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Submission for consideration for the Leisure Studies special issue on Research  
Methodologies

**Ethnographies of the Imagined, the Imaginary, and the Critically Real:  
blackness, whiteness, the north of England and rugby league**

## **Introduction**

In our long engagement with rugby league as a research site, and racism and racial identity as a research focus, we have grappled with the meaning and use of ethnography within the research process. There is a real methodological challenge involved in gaining knowledge of the field while remaining critically positioned in anti-racism. For us, ethnographies are a way of bridging that gap. This paper is simply a case study of what ethnography offers to leisure scholars, then, but what it is and can be in the context of the situatedness of the researcher (*cf.*, Duneier, 2004). We see this paper as a contribution to developing a critical ethnography of ethnicity in sport and leisure. As such we do not 'do' Critical Race Theory, but draw on some of its principles and extend them. For example, we not only value the principle of plurivocality in allowing a multiplicity of otherwise unheard voices to emerge through the research exercise, but we support a plurivocality of interpretation through a recognition of the situatedness of the researchers in the team bringing their own histories/experiences to the analysis (Hylton, 2009). We do this through an examination of the different experiences of the three of us as researchers examining issues of ethnicity in rugby league. We argue that our own histories and identities are pivotal in how we are accepted as legitimate ethnographers and insiders, but those histories and identities also pose a critically real challenge to us and to those in the community of rugby league with whom we interact.

As researchers, we have all in turn started our research on rugby league on the assumption that part of what we are doing is an ethnography, using participant-observation (Spradley, 1980; Whyte, 1993) to get inside the life of the field we are

studying, so that we would understand its insider knowledge and structures (Whyte, 1993). Ethnography is a term that has come to us from cultural anthropology. As Spradley (1979) claims, it is the work of describing a culture using the principle of learning from the field. Ely (1991) and Werner and Schoepfle (1987) describe ethnography as a specific academic field that attempts to describe the acquired, tacit knowledge of a culture, the perceptions and interpretive methods of that culture, and its social behaviour (see the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, 1978). Before we turn to our situatedness within the field, and our ethnicities in doing ethnographic work around 'race' and racism, we need to introduce the particular context of rugby league in the north of England, which may not be familiar to readers of this journal.

### **Authorised Version of Rugby League**

The work of Tony Collins (1999, 2006) reflects the new orthodoxy of opinion internal to rugby league. Rugby league is viewed by Collins as a genuine working-class social movement (movement of resistance), situated in the leisure lives of its white, northern, working-class participants. In the work of Collins, as in the work of non-academic historians such as Robert Gate (1989), rugby league becomes the north – its very identity in this country is fixed by fixed notions of northern England: its landscape, industry, housing, and its popular culture (*eg.*, the use of the Northern Union as a vague, almost psychogeographical entity in the early years of Coronation Street).

Having previously been the writer of the alternative historiographical challenge to an official version, Collins' historiography of black involvement (in Melling and Collins, 2004) has become the new orthodoxy. The Rugby Football

League, in its attempts to do the right thing morally, or to increase participation, or perhaps to increase funding from Sport England (or quite probably all three), has embraced the good practice of equality and diversity policies from elsewhere in the sports sector (Hylton, 2009). Part of the Rugby Football League's promotion and campaigning around the issues of 'race' and ethnicity is a claim that the game provides an environment in which black sporting stars can shine.

### **Ethnography of whiteness as a black researcher**

In reflections on his fieldnotes, Timmins writes:

I was born in Sandwell near West Bromwich in the West Midlands and am of dual-heritage African Caribbean father and white British mother. In 1977, after playing rugby union for twelve years, I changed codes and signed professional rugby league forms for Wakefield Trinity. Since the closure of the coal mines there have been many changes and as population demographics have changed nationally so has that of the former mining village of Hemsworth where I live. The men of the village no longer work 'down pit' they now pack their snap tins and go to work at Netto and Next, major distributor warehouses on large industrial sites that have sprung up around the district. Many don't work at all. Many people from outside the area have purchased newly built housing in the village and there has been an influx of commuters and also refugees both black and white who now contribute to a more diversified community. In my reflection as a black researcher I have had to ask myself questions that at times give me cause for concern. Am I still accepted in the present as in the past now that I am

no longer recognised by many as a former player or coach involved in the game?

As a black man no longer involved in rugby league is he still accepted in a community that has changed with the decline of the pits? Does past history still have social capital? These are all questions that have to be addressed by Timmins both in the fields and in analysis and interpretation. Timmins is exploring the prevalence and nature of institutionalised racism within rugby league that may account for the fact that few black players go on to successful careers in other areas of the game. Some of the research data is from interviews with black ex-players and white gatekeepers, but there is a rich, ethnographic strand to the methodology: getting into the culture of the institutions of rugby league such as professional clubs, but especially the governing body. Timmins' relationship with the Rugby Football League is crucial. Their support for his research has allowed him to gain entry into their offices, and access to their staff. However, his need to 'hang around' Red Hall and ease himself into an insider ethnography is counter-balanced by the demands made of his time inside the organisation.

Timmins writes:

Fieldwork and interviews have been conducted to date at various venues, including a super league club in Yorkshire where the CEO thought it appropriate to conduct interviews in the club's cafeteria in tune with cutlery clanging, cups and saucers rattling and all the noises associated with that particular venue. This particular respondent when asked about racism in rugby league agreed that there was racism in RL but not at his club as they employed black people in a number of jobs (but to my knowledge there are currently none in senior coaching or senior

management positions). When introducing myself to respondents I ensured they were aware of my background as a former professional rugby league player and senior coach and this seemed to put respondents at ease, which in turn facilitated the interview process. This strategy also worked on the Equality and Diversity training days and Staff Induction Sessions. Initially I was introduced as a PhD student from Leeds University [sic.] researching issues of discriminatory practices and institutionalised racism in rugby league. At this announcement I could physically feel people withdrawing away from me, and at that point realised that to this group of employees I was very much a threat to them and their organisation.

Although experienced in certain aspects of this specific research field, at times as a black researcher he has felt both uncomfortable and inadequate, finding it difficult to come to terms with the complexities of the research material and at times this has led to a certain amount of isolation. This is partly the ethnocentrism of academia, but more so the whiteness of rugby league. For people in the game, Timmins is seen either as an 'expert' on equality and diversity, and therefore someone to sit on committees and groups and to deliver training sessions; or as an outsider, perhaps with a touch of 'sour grapes', complaining about lack of opportunities for those Othered players who are just like him.

### **Ethnography of 'race' and blackness as a black researcher**

Crotty (1998) stresses the importance of reflexivity, *ie.*, an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and

background has an impact on the research process. As a black ex-player, part of the second author's ethnographic field work has required reflection on a number of fronts and challenges that he has found himself facing. One former high profile black player and coach who he deemed important and central to his research has refused to be interviewed claiming that he has often been misquoted by the media in the past while another is out of the country. The need to speak to respondents who we know to be crucial holders of pertinent stories is a common issue in qualitative research (Dumeier, 2004): what makes this more problematic for a critical ethnography of racism in sport is the suspicion that some black ex-players are wary of being seen as traitors to the game. By publicising the existence of a glass ceiling, Timmins' work may in fact lower that ceiling even further for black ex-players (or make it stronger, to extend the metaphor), making them feel even more like unwanted outsiders in the game they may still love.

In reflecting further on his role within the research process Timmins finds himself in a dilemma. Timmins is a black British male of dual-heritage and, in reflecting on research strategies he has realised that when conducting interviews with respondents he has unconsciously changed the way he speaks depending on the respondent (white or black). He has realised he has been changing the language he uses and his mannerisms so that he could be accepted both as an insider and outsider appropriate to the given circumstance (which methodologically speaking is where he needs to be situated). Timmins is well aware that his identities are fluid and the balance changed to take the advantage:

on the one hand of my visible blackness, talking and acting black when it suited me, and then taking advantage of my upbringing in white organisations being able to talk and act white on other occasions.



How white Timmins could act is, of course, a matter for cautious reflection. No matter how much knowledge of rugby league's institutions, culture and history Timmins deploys in acting white, the fact of his blackness is still a potential barrier for him, one which white respondents in the field might use at any time to deny him information or access. There are a number of challenges in developing a critical ethnography of ethnicity as a black researcher, related to this question of situatedness. The challenge for Timmins is in speaking with former and current black players and black coaches who may see him as a threat and as part of the establishment from Red Hall. This challenge is met by Timmins' own autoethnographic reflection, his own empathy for the players' stories. Another challenge is the negotiation of Timmins as an outsider interviewing white Chief Executive Officers, referees and administrators, who may see him as a threat to their status in rugby league and to the game more generally. This challenge is more difficult to meet: the support of the Rugby Football League and a strong gatekeeper within the game are both crucial to the success of the ethnography.

The status of the social researcher as 'outsider' or 'insider' is neither static nor one dimensional. As social researchers we may initially be an outsider to a particular group, but as we spend more time with them, we become more of an insider (Rabe, 2003). As an insider in rugby league, Timmins has some credibility and access. Timmins is also careful to manage his situatedness within the game, though he wonders whether the support of the Rugby Football League helps or hinders the research process:

I have assisted in staff induction training and in staff equality and diversity training. I have also been an active member on the RFL's Equality and Diversity Steering Group and advised on the re-launch of the Tackle It

agenda and the RFL's Black History Month new initiative. More recently I have advised on the RFL's Draft Equity and Diversity Strategy 2010 – 2012. As a researcher have I been compromised? Does my relationship with the participants and data give a true definition of a participant observer? Burgess's (1982, p. 45) view is that the primary aim is to maintain the balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' status; to identify with the people under study and get close to them, but maintaining a professional distance which permits adequate observation and data collection. It is a fine balance.

### **The Products of a White Ethnographer**

Spracklen (1996, 2001), a white researcher from the north of England, conducted research on rugby league (and union) in a northern city. The research was qualitative and ethnographic. Spracklen found that traditional rugby league localities (communities?) were in decline, or gone altogether. They had been replaced by an imaginary community, partly symbolic, partly imagined and invented as rooted in some (rose-tinted) 'reality' of the past: the myth of the Split; gritstone; gritty men; and Northernness – white, and working-class. Of course the communities in the past were also imaginary and imagined, in the sense that the Split gave them a myth and an invented tradition of working-class resistance, whose whiteness and maleness were refractions of the imaginary (re)invented throughout the age of urbanisation and industrialisation. This refraction still exists in rugby league, *eg.*, the big Cumbrian forwards, big because bred in the steel works of Workington and Whitehaven, hardened in the rain lashing that coast... exotic others to the normal

northerners of Yorkshire or Lancashire. The men of the north (imagined in rugby league) come from particular elements of the working class: small, one-industry towns; or particular one-industry districts in the bigger cities. We have argued elsewhere (Spracklen, Long and Timmins, 2009) that postmodernity's fragmentation imprints on this past a unity and cohesiveness it lacked.

Spracklen (1996, p. 89) wrote:

My research aims involved exploring ideas that would, it seemed, remain untouched by quantitative attitude surveys. And there were, as I had established, a number of intractable problems in adherence to scientism - particularly when the nature of the research tended towards the interpretive and exploration of meaning, as mine did. From this it seemed the best way forward for my research, the best methods I could employ, were qualitative ones (Denzin, 1978; Miles and Huberman, 1984). Not only did such methods enable me to do what I wanted most efficiently, they sat easier with the Kuhnian conception of a new paradigm of knowledge gathering: the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Guba, 1990).

The naturalistic paradigm is hard to define. Following Kuhn (1962) it is suggested that the normal science exemplified by what the naturalists term 'positivism' (a reading of the philosophy of science concomitant with public perceptions of how science operates, such as Hempel, 1966) is being challenged by a new paradigm which is incommensurable with the old one. In essence, social science academic research is, according to the naturalists (*eg.*, Guba, 1990), in a Kuhnian revolution. It could be argued, of course, that social sciences have always had that naturalistic perspective, having a brief flirtation with positivism before such

quantitative techniques were replaced by qualitative inquiry. However, the naturalistic turn is evident in leisure studies, which has shifted in recent years to naturalism, as evidenced by the kinds of research published over the last thirty years in this journal, *Leisure Sciences*, and *Annals of Leisure Research*.

This new paradigm suggests an emphasis on understanding, perception and the demands of the field (Ely, 1991). It supports a qualitative approach with less insistence on objectivism. It suggests researchers have to learn from the field, to listen and try to understand. On a theoretical level, it eschews traditional hypothetico-deductive models for a more grounded theoretical approach of theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 8) claim that it is “precisely because the matter is so involved that it is not possible to provide a simple definition” of naturalism. Ely (1991) identifies the problem as one of labelling. Indeed, Guba and Lincoln (1989) have gone on to identify the paradigm as ‘constructivism research’ – which is a definition that does not sit easy with work of Hammersley (1990, 1992). However, the label is really irrelevant (Lofland and Lofland, 1984).

Spracklen’s (1996) initial plan - of doing an ethnography incorporating in depth interviews (Spradley, 1979; McCracken, 1988) and participant-observation (Spradley, 1980; Whyte, 1993) - could also be questioned in terms of its reliability. It had to be reliable data he was collecting, and the process had to be seen to take into account problems associated with ethnography raised elsewhere in this paper. This was an issue of triangulation, of making sure what he was collecting was not erroneous in any sense (Mathison, 1988; Fetterman, 1989). Also, since he claimed to be a naturalist, developing grounded theory, he had to be flexible enough to adapt and change his method as his research progressed (Strauss, 1995). What these

problems implied was that an ethnography was on the one hand too intimate and produced lots of descriptive data but not enough explanation, and on the other his methods did not give him enough to work on. What he planned initially and what he did altered as the research progressed, and the issue of reliability and triangulation was addressed by a multimethod approach (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) that incorporated different ways of approaching the field. What mattered to Spracklen was being flexible and reactive to the field in finding novel ways to gain trust from insiders. As he acknowledged (Spracklen, 1996: p. 95):

In practice, my closeness to their experiences served as a useful key to unlocking any barriers to access. As a fan with some prior knowledge of both codes, and a background that could be emphasised either way, I ingratiated myself into the field (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Whyte, 1993). This perhaps may be questionable ethically, as I admit I was economical with the truth on occasions. For instance, I did not tell the members of the amateur rugby league club I had a degree from a 'posh' university: instead I chatted about team selections for Great Britain and so on.

### **Whiteness as belonging, as community**

Local and family relationships remain important in the lives and histories of the white Hunslet and Bramley fans interviewed for research by Spracklen (2009), histories that had much in common with the researcher's own. The involvement of Spracklen's family at Bramley Buffaloes, and their previous active support of Hunslet, is an example of this intimacy (Spracklen, 1996). These fans were in the

sample interviewed because Spracklen knew they had similar histories to his history, and were serious about their commitment to their clubs.

Every male fan interviewed told a similar story of early introduction to rugby league through male members of the immediate family (mainly fathers) or, in one instance, through a close friend who attended matches with his father. For the women, rugby league remained something to which they had to be introduced, something in which they had to prove their involvement through active engagement. The supporters still involved with and following Hunslet and Bramley were all, with one exception, in working-class occupations: some traditional jobs, some from the new working-class of the service sector, and the rest not working or working for themselves in a trade. These occupations fitted the working-class patterns of their everyday life and their upbringing, though some of them had been educated in the grammar school system. Because of the way they were selected, all the fans were involved in one way or another with rugby league itself beyond merely spectating, and saw the game as a means of celebrating their working-classness.

For the fans of Hunslet and Bramley this same yearning for an imagined working-class utopia was also given expression through allegiance to rugby league's imaginary community. All the fans (both Hunslet and Bramley) told similar tales of belonging, of being situated in a story of working-class, northern pride, associated with the idea that what they were doing was replicating the leisure lives of their grandfathers. Their understanding of rugby league's history was based on the orthodoxy of its own amateur historians. It featured resistance, non-conformity, the Split, anti-RU, coloured by the remembering of key moments in their respective clubs' histories.

The dreams of Parkside and Barley Mow, of the (white) working-class communities united by a love of rugby league, ale and having a laugh, were turned bitter by the recent histories of both Hunslet and Bramley. For all the Hunslet fans, Parkside's glory years are a high-point from which everything else has been measured. Asked about how Hunslet and Bramley had changed as communities, the fans all recognised that the streets in which they had grown up were no longer easily recognisable. Some mentioned the 'new', migrant communities that had moved in to new housing in areas the white, working-class families had moved out of in the 1970s, when Hunslet, for example, was cleared of terraced housing. But for most of the fans, their Hunslet and Bramley, the white working-class communities of the post-war years, were the only 'real' expressions of community available to them, and their whiteness was so taken for granted that it was never even mentioned.

There is then, in rugby league, a very particular cultural capital represented by sporting capital: the knowledge and networks (and values and norms) of white, working-classness as northernness (Ehland, 2007). Or rather, northernness is whiteness. The game of rugby league, and its constituent community, is construed in an imaginary, imagined (Anderson, 1983), invented north. This has roots in the actual past, e.g. in Hoggart's (1958) Hunslet, with its tight network of terraced houses and street corner pubs; where the men went to Parkside and the Golden Gate while the women made their tea. But there is an invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) of working-class resistance, and of working-class male strength: hard as nails, hard as millstone grit. These roots, these traditions, map a space, a community where whiteness is taken-as-read, or taken-for-granted, where whiteness is invisible (Garner, 2006): hence the limited involvement in the game of black

people up north is more exotic/Othered than the involvement of (white) Australians and New Zealanders.

That is not to say there are no black (or any other minority ethnic) players of rugby league. Spracklen (2007) demonstrates the growth of the game among black players in the south of England; and Spracklen and Spracklen (2008) show that French Arab and black French players in France have always existed. But in both these cases, there are still acid tests of belonging and exclusion, with the result that whiteness remains unseen but privileged in the wider structures of rugby league. Can northernness be encompassed by blackness? The answer, of course, is yes, there is nothing essential or deterministic about northernness. But in the context of rugby league, northernness just is whiteness – blackness is always associated with some kind of outsider or insider who has sublimated his or her blackness.

### **Blackness**

It is claimed that sport traditionally has been associated with notions of equal opportunity and social mobility (Jones, 2002). Commitment to racial equality by policy makers and senior management in sport stands in opposition to many of the cherished beliefs about sport and the limited involvement of ethnic minorities in sport (Long and Hylton, 2002). In the United Kingdom, although initially these concepts related to white working-class males, in the past it has been suggested that sport has served, and continues to serve, “a similar function for Afro-Caribbean black Britons” (Maguire, 1991: 94). Long, Carrington and Spracklen (1997) propose that in the hard world of rugby league at least, the desire to win may become more significant than underlying prejudices. That desire to win and



the unique playing ability which contributes to winning gives elite black players such as Ellery Hanley and Martin Offiah access to rugby league along with the accolades and rewards it brings. Yet there is a clear case of double standards - white players, those who come from 'the game', are seen as role models when they sign big contracts, unlike the black players. This corroborates the picture developed in this section of 'the game' as inherently biased towards white men. But it also suggests that players are working-class heroes. It is the very success of black sporting heroes like Hanley and Offiah that allows racism to exist behind the mask with protestations that there is no racism in 'our' game (Spracklen, 2009). Even if the claims that 'we only select players on the basis of their ability - if they're good enough they're in the side black or white' are justified, it does not necessarily mean there is no racism in the sport (Long *et al.*, 1997). A sport with rugby league's record of on-field integration has still proved largely incapable of confronting deeper aspects of racial stereotyping and institutionalised discrimination (Collins, 2006).

Racism has historically been an integral part of all institutions and has served to maintain and protect white privilege (Solomos, 2003). The research of Jones (2002) in the semi-professional game of soccer demonstrates how the progress of blacks through and within the sport continues to be slow and uneven. A similar situation currently exists in professional rugby league in Great Britain. Only two coaches of black or Asian origin, Ellery Hanley (Great Britain/St Helens/Doncaster Dragons) and David Plange (Warrington Wolves) have broken through the 'glass ceiling' into senior coaching positions, and in the administrative and senior management hierarchy only Abi Ekoku as the one time Chief Executive of Bradford Bulls. Currently nobody of black or Asian origin

holds a position of power in rugby league off the pitch: as a coach, in administration or in the boardroom. It may be that the lack of upward mobility for Asian and black players has a negative impact and damaging consequence within the game and this presents tensions and suppositions that require exploration. As Acosta (1993) has identified, many white coaches are ignorant of cultural differences in expressiveness and in how emotions are exhibited (or not exhibited). Those same issues are also problematic within professional rugby league and the daily operation of 'normal' procedures. Previous studies of racism in rugby league (Long *et al.*, 1995); Long *et al.*, 1997) looked at the more overt forms of racism. Timmins' on-going project identifies the more covert forms of racism that might be found entrenched and practised in the procedures, policies and culture of the institution of rugby league.

That research suggests there is a selective and convenient racism in the game of rugby league that centres and reifies certain black players while at the same time placing other Asian and black players to the extremities and thus confines them to obscurity. Melling and Collins (2004) are applauded by policy-makers in rugby league in their attempts to raise the profile of black players in *The Glory of Their Times*, but clearly the editors only identify the leading roles played by a select core of elite players such as Billy Boston, Ellery Hanley, Martin Offiah and Clive Sullivan among others. There is in this an absence of any analysis of the difference between exotic outsiders coming up north (the public schoolboy Offiah, for example) and the northern, working-class black players (for example, Hanley). Players bought in, like Antipodean professionals, are seen as rare commodities and treated as heroes, if they succeed. Their blackness is the blackness of the foreign, the unknown. Hanley's blackness, however, is tied up

with his northernness, his early involvement in the game in Leeds as a working-class, northerner playing amateur rugby league for Corpus Christi. For many people in rugby league, his insider status was and is subject to his blackness: his location elides with the familiar world of the exotic Other whenever his commitment to rugby league is questioned (Spracklen, 2009).

In the emerging themes of Timmins' research, contemporary discourse on developing variables such as hybridity, dual-heritage and ethnicity, along with explanations and dimensions of difference in relation to current racialised identities, will have to be explored and rationalised (Brah, 1996). Society has chosen to focus on historical markers of racism and in doing so ignores the revised and emerging ones (Anthias, 2001). Recent interviews by the second author of this paper with management and players of the Jamaican rugby league team have identified possible masculine and racialised tensions between players of full Jamaican heritage and those of dual black British and black Jamaican heritage. With increasing inter-race and inter-cultural marriages and the possible blurring of racialised identities, colour may become less visible and less important, given that historical markers may change. New racisms of the future may be focused not on skin colour but other dimensions such as Islamophobia, racism based on the fear of cultural and religious beliefs. In celebrating black players from its past, rugby league has ignored young British Asian Muslims who live in the shadow of its professional clubs' grounds.

### **Ethnography of whiteness as white researchers**

Spracklen (1996, pp. 87-88) observes:

Ethically there is a question over my own role, and my perceived roles within the field. As well as being a researcher, I am a reporter and a fan. Also, a number of the people I wanted to talk to in the field were friends, or friends of friends, or relatives. Clearly this raises a number of methodological problems. Because I am close to the field, because I have access as an insider, it could be argued that this makes my stance subjective and not objective. Where to position oneself in relation to the field is the subject of volumes of debate. There is both a desire not to be too distant from one's field, and a fear of 'going native' (Spradley, 1980; Whyte, 1993). Methodologically, I had to balance my role as an insider and the tacit knowledge that revealed, and my position as an academic researcher. The figurationalist dictum of involvement-detachment (Maguire, 1988), while obviously a solution to the dilemma, offers little practical advice.

For the first and third authors of this paper (both white), in our research on racism in rugby league (Long *et al.*, 1995; Spracklen, Long and Timmins, 2009) there is also the problem of who the respondents thought they were, and whether it was ethical or not to use material from situations where they were clearly acting as a reporter or another fan down the pub. In practical terms, the breaks between the researcher, the reporter and the fan were minimal, and some of the material invaluable (Marcus and Fisher, 1986). We have had to find some kind of method that allowed us to gather this kind of material so that we were not ethically suspect, which meant we would be open and honest in all formal or semi-formal situations, and that we made people aware of our different relationships to the game. In our ethnographic research we have gathered data when others have seen us in those different roles and relationships – and although we have at times treated that data as

equivalent, we have felt it necessary to note the roles we were playing, and the roles in which respondents thought we were interacting with them.

The value of our knowledge, given our roles as fans, and also as white men (Rhodes, 1994), is open to scrutiny. It could be argued that our closeness to the field we have chosen to study would impair our ability to act as an unbiased observer (Hammersley, 1990). Although we have aimed to do our best to keep some academic sense of what was going on around us, we have to accept that we would be intimately connected to the field due to our upbringing (to a greater and lesser degree between us) and our current enthusiasm (to a greater and lesser degree between us). We may miss some data, but we hope that this has been more than made up for by being sensitised and situated to appreciate what is significant. Yet we have achieved some kind of distance, through university and enculturation into the academic language. Hence this intimateness can be an advantage, as it enables one to find out how tacit knowledge creates these constructions and symbols that are at the heart of my theoretical framework (Stanley, 1990).

Similarly, we are white men theorising about (mainly) white men. The complexity of men trying to theorise about something which they are a part of (such as notions of masculinity, even though we question and challenge such notions) has been on the whole overlooked (though see Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Messner, 1990; Blackshaw, 2003). Again, although perhaps the first author's intimacy with the worldview of white, working-class men means his research becomes reflexive (Bourdieu, 1990), reflexivity is no bad thing: it means access into the world of these white, working class men becomes easier. This whiteness is whitewashed by mythology of northern man: the natural, contrasted with the Others (black, Asian, Polynesian, southern, homosexuals). One cannot avoid the fact that as researchers

we are involved in and shaped by our own research (Bourdieu, 1990). For Long – white, a supporter of a Super League club – there is some distance between his upbringing and Spracklen’s upbringing. But we have both felt a part of ‘the game’ of rugby league: for Long, being on the terraces, hearing racist comments because the fans think ‘he’s one of us’ (Long *et al.*, 1995; Long *et al.*, 1997); for Spracklen (1996), the complete trust given to him by his respondents, using his father’s name to get access, knowing people knew him from the terraces, along with the responsibility to find clear demarcations of belonging and distance.

### **Ethnography of ‘race’ and blackness as white researchers**

We have mentioned the heroic myths of exotic others in rugby league, and elsewhere argue that this inclusive history excuses current exclusionary boundaries (Spracklen, Long and Timmins, 2009). In practice, the first author and third author of this paper, as white men, have been keenly aware of the balance between being in the community and an anti-racism discourse: with white respondents, as well as black respondents. This discourse has been particularly important in seeking acceptance among black respondents in previous research (Long *et al.*, 1995; Long *et al.*, 1997; Spracklen, 1996, 2001, 2007). In Spracklen (2001, 2007), semi-structured interviews about racism in the game with black respondents established that those respondents had to inform their entry into the white imaginary community through a series of careful negotiations about their own identity.

For Spracklen (1996, 2001, 2007), insider status was more important among black respondents in ‘the game’ than his political stance, though there were suspicions by those respondents of his location in the field. In his postgraduate

research, he found his support of a particular rugby league club was acknowledged as a point of commonality with the black players at that club, but at the same time those players were guarded in their comments about the whiteness of rugby league: they were careful not to be seen to be ‘mercenaries’ in rugby league for money with no loyalty to the wider game (a criticism often levelled at black players in the 1980s and 1990s). At the same time as explaining to black players they were anti-racist and empathetic to their negotiations, Spracklen and Long have also the faced the challenge of interviewing white respondents suspicious of politics: being a critical insider might easily be seen as being a traitor to the game. The tension for both researchers has been the complexity of negotiating how they have been viewed by people in the field – insiders, outsiders, academics, campaigners, or even officials working for ‘them’ at the Rugby Football League.

## **Comparison and Conclusions**

In reflections on his fieldnotes, Timmins writes:

At the World Club Championship match in 2008 at Old Trafford all the catering staff, both male and female, serving coffee/tea and biscuits in the Captain’s Bar at half time were all visibly black or from another minority ethnic group. At the recent launch of the Connecting Communities initiative one of the presenters stated that Leeds was a multicultural City and rugby league was a multicultural sport. On my arrival at 7.15 am members of the BME community were indeed involved in the multicultural sport of rugby league... mopping and polishing floors in the cafeteria and corporate entertainment areas. At this stage of my research I

have yet to find any supporting evidence that would indicate that rugby league is an inclusive and multicultural sport off the field of play. My research to date has shown that black players are included on the field of play but in real terms the sport still has many obstacles to overcome and navigate in order to become fully inclusive especially off the field. Piara Power [of Kick It Out] recently asked the question: How do we get black sportsmen out of tracksuits and into business suits? That question remains unanswered at this point in my research.

As ethnographers we are active researchers seeking to make societal change in a critical sociological tradition. This definition of ethnography suited both our research aims and the theoretical frameworks we have been developing through grounded theory, critical realism, and CRT. One can also see why naturalist paradigm researchers favour ethnography, as it is (theoretically) sensitive to the field and develops with the field. According to Agar (1980), ethnography is a particular style of research that uses anthropological methods such as participant-observation and long, unstructured interviews to construct a story about a particular social group or culture. Stanley (1990) stresses the importance of ethnography in understanding and interpreting, and suggests - following the naturalistic paradigm - that the aim of ethnography is not to elaborate on universal truths, but on localised ones.

As stated, ethnography has come under criticism from theorists and devotees of more rigorous, scientific methods. It has been argued by Hammersley (1990, 1992) that ethnography is the latest example of the academic ego, which assumes one can simply live amongst a strange culture and learn its ways due to one's white, middle-class, patriarchal training. It is, as Clough (1992) argues, a method that relies on an unattainable image of the researcher as a disinterested, objective adjudicator,



and a voice that is aloof, 'neutral' but undoubtedly masculine. It is the white man with pith helmet, writing anthropology about natives. Hammersley (1990) queries ethnography's theoretical weakness and accuses it of being unexplanatory, and questions the value of so much description. It can also be argued that the method of ethnography - and participant-observation - is flawed as what it claims to do (tell the complete picture of a particular set) is impossible to achieve by these methods (Eglin, 1976). It is a case of ethnographers dismissing the scientific method but claiming to be scientific, and in doing so failing to tell the entire story. It is a question of how much needs to be observed before one can claim to know what is happening - theoretically, one needs to observe all possible permutations of a problem before one can infer an explanation (*cf.*, the raven paradox: Lipton, 1991). Hence ethnography is criticised for not telling the whole story, only a story biased by the observer's own values. It is this that has led Porter (1993) to suggest that ethnography has to ground itself in critical realism as developed by Roy Bhaskar (1989), to maintain a semblance of scientific rigour.

Ethnography, according to Ely (1991), is extremely subjective, and the good ethnographer learns how to be sensitive towards and sensitised to the field. Writing good ethnography becomes the crucial issue according to Van Maanen (1988), so that a coherent story can be told, the story that is relevant to the aims of the research. In doing this, one avoids the syndrome of the white man in the pith helmet. Ethnography, claim Ely (1991) and Fetterman (1989), is also a liberating method for the researched, who can take a more active role in deciding the course of the research: this, they argue, gives the researcher a subjective, more passive role, contrary to Clough's (1992) argument. The naturalistic paradigm is incommensurable (Kuhn, 1962) with that of the positivists; hence naturalistic

ethnography is about feeling, understanding and interpretation, and criticisms about not observing everything become mute.

Spracklen (1996), following Spradley (1980), started out as a standard ethnography. This is the same methodological starting point for Timmins, and indeed our collaborative work. Spracklen and Timmins realised that pragmatism showed ethnography to be the right method for their research. It allowed them to generate the data they needed for the theoretical framework. It best suited their research aims, which were to explore constructions and meaning in a particular setting. And it dovetailed conveniently with the ideas of grounded theory - ethnography seemed ideal for working through new ideas. However, all of us, individually and collaboratively, are acutely aware of the demands of the research process, the academic rigour required, and our own ethnocentric education. We are not entering the field without any judgemental values, we are not going, to quote Star Trek's Captain Picard, "to see what's out there". We have a purpose, and our (different) backgrounds and education, and our theoretical framework. So it would be best, as Spracklen (1996) realised, to follow Wolcott (1982) and state instead that we are going to draw upon ethnographic approaches in our qualitative research.

In other words, Spracklen (1996) was not going into the field to spend three years living the life of a rugby player. He was going to use his own experiences, ethnographic methods such as qualitative questioning, informal conversations, observation and participation in some theory-relevant elements of the life of the field, to build up a picture informed by the theoretical framework. As the research progressed the distinction between his own insider knowledge, the fieldwork of observation, participation and conversation, the theory developed from literature, and the theory developed from suggestions from the fieldwork, was blurred.

Likewise, Timmins begins with his own relationship to rugby league: his success as a professional player, and his career after playing. Along with his own credibility as an ex-professional are the facts of his blackness and the ambivalence of his outsider status, brought with him from down south as an ex-rugby union player travelling up north to play league.

The trouble with ethnographies of 'race', and the naïve assumptions made by ethnographers about their ability to give voice to others yet remain detached, is balanced by our commitment to critically real accounts of racism and white hegemony. The strength of our research is in our analysis and interpretation – our ability to create rich, thick data, but not to lose ourselves entirely in the ethnography. Our research approach is different as well because of the reflexive nature of our collaboration.

We note that in rejecting critical ethnography Hammersley (1992) uses Habermas as the typical case to argue against. He suggests that in its orthodox Marxist form critical ethnography is coherent and comprehensive, but 'highly implausible' (because of its dependence on a teleological conception of history) and that as successors have sought to refine these problems out it has lost its coherence – it cannot claim priority on the basis of emancipatory potential. Hammersley finds oppressor-oppressed framework to be insufficiently subtle, and we can support that – we would argue for a more complex take that problematises that relationship, but cannot escape the oppression that is going on and the balance is fairly consistently in certain directions. To argue that in some cases people from minority ethnic groups are sometimes the oppressors – sometimes in terms ethnicity (black versus white), sometimes in terms of gender (male versus female) is something we ourselves address (Long and Hylton, 2002), but to dwell on that

means overlooking the more dominant processes and runs the risk of becoming apologists for racism/racists (cf., some liberal adoptions of Foucault's work on power). Hammersley also balks at Habermas' checks on validity: recognition by the oppressed group. The third author of this paper has written before about my unhappiness with the relativist definition of racism proposed by Macpherson that an action should be deemed to be racist if it is perceived as such by the person subjected to that action (Long and McNamee, 2004). But of course a check on validity should be that it speaks to their 'condition', that the oppressed (and not just the white academics) can recognise the account. Success in bringing about *some* emancipatory change, then, is a goal of our research though not for Hammersley but perhaps not a means of judging validity.

As ethnographers of rugby league, and its social networks, there is a challenge: to us and to our contacts in the game, to try to make that game more equal, more open; or to expose its failings in coming to terms with contemporary societal requirements: its failings in understanding 'race', racism, and racialised discourse (and gender and sexuality); and its struggle to interpret and abide by the appropriate legal and policy frameworks. We do not dismiss the work of historians like Collins (2006): it is a crucial piece of social history, and there is truth in the game's outsider status when viewed from Twickenham, or Westminster. But we argue for a plurality of epistemologies, a recognition that there are different routes to knowledge. Rugby league remains a site for a white, working-class identity to be articulated (even though the game can be used to construct other identities, *eg.*, black rugby league players in London with no sense or care of northern-ness and whiteness, but still a sense of heteronormativity and working-classness: Spracklen, 2007). Our histories and identities are pivotal in our

ability to be accepted as ethnographers in the community, and then in our analysis and interpretation. But our histories and identities also pose a challenge to us and to those in the community with whom we interact.

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