

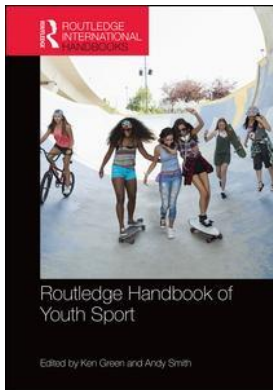
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Ken Green, Andy Smith

### **Youth Sport, Race And Ethnicity**

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# YOUTH SPORT, RACE AND ETHNICITY

*Scott Fleming*

## Introduction

The *Routledge Adolescence and Society Series* includes an edited collection entitled *Young People's Involvement in Sport* (Kremer *et al.*, 1997). On its cover is a photograph of six young lads wearing soccer kit in what looks as though it might be a training session (but probably isn't). One of the lads is white; the others are from minority ethnic groups. The rest of the book has 269 pages of text, yet there is barely a mention of race, racism(s), ethnicity or specific ethnic groups. The paradox is not merely a matter of choosing an appropriate image for marketing a book; it is a reflection of the neglect of race and ethnicity in the discourses around youth sport more generally. For though there have been some important contributions to the sports studies literature linked to ethnicity before and since, this element of the topic of youth sport remains relatively under-researched and therefore insufficiently understood.

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the background to the current understanding of how experiences of youth sport are shaped by race, racism and ethnicity. It reflects my own research interests in this area that go back almost thirty years, and my commitment to anti-racism informed by aspects of critical race theory (Hylton, 2010; Hylton and Long, 2005). Following an attempt to bring some operational clarity to key concepts, the chapter has three further sections: an account of landmark edited collections that highlight the neglect of youth sport in studies of ethnicity and racism; a policy overview again illustrating the absence of careful and considered approaches to sport development and educational policy for minority ethnic groups; and, a summary of what is known about particular contemporary themes and issues.

## A conceptual platform

There are some important premises upon which this chapter is predicated. First, the term race has been used in different ways – as classification (Banton, 2004), as signifier (Cashmore, 2004) and as synonym (van den Berghe, 2004). It remains contested and problematic. On an operational level, as Saeed and Kilvington (2011: p. 603) suggest, 'arguably, "race" in contemporary society is defined by skin colour as this is the most obvious method of distinction between "races"'. However, they go on to explain that such distinctions are without scientific basis in

biology. In brief, the term race was applied to the appearance of human beings as a taxonomic classification of sub-species (Tobias, 1972 [1961]), but without clear distinctions. Differences within a so-called race are much greater than the differences between races, and for this reason as well as others the concept has no analytical purchase (Fleming, 2001). This fundamental concern is not new. First published in 1964, UNESCO (1972: p. 68) was unambiguous, 'Pure races – in the sense of genetically homogeneous populations – do not exist in the human species'. That race continues to be used in many current discourses by, for example, politicians, broadcast media, and even some academic writers, tells us something about the (mistaken) resilience of the concept.

Second, a much more useful conceptual point of departure for discussions about race and youth sport is ethnicity – and this is a distinction that does not originate in the semantics of vocabulary (see also Stein, 2004). Ethnicity may be thought of as the shared cultural identity of the members of a particular group that make it distinct from other groups. Linked to collective history and tradition, it is often concerned with the expression of cultural difference. For those interested in cricket, the historical accounts linked to that sport in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent illustrate the point (Bose 2002; James 2013 [1963]), especially in the rivalries of opposition.

Third, whether or not it is widely recognised that there are conceptual flaws in accounts of race, there exists what Saeed and Kilvington (2011: p. 603) have referred to as 'race thinking' which, they argue, is prevalent in western culture. Specifically, a commitment to the idea of race and the linked attitudes and beliefs about the characteristics of so-called racial groups provides a basis for racism – especially when associated with assumptions about superiority and inferiority. Also a contested concept, racism is manifest in the behaviour of individuals and groups as well in organisations, institutions and even societies. Importantly, it is clear that racism has multiple origins and methods of expression and has been experienced in a variety of ways – for example, by different groups and during different historical periods. Hence, it has become customary for some scholars to refer to 'racisms' (Long and Spracklen, 2011b).

Fourth, youth sport in Britain needs to be set within a wider demographic and cultural context. The 2011 census showed that over the preceding two decades, England and Wales became more ethnically diverse (ONS, 2012). Moreover, population projections indicate that the ethnic composition of Britain will continue to change, with slow growth among Black Caribbean groups but with an increasing proportion of South Asian groups, Chinese and 'other' ethnic groups (Rees *et al.*, 2012). The centres of population density among minority ethnic groups are the major urban cities, and there are key linkages between ethnicity and class that help to frame youth sport. Indeed, sports participation remains stubbornly and positively related to household income (Farrell and Sands, 2002). All of this is set a prevailing climate of a return to old political debates about immigration and the evident appeal of some anti-immigration sentiment, as well as fears about terrorism and Islamophobia (Bi, 2011).

Fifth, there has been a tendency in some aspects of sports policy discourse to assume homogeneity among minority ethnic groups in Britain and this has operated on (at least) three levels (Fleming, 2007 [1994]): treating all minority ethnic groups as though they are the same; treating all members of a broadly defined group as though they are the same (e.g. South Asians); treating all members of more narrowly defined groups as though they are the same (e.g. Muslims). It is important, therefore, that the heterogeneity of minority ethnic groups is not neglected in any careful consideration of the youth sport.

Sixth, this chapter addresses themes around ethnicity linked to youth sport. To do so it has been necessary isolate ethnicity from the other demographic characteristics of young people – in particular, class, gender and dis/ability, which are relevant and important. Yet it is clear

that a properly nuanced consideration of multi-dimensional young people in Britain requires recognition of the intersectionality of these and other variables (Azzarito and Macdonald, this volume; Watson and Scraton, 2013).

### Mapping the terrain

Notwithstanding the failure to address explicitly the linkages between ethnicity and youth sport, it is, of course, possible to infer a lot about youth sport from various sources from the sociology and social psychology of sport, more generally, and from some accounts of sporting lives (Holland, 1997; Ismond, 2003; King, 2004). Since the early 1980s, there has been a series of landmark volumes that have charted the development of the body of knowledge. The first was Ernest Cashmore's *Black Sportsmen* (1982). Republished in 2013, it was concerned primarily with the experiences of elite male athletes from a variety of sports including athletics, boxing and soccer. It was not without critics, notably Bruce Carrington (1986) who noted the atypicality of the respondents whose narratives were featured ('not every black youth gets involved in sport', p. 5), the retrospective nature of the narrative accounts and inherent problems of the accuracy of recall, the narrowness of the range of sports considered and the inferences drawn from them, and the failure to address class relations. All of these comments were reasonable (if together they seemed a little churlish), but they should not detract from the profound influence of Cashmore's work on sport and youth studies more widely around that time (Cashmore, 2012 [1987]; Cashmore and Troyna, 1981; 2013 [1982]). In *Black Sportsmen* there were analytical points that still resonate over thirty years later (which presumably helps to explain the decision to republish). They include:

- 1 the prospect of blackness for kids;
- 2 all or nothing from families;
- 3 expectations of failure among teachers;
- 4 twice as hard for blacks.

Each tells its own tale around themes of identity, the perception of limited prospects for upward social mobility, the consequences of stereotypes and the impact of racism.

Almost a decade later, the second landmark volume was Grant Jarvie's (1991) edited collection *Sport, Racism and Ethnicity*. Wider in scope and variable in quality, it included chapters on the influence of racism on South Asian male youth (Fleming, 1991) and on young African-Caribbean and South Asian women (Lovell, 1991). Both were based on ethnographic studies, each within an educational context. The former was a typology of the experiences of racisms in a north London secondary school (Fleming, 1995); the latter was based at a community college in Coventry and was notable for also being one of the first feminist contributions to address in an empirical study the leisure lives of women from minority ethnic groups in Britain. From these, however, an understanding of youth sport *per se* can only be inferred (at best).

The remaining two landmark volumes were also edited collections. Published in 2001, the first, '*Race*', *Sport and British Society*, was edited by Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald. The second, *Sport and Challenges to Racism*, was edited by Jonathan Long and Karl Spracklen and published in 2011. These two volumes emanate from two of the British Universities at the vanguard of a sustained commitment to the sociology of 'ethnic relations' in sport and leisure – the University of Brighton (see, especially, Burdsey, 2007; 2011) and Leeds Metropolitan/Beckett University (see, especially, Hylton, 2009; Spracklen, 2013). Coincidentally, with the three collections separated by ten-year gaps, each provides a snapshot of the emphases and priorities

for researchers at the particular time, and helps to chart the progress and sophistication of the understanding of the complex issues that were addressed.

Chapters by Carrington and McDonald (2001b) on sub-elite cricket and by Johal (2001) on the engagement of South Asian males in soccer shed light on the experiences of youth sport for members of minority ethnic groups, but these were secondary to the main themes of racism and social exclusion. Extending the reach of the exposition of racism in sport internationally, Long and Spracklen's (2011a) volume confirmed its continued prevalence at elite and grass-roots levels. In the conclusion they note that sport should become a site of resistance and might include: 'demanding changes in sporting structures and procedures' and 'demanding representation in sports governance to try and pull the levers of power' (Long and Spracklen 2011c, p. 250). Rather than elaborating on this in relation to the infrastructure of British sport (which would inevitably embrace youth sport), however, they set out a manifesto for anti-racism through legislation, campaigning, education and action.

In summary then, it is clear that the links between ethnicity and youth sport have not been a major focal point for researchers other than in the sense that youth sport has been and remains a site for racism – and why wouldn't it be?

### The policy domain

A review of sport policy since the early 1980s and of some of the evidence that has helped to inform it provides a further context for the consideration of ethnicity in relation to youth sport. As part of the Sport for All campaign, the then Sports Council (1982) launched a major policy document, *Sport in the Community . . . The Next Ten Years*. In order to increase participation target groups were identified, and these included ethnic minorities. Based on an assimilationist model of ethnic relations, schemes were devised and implemented often based on a limited and/or stereotypical appreciation of the groups for whom provision was intended – for instance, attempts were made to attract under-represented minority groups to: 'existing facilities for sports of *direct interest*' (Sports Council, 1982, p. 36; emphasis added).

The rationale for the choice of ethnic minorities as a target group was not argued or evidenced persuasively, at least not publicly; and the schemes seemed to be based on assumptions about stereotypes (Fleming, 2007 [1994]). At a time when, as Cashmore (2013 [1982]) demonstrated, some young African-Caribbean men were experiencing elite level success in working class sports, the absence of high profile South Asian sports performers seemed to be cause for concern and policy intervention. In short, and with the benefit of hindsight, this was all rather simplistic.

A policy update, *Sport in the Community – Into the 90's* (sic), was published by the Sports Council in 1988. By that time there was better evidence about patterns of actual participation, and it had become clear that South Asians were, indeed, under-represented. There was also an acknowledgement that: 'a lack of understanding [remained] about the needs of different ethnic minority groups, and in many areas service delivery is inadequate' (p. 30). An appetite for empirical work of wider scope and greater quality had been established and a study by Verma *et al.* (1991) was commissioned. Later published as *Winners and losers: Ethnic minorities in sport and recreation* (Verma and Darby, 1994), it addressed the intersections of ethnicity and gender among different minority ethnic groups. Its conclusions identified a set of factors that influenced involvement in sport and physical activity including the cultural traditions of minority ethnic groups, as well as the combination of racism and sexism from providers of sporting and recreational facilities and within society at large. Interestingly, it also noted the factors that affect *all* sports participants (e.g. age, class, gender, social skills and self-confidence) and challenged the suggestion that minority

ethnic groups in general show less interest, enthusiasm and aptitude for sport and physical recreation than their white peers.

By 2000, Sport England had conducted an extensive survey of over 3,000 adults (the youngest of whom were sixteen), and consistent with findings of the General Household Survey in 1996, the data showed that minority ethnic groups were disproportionately under-represented (Rowe and Champion, 2000). As if to make the point about the dangers of treating all minority ethnic groups as a single lumpen mass, the data also revealed (among other things) that black African men and black other men and women were over-represented, while men and women who classified themselves as black Caribbean or Bangladeshi participated less than the averages for all men and all women. There were also some interesting data about patterns of participation in specific sports, but the analyses did not incorporate age as a factor. Importantly too, a sizeable minority (8 per cent) of all participants indicated that they had had a 'negative experience of sport due to ethnicity'.

The health benefits derived from physical activity are well established (Hardman and Stensel, 2009), and it was inevitable that different levels of engagement in sport would be linked to public health among children and young people (Maguire and Collins, 1998). Policy and media rhetoric associated with childhood obesity in particular has sometimes been reactionary and even sensational, but rigorous epidemiological reviews have shown trends linked to ethnicity. Specifically, having noted some methodological caveats, Fischbacher *et al.* (2004) concluded that low levels of physical activity among minority ethnic groups of South Asian origin may contribute to increased risk of diabetes and coronary heart disease. Drawing upon the *Health Survey for England (1999–2004)*, Williams *et al.* (2011) confirmed that even though South Asians born in the UK reported higher levels of physical activity than those born elsewhere, overall physical activity levels were very low among all South Asians.

In view of this, it is surprising that there were only fleeting mentions of ethnicity as a major consideration in *Driving up participation: The challenge for sport*, a collection of academic papers commissioned by Sport England (2004) to address priorities from the UK Government's strategy for sport and physical activity *Game Plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). For example, Rowe, Adams and Beasley (2004) re-stated the evidence of participation patterns from Sport England's (2000) survey, and Rowe *et al.* (2004) commented on the overall demographic profile of England with an acknowledgement of the importance of sensitivity to the barriers that impact on minority ethnic groups and: 'to provide the *types of activities that appeal to them* within environments that are accessible and welcoming' (p. 11; emphasis added). In contrast to the similar aspiration from over twenty years earlier (Sports Council, 1982 – above), however, this ambition was at least founded on the evidence of extensive surveys that explored not only participation patterns but preferences too (Rowe and Champion, 2000). There were also mentions of the influence of ethnicity in Long's (2004) exposition of the demographics of a greying society and a plea for recognition of the heterogeneity of older people, and in Kay's (2004) overview of the role of the family as a socialising agency into sport and variability in family structure linked to cultural factors. Overall, though, full and careful consideration of ethnicity is conspicuous by its absence and in particular in its relation to youth sport.

Even the excellent systematic review of literature on ethnicity, sport and physical recreation by Long *et al.* (2009, p. 28) pays only scant attention specifically to youth sport, noting that the Sports Equity Index (Sport England, 2005a) drew on the 2002 *Young People and Sport Survey* to demonstrate that, like their adult counterparts, young people (aged 6–16) from (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities had below average levels of participation for taking part in both casual (at least once a month) and regular (at least once a week) sport (excluding walking). Of particular concern is evidence from Broderson *et al.* (2007) and Woodfield *et al.* (2002) that

these discrepancies are already well established by age 11. All in all, it is clear that the linkages between ethnicity and youth sport have been largely neglected by academic researchers.

In parallel with sport development policy, an important context for the engagement of young people in sport was (and continues to be) through schooling. During the 1980s, the physical education (PE) profession in Britain was slow to respond to the challenges posed by a culturally diverse society. Initially, curricula and pedagogy adopted a colour-blind approach (Bayliss, 1989), and the implication was clear: 'treating all children the same [meant] treating them all like white children and probably like white middle class children' (Williams, 1989, p. 163). There followed a problems approach to PE for minority ethnic groups where black and South Asian children and young people were seen as the problem rather than inappropriate curricula and teaching methods (Bayliss, 1983, 1989).

As part of an overall policy and practice imperative, multicultural PE was designed to cultivate empathy among children and young people, to help them to question prejudice and to develop their open-mindedness (National Curriculum Council, 1990). Predictably, it was the subject of scathing critique. Based on a continuation of a commitment to an assimilationist stance, there was an implicit notion of cultural superiority (Mullard, 1985) and of the introduction of a mechanism for coercion and control. More specifically, Cole (1986: p. 124) drew attention to the preoccupation with 'safe cultural sites' – of which PE was one (alongside art, dance, drama, music and domestic science) – and the tokenism which was caricatured as 'let's dress up and eat Chinese food' (Katz, 1982: p. 13) and 'saris, samosas and steel bands' (Troyna and Carrington, 1990). There were questionable assumptions about the potential of multicultural PE for enhancing the self-esteem of black and South Asian youth (Cole, 1986), as well as the possibility that cultural distinctiveness was reinforced unintended ways, racist stereotypes were consolidated, and ethnic antagonism exacerbated (Fleming, 1992). Most important of all, a multicultural approach to PE failed to acknowledge and address the centrality of racism in the experiences of young people from minority groups.

Later, in the aftermath of the death of Stephen Lawrence, the publication of the Macpherson Report (Home Office, 1999) was a pivotal moment in criminal justice as well as the politics of ethnic relations in Britain. It recommended amendments to the National Curriculum in order to value cultural diversity and prevent racism (Benn, 2000), but in spite of case study evidence (e.g. Benn *et al.*, 2011), the effects of any such changes are yet to be evidenced unequivocally. The challenge for the education sector was set out by Benn:

The dilemma of moving towards greater valuing of cultural diversity is related to what Bullivant (1981) called the 'pluralist dilemma' in Western societies which results from the juxtaposition of different, but unequal, cultures within a democratic and liberal society.

If it is true that the National Curriculum in England and Wales homogenises the educational experiences of children and young people, then the same fundamental questions about multicultural education apply: what is the anchor for the homogeneity? In other words, the same as what/whom and based on what criteria?

Throughout, the effects of stereotyping continue to haunt the perceptions of many in the PE profession. They may not be as crass as some reported by Bayliss (1983, pp. 6–7) over thirty years ago, for instance: 'blacks will never make good swimmers because their bones are heavier'; 'blacks run faster because they have wider nostrils and can breathe in more oxygen'; and 'blacks have an extra muscle at the top of their legs which helps them run faster'. Yet anecdotally at least they have remained resilient to the contradictory empirical evidence (Fleming, 2001).

## Ethnicity and youth sport – key themes and issues

Despite the neglect of ethnicity in considerations of youth sport for minority ethnic groups in Britain, there are some over-arching points to make. First, sport continues to act as a vehicle for the expression of ethnic identity and pride as well as a site of racism. Both shape the un/willingness of young people from minority ethnic groups to engage in sport and physical activity. Second, the history of sport development policy initiatives serve as a reminder that minority ethnic groups do not necessarily perceive and express their sporting preferences in the same way as providers anticipate, or as each other (Bi, 2011) – and there exists evidence of ‘frustrated demand’ (Rowe and Champion, 2000, p. 4). Third, there is something very familiar about many of the attempts to summarise the links between sports participation and ethnicity (and this chapter is no different). Yet there are still relatively unexplored areas of enquiry that add texture to appreciation the complexity of the young lives of members of minority ethnic groups – some of them from within the UK (Long *et al.*, 2009), others with a valuable international dimension (e.g., Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Benn *et al.*, 2011; Long and Spracklen, 2011). Fourth, there is a clear public health imperative related to sport and physical activity – particularly for young people and especially from groups who are under-represented. Some of the inability and/or unwillingness to take part is a matter of personal circumstances and individual choice. Yet when trends of non-participation among specific minority ethnic groups are evident, these transcend personal troubles and become public issues (Mills, 2000 [1959]). Fifth, a variety of campaigns and campaigning organisations have been launched that are committed to positive action, these can be found in an annotated appendix prepared by sportscotland (2001). Among the thirty-five initiatives listed, many are aimed at women (and presumably girls, in some instances at least) and have a local focus (e.g. Blackburn Asian Women’s Project, Sandwell Asian Women’s Exercise and Recreation Activities). Others are country-wide programmes (e.g. Sporting Equals, Scottish Asian Sports Association Competition), and others still have a focus on a specific sport (e.g. Tackle Racism in Rugby League, Basketball Rejects Racism).

Looking ahead, recommendations for sports policy linked to minority ethnic groups and sport have been synthesised by Long *et al.* (2009, pp. 62–64) – many are as important now as they were when published first. There are some that apply in particular to youth sport. Edited for brevity, they include:

- sport administrators should ensure that mainstream equality policies are integrated into sport;
- national governing bodies and other sport organisations/providers should promote racial equality and ensure a wider understanding of racisms that is fit for purpose;
- sports councils should be willing to take risks and innovate around sport and physical recreation to make gains;
- training is needed to offer those working in sport an understanding of the needs of minority ethnic communities;
- dialogue should be promoted with Black and minority ethnic communities and efforts made to empower members of local communities;
- good practice ideas and successes should be regularly disseminated.

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