hylton, 2002) - and providing counter-hegemonic stories of identity formation and resistance (Carrington, 1998; Ferber, 2007; King, 2004). These counter-hegemonic stories allow for multiple identities and hybrid identities (Brah, 1996; Solomos, 1998), but within the limits of agency defined by their participation in the game. Both rugby league in England (up north and in London) and south-west France provide places for belonging and exclusion (Hylton, 2005), but control of who belongs and who doesn't in London and France is no longer the privilege of white gatekeepers. Minority ethnic players in the north of England have to demonstrate their ability to embrace a working-class, northern culture of whiteness to be accepted (Spracklen, 2001). Minority ethnic players in London (Spracklen, 2007) are able to define the game in their own terms away from traditions of whiteness (cf. Andersson, 2007). In France this is made more difficult by notions of Frenchness and particularly Catharism (traditions of rebellion and resistance (re)invented in the histories of the white, working-class villages of the region: Bourdieu, 1980; Dine, 2001) – but ironically, the game is well established in Arab and Gypsy communities in the Languedoc and Provence areas of France. These communities have their own specific histories, but for Arab players – as for black players in French rugby league - there is the additional story of postcolonialism and diaspora that shapes their identities (Wievorka, 2000; Noiriel, 2001). The political tensions over what it means to be French (Kumar, 2006; Silverstein, 2004, 2008) have not made French rugby league, despite persistent questions over the meaning of diversity and ethnicity in France and the role of sport (Ungar, 1996; Leff, 2001), a vehicle solely for exclusion and the making of whiteness (Garner, 2006). The regionality of French rugby league has left open the possibility of minority ethnic communities embracing the game and using it in a number of complex ways to define their own relation to the French state, Frenchness, the south-west, and each other through the agency of hybridity but within the structure of French nationalist ideologies.

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