

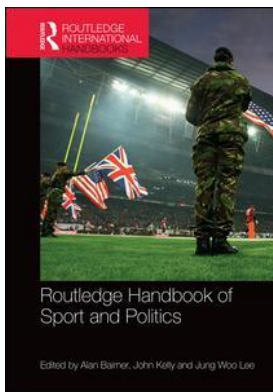
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“RACE”, SPORT AND POLITICS

Kevin Hylton and Alexandra J. Rankin-Wright

Sport is meant to foster social cohesion, bring different cultures together in a celebration of healthy competition, and to overcome the diffidence and even contempt that all too often divide countries and communities in the political and social arenas.

(UN Human Rights Chief, Navi Pillay UN 2013)

When the United Nations make statements about the presence of racism in sport it should be clear that “race”, sport and politics are not only linked, but inextricably so. There are numerous instances through history where “race”, sport and politics have taken centre stage as a form of resistance, or more broadly as a cultural tool. The nature of politics is such that, depending on perspective, these events have shown sport as not always a vehicle for good, yet it remains a tool for the expression and reinforcement of values for the broadest spectrum of actors and political issues. Many commentators have identified sport and “race” as triggers for social and political events. The image of Martin Luther King Jr explaining to his daughter why she could not go to a public amusement park because it was closed to Black children offers us further insight into sport and recreation as spaces for social control, subordination, oppression and dysfunction (Wolcott 2012). Further, King’s “I have a dream” speech that followed this shameful event is brought into sharper relief, as his personal and political lives are further focused in what some would paradoxically describe as the benign fields of sport and recreation. This state-sponsored support of racism through the systematic defence of individual and institutional actions against minoritised Americans reinforced racial hierarchies in a plethora of ways. The social relations in sport and recreation not only reflected the broader travails of the racial and political landscape of the 1960s; it also symbolised a “frontline” arena for the state of the nation (Hylton 2014).

In this chapter we broadly explore the place of “race” in sport and politics. We do this by critiquing the politics of racialised terminology and their relevance to sport and the state, while juxtaposing the tensions within. The chapter moves on to focus on two cases where “race” sport and politics coalesce. One is a current study of the “race” equality landscape in sport, where we illustrate the political and organisational tensions and issues that national governing bodies (NGBs) and key sport organisations have in confronting the problem of the

under-representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) coaches. With a backdrop of the broader public sector equality duties and compliance mechanisms, this study emphasises the influence of everyday individual acts, the rhetoric and realities of provision. Following this, we discuss the racialised outcomes of unconscious bias in the USA and the implications of the Rooney Rule for sport elsewhere.

According to Houlihan’s (2008: 39) three definitions of politics, the implications for “race”, in regards to sport and politics is that resource allocation decisions are subject to a range of influences. He argues, first, that in the public domain there are official actors that must manage their everyday environment and contingencies. Second, there are those influences that are sometimes *ad hoc* and/or not always formally or publically agreed. Thus stakeholders at a number of levels can effect influence on policy in a range of fashions. They can also interpret policy in practice and thus make decisions as “proximate policy-makers”. Beyond the formal state institutions there is that third element of politics that can occur anywhere where there are disputes over goals, or challenges that require resolution. Houlihan (2008) suggests that these manifestations of power are even more nuanced, ambiguous and slippery to identify. He goes on to argue that:

Politics is seen as a pervasive feature of modern life, inherent in all organisations whether public or private and common to all areas of human activity, including sport.

(2008: 37)

As a result we should consider that any examination of “race”, sport and politics could feasibly incorporate a broad range of issues in vastly differing contexts. For example, the independent UK-based organisation the Sports People’s Think Tank (SPTT), established in 2014 by ex-professional footballers Jason Roberts (Blackburn), Darren Moore (West Bromwich Albion) and Michael Johnson (Birmingham), has heavily influenced debates concerning the lack of Black and minority ethnic football coaches and managers (Sports Peoples Think Tank 2014). Their collective profile and commissioned research have made many stakeholders in professional football take note of what they are saying. The SPTT was set up because Black sports people felt excluded from industry discussions and wanted to contribute to conversations that they felt required resolution. The SPTT clearly understands that the nature of politics is multifaceted and that actors can influence important decisions where they can effect leverage directly/indirectly, formally or through “back channels”.

Globally, others in sport operate different versions of politics in regards to “race”, dependent on context, history and culture. These stakeholders can effect a variety of influence formally, informally, directly or otherwise while residing inside or outside of sport. Houlihan (2008) describes these forms of political power as (1) confined to the state, (2) an aspect of all institutions, and (3) ubiquitous and inherent in all social activity. While conflict and resolution are often central to discussions of “race”, sport and politics, other policy implementation discussions recognise that where resources are at stake and therefore finite, those contesting “conversations” will intuitively know there will also be winners and losers. Many of the conversations concerning “race”, and the variety of political discussions in sport are often concerned with the way Black and minoritised groups are regularly excluded or subject to racialised barriers and patterns of inequality compared to their White counterparts. Sport as a racially contested arena and site of politics, oppression and subjugation is the conclusion of many such discussions on this topic.

The politics of “race” and racism

In Mason’s (2013: xi) *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* “Race” is defined as,

Social groups partially and inconsistently defined by differences in observable physical characteristics such as skin colour and hair, but it also signifies ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences that animate persistent conflict between social groups.

“Race”, sport and politics have an uneasy relationship, because the presence of the discourse of “race” itself signifies that some people are systematically differentiated not by the substance of their character, but by biology and culture (Guinier and Torres 2003). The racialisation of people is well documented, though the outcomes of this process lead to forms of racism that are complex and requiring of interventions to reduce their impact on those affected. State and international conglomerations have taken time to implement statutory instruments to curtail the worst excesses of these oppressive processes that range from the abolition of slavery, abolition of apartheid, and the inception of racial discrimination and anti-xenophobia acts and cross-continental sanctions.

We must consider the politics of “race” and ethnicity in sport and politics at a time when many would argue that we live in a state of *post-raciality*. By “post-race” it is argued by some social commentators that “race” was significant before but it is less so now. Post-“race” arguments are thought-provoking and paradoxical in any discussion of sport and politics because they deny the presence of something that did not exist in science in the first place. Nevertheless, what differentiates those who agree with this position, or otherwise, is not that racialisation and racism are unproblematic, but their disagreement on the nature and extent of racism. We are careful not to deny the impact of racisms when arguing that “race” is a social construction used to differentiate groups of people into crude categories that change over time. These categories reflect any number of cultural, national, geographical, religious, physiognomic and biologically perceived characteristics that between them distinguish groups of people into “races”. To destabilise this view, it is important to recognise the unfixity of “race” as a subjective, recursive, pseudo-scientific phenomenon. For us the most significant point to emphasise about “race” is that it does not exist in science but is replete with meaning from history, through discrimination, xenophobia, and forms of oppression and subordination. It therefore conspires to make these realities “lived”.

The politics of “race” is such that there is often a pragmatic incorporation of the notion of ethnicity *because* of how “race” is used unproblematically in the everyday. Both “race” and ethnicity are used to demarcate individual and group identities, mark boundaries, include and exclude, and are situated. Often ethnicity is said to be freely chosen, yet such labels are still socially constructed, limited and changeable over time and space. We all experience the racialisation of people, places, even spaces and sports. However, many nation-states argue that it is necessary to employ racial and ethnic labels if they are to pursue the interests of all their constituents. By reinforcing racial and ethnic categories, whether they are endorsed by a census or otherwise, institutions such as the state perpetuate racialised discourses and ideologies with a view to prosecuting and promulgating their duties. This discourse of “race” is significant because it does a number of conflicting and confusing things, it (1) validates the everyday use of racialised terminology, (2) reinforces Black/White binaries, (3) centres “White” as the norm, (4) leaves biological arguments unfettered, (5) retains racial hierarchies through descriptive statistics, and (6) significantly, even in a neo-liberal society, recognises that where individuals and

communities identify with racial and ethnic categories there are many serious disparities in facilities and services that require correction.

State and institutional preoccupations with "race" and ethnicity revolve around recognition of systemic conscious and unwitting barriers that operate at a societal level. It is custom and practice at the highest levels of public policy-making for a degree of regulation and management of these disparities to enable a healthy cohesive society (Cantle 2002; Hylton 2010b). As part of this policy exercise, the UK Equality Act 2010 makes a number of stipulations that those in receipt of public funds have a duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation and other conducts prohibited by the Act; advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. This process is most significant in the way the state manages social relations using "race" and ethnicity as organising categories that reify and fix the way social groups are mediated, signified, represented and resourced. Departments of immigration, employment, education, crime, health and sport have all relied upon racial and ethnic categories and the consequent racialised statistics collected to inform policy agendas (Long and Hylton 2014).

The presence of "race" talk and racialised discourses indicate the presence of racism as their more pernicious end product (Guinier and Torres 2003; Long and Spracklen 2011; Hylton 2015). Racism has been described as endemic and a permanent aspect of modern societies (Bell 1992). It has become embedded in value systems, institutions and structures while manifesting in ways that challenge those in sport to be reflexive and critical. The use of the term *racism(s)* is often used to illustrate the plethora of layers to what is often simplistically referred to as racism. Racism(s) has been defined as,

Racialised . . . Modes of exclusion, inferiorization, subordination and exploitation that present specific and different characters in different social and historical contexts.

(Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993: 2)

Anthias and Yuval Davis' (1993) summation of the complexity of racialised processes and barriers emphasise the challenges that require a critical approach to managing the politics of "race" and racism in any sport setting. So, institutional providers, conscious of historical inequalities, barriers and disparities, are likely to recognise a need to use their resources in a way that may seem inequitable to the whole community. Small (1994) uses the term "racialised barriers" to denote the outcomes of the material distribution of racialised property, privilege and power. These dimensions facilitate the racialised processes that lead to the inequalities we see in sport that Rankin (2014) explores in her work on national governing bodies (NGBs).

The following section is taken from the first stage of an ongoing larger study by Rankin (2014) aimed at gaining an understanding of the policy and provision landscape for racial equality and diversity in sport organisations and NGBs. In this study, equality and coaching lead officers (6 NGBs and 5 National Sport Organisations) considered the under-representation of Black and minority ethnic coaches in the upper echelons of each organisation, and sport in general. The study sheds light on the politics of "race" in NGBs and the subsequent tensions of managing "race" equality and diversity across sport's vast landscape. Rankin reveals an overview of the politics within and across these NGBs and sport organisations in how they manage "race" and racialised gender equality in the everyday. Her conclusions fall under three main themes: (1) locating "race" and ethnicity in the equalities agenda, (2) denying inequalities and racism, and (3) rationalising inequalities and racism.

Locating “race” and ethnicity in the equalities agenda

A prominent finding from Rankin’s interviews was that “race” and ethnicity were seemingly absent from the sport stakeholders’ discourse and as a result were often unwittingly overlooked within their equalities agenda. This absence of “race” and ethnicity can be explained as a result of the colour-blindness embedded within the sporting organisations and NGBs. These colour-blind ideologies serve to normalise and privilege the centrality of whiteness whilst subordinating the issues of those excluded from this dominant group (Burdsey 2007). NGBs were much more proactive around the inclusion of women and disability groups, which was attributed to the prioritisation of the high-performance discourse in sport. Yet the funding for this high-performance discourse does not explicitly focus on “race” and ethnicity, which reflects its lower profile in the equalities and sporting agendas. The Head of Consultancy at race equality in sport organisations, Sporting Equals,¹ explains this here:

There’s a louder political voice around disability and gender in comparison to the ethnic [sic] voice . . . because you have a pathway for disability sport, so if you’ve got a disability [it’s] got its own pathway and similar with gender, you’ve got a women’s arm of governing bodies and you’ve got separate structures. I think governing bodies as a whole find the issues around ethnicity and faith and race [– they are] not sure how it fits in and therefore there’s almost some danger of it’s in the “too difficult to do” tray.

This was evidenced where those interviewed omitted “race” and ethnicity when discussing the equality characteristics and under-represented groups within their organisations. Alternatively, they expressed a degree of anxiety and were vague when discussing “race” and ethnicity issues. Bonilla-Silva (2002: 62), argues that such a colour-blind narrative that results in an increased degree of anxiety and rhetorical incoherence when discussing “race” and racial equality issues is often reflected in predominantly White institutions where “race” matters least. This omission to analyse their own whiteness and its related processes in sport is based upon the explicit recognition of whiteness as normal, “race-less” and invisible (Massao and Fasting 2010; Hylton 2009; Hylton and Lawrence 2014; Long and Hylton 2002). It also offers some insight into the biographies of the actors making the decisions that maintain these customs and practices. So the politics of “race” in sport does not exist in a vacuum. Strategic and resource allocation discussions are affected by the invisible hand of institutional and individual values.

Thus, it is apparent that the colour-blind ideologies used within these sporting organisations and NGBs inhibit discussions around “race” and racial equality and directly affect resource allocation activities (Burke 2012). This “colour-blind package of racial understandings”, in which “race” is no longer “seen” and thus no longer matters, falsely allows social structures to be viewed as meritocratic, equal and impartial in their day-to-day functioning (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003: 12). Such an approach is argued by Rollock and Gillborn (2011) to sustain racial inequality, sport organisations and NGBs included.

Denying inequalities . . . denying racism

Framing the institutional politics of the sport organisations and NGBs in Rankin’s study was the powerful discourse of meritocracy and equality of opportunity that positioned access to, and progression in, sport and coaching qualifications as a “level-playing field” (Burdsey 2011a;

Burdsey 2011b; Hylton and Morpeth 2012). This discourse was illustrated by the normative expectation and embedded belief that the sporting arena is a space in which individuals from different social backgrounds could enter and progress without the constraints of racial or gender conflicts and division (Brown *et al.* 2003). Within this narrative of meritocracy, a number of the participants’ responses for the espoused value of racial equality endorsed a denial of racial inequities and/or racism (Hoerber 2007). This denial of racism and systematic inequalities coupled with a lack of knowledge of the intersecting barriers that may impact upon aspiring coaches from BME backgrounds is exemplified here:

I’ve never really . . . umm perceived it as being an issue that we don’t have a diverse group of coaches or that we discriminate in any way or that the same opportunities aren’t available to everybody. I think the barriers that would prevent people from progressing in their coaching apply to everybody regardless of their background, so whether that’s cost or you know, time commitments or whatever else I don’t think they are specific to any particular group.

(Coaching Lead)

Burdsey (2007) states that this sense of denial derives from a dominant sport culture that discourages speaking out about racism and has consistently failed to acknowledge and challenge the shift from overt and explicit racial encounters to more subtle institutional and insidious practices. An adherence to the ideology that NGBs are bastions of equality and that sport is free from racialised barriers ignores the salience of “race” and racialised inequalities. Such ideologies serve to obscure and defend any processes that lead to racialised disparities that function as a way to maintain current resource allocations, opportunities, interests and privileges of the dominant groups in sport (Hoerber 2007). Burdsey (2007) argues that this reluctance to acknowledge racial inequalities and the denial of its existence in sport means that NGBs are less inclined to recognise or challenge racism. Ultimately, this serves to obstruct the efforts of organisations to effectively discuss or work towards racial equality (Acker 2009; Burke 2012; Duru 2011).

Rationalising inequalities . . . rationalising racism

The colour-blind ideologies evident in the stakeholder responses were further underpinned by a rationale that the under-representation of Black and minority coaches is a result of individual agency. By justifying the inequalities as a matter of *their* unwillingness to engage in sport coaching, the sport organisations and NGBs not only position BME groups as the problem but also dissociate any responsibility for the construction and maintenance of racial inequalities and exclusion (Burdsey 2007). This transfer of blame is exemplified here:

We get a bit of heat and grief in terms of we don’t have representative black and ethnic minority tutors to deliver our courses, so sending in a white middle class male tutor makes it un-relatable to the coaching community. . . . Which on the one hand I can see but on the other hand whenever we’ve advertised we don’t have people with that background applying to become tutors, so it’s like how you attract those people to role model what you are moving forward . . . do you know what I mean?

(Coaching Lead)

Through framing this as a “cultural issue”, the NGBs struggle to dissociate any responsibility for the lack of engagement by Black and minority ethnic groups without appearing to be

racist (Bonilla-Silva 2006/2010). Ultimately this distancing of responsibility serves to reinforce current practice while deflecting attention away from possible systemic racialised and sexist discrimination. The onus placed on BME individuals to “possess” the correct motivation, drive and competency to engage and progress further represents a disengagement from a responsibility to be proactive. Further, the reality of intersecting racialised and gendered barriers facing aspiring Black men and women coaches is ignored. Here, notions of pluralism and meritocracy are unwittingly used to defend White privilege within sport coaching, and rationalise the under-representation of BME coaches.

Unconscious bias, Rooney and realities

The politics of “race” permeate sporting organisations and institutions in a variegated fashion. For example, unconscious racial bias has been described as the social networking systems and stereotypical perceptions held by those in authoritative positions that reinforce traditional power structures by excluding Black coaches from recruitment practices (Conway 2015; Collins 2007; Bradbury *et al.* 2015). In some cases positive change can be made much simpler where success has occurred in another organisation that has positive implications for the way they do business. This is currently the case for many who have seen the symbolic shifts in the ethnic diversity of managers in the National Football League (NFL) since the inception in 2003 of the Rooney Rule. Duru’s (2011) analysis of the way closed social networks in American Football mitigate against diversity and equal opportunities in senior hiring practices is reflective of many inward-looking professions. Yet the realisation by lawyers, Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie L. Cochran Jr, that these practices needed to shift to change the unequal hiring patterns of NFL clubs still required the support of significant others; an example of how good ideas only become so with the institutional support that follows. Mehri and Cochran Jr’s observation of the differences in hiring for African Americans wishing to become players compared with the glass ceiling stopping them from occupying positions of leadership concluded that the best of a few rather than the best of rest were being given a chance to progress beyond their playing years and into management. Previous assessments of such practices would surmise that racial processes were apparent in the making of these racialised outcomes. Some of these behaviours have been explained through debates on stereotyping and racial reductionism that leave some players with higher levels of physical characteristics and lower levels of intellectual characteristics, which make them less suited to positions of senior leadership (Carrington and McDonald 2001; Spracklen 2008; Fitzpatrick and Santamaría 2015; Hylton 2009). The ultimate result of such social relations, for the NFL, whether deliberate or otherwise required a shift in approach to how they conducted business. In the case of the NFL, a sporting institution driven toward achieving excellence on the field and in business it seems as though this problem eventually became beyond dispute with their acceptance of the need for the Rooney Rule. It is a rule that accepts the realism of past NFL inequalities, behaviours and cultural norms with a view to correcting them. A rule that required the equivalent of a seismic shift of ideas on recruitment for NFL front-of-house roles, such as managers and coaches, ensures at the very least that a suitably qualified minority ethnic [*sic*] candidate be interviewed where in the past they would have been overlooked.

Ingle’s observation that we had never seen two Black managers/head coaches shake hands at the Wembley national stadium in London until Mike Tomlin of the Pittsburgh Steelers led his team out to play Leslie Frazier’s Minnesota Vikings should have been a wake up call for British football (Ingle 2013). Alas, leadership in this matter is still lacking, though there have been some signs of movement with the English Football League announcing their intention

to implement a version of the rule in 2016–17 (Conway 2015). According to Bridgewater’s (2014) report into how football managers are appointed, British football suffers from a lack of transparency in its recruitment processes, the advertising of roles, elitist networks and a distinct patronage culture. This patronage culture is exemplified by connections and influential others in positions to endorse the abilities of potential applicants while remaining silent on those outside of their patronage. This is further illustrated by Bradbury *et al.*’s (2015) metaphor of the glass ceiling to illustrate the under-representation of visible minorities and women across European football; Black and minority ethnic women falling even further back as a result. In addition to “closed mechanisms” and “patronage”, gendered and racial stereotypes are framed by entrenched historical inequalities. This is exacerbated by a general lack of understanding of how these inequalities persist, and where there is some awareness of these issues there is often an unwillingness to implement the changes that might disturb the hierarchies in place. An example of this resistance to change is exemplified in the lack of consensus of Rooney Rule-type initiatives or even more radical redistributive approaches. Bradbury *et al.* (2015: 8) state that part of the problem relates to:

Conscious and unconscious racial bias and stereotypes in the coaching workplace and negative perceptions of key decision makers regarding the attitudes, behaviours, abilities and authority of “visible” minority coaches.

Though many believe in the meritocratic “level playing field” notions of sport, they are rarely skilled enough to recognise what has been described as unconscious bias. An unconscious bias that Collins (2007) argues the Rooney Rule goes some way to address. Yet, the notion of unconscious bias itself is not absent from criticism as it has been described as a more acceptable way of conjuring up the significance of racial inequalities while *mis-describing* the real *substantive racial inequalities* (see Hylton and Morpeth 2014), and instead focusing on *the hidden bad attitudes of individuals* (Banks and Ford 2009: 1121). Though the Rooney Rule in the NFL and European sport has drawn many plaudits, it remains contested. A critical politics of “race” and race equality challenges ideas such as “unconscious bias” and the Rooney Rule and suggests that they are used under advisement in contemplation, pre-implementation (What do you wish to achieve and how does this fit a race equality strategy?) and during implementation (Is it working and does it support related institutional initiatives?), on the journey to race equality. Though “sport for all” is a common mantra inside and outside of the industry, sport can be accused of offering piecemeal and *ad hoc* approaches to these important issues (Spracklen *et al.* 2006; Long *et al.* 2009; Hylton 2010a).

Conclusion

With a background of tensions around resourcing, Rankin’s observations of blind strategies to “treat everybody equally”, coupled with the failure to recognise the multiple intersecting issues for Black and minority ethnic coaches (men and women) demonstrates how a dominant racialised hegemony can be reinforced. Here, the male-centric nature of key sport organisations, combined with the dominance of whiteness illustrates that the coaching profession is both a gendered and “raced” arena. This White, male-centric knowledge, and the resulting practices, went unquestioned and unchallenged and thus reinforced a taken-for-granted, “common-sense” environment that upheld the existing order/inequalities characterised by asymmetrical power relations (Hoeber 2007), a state of affairs in the US that forced the NFL to accept the consequences of a new Rooney Rule. We can evidence that the necessity of

underpinning race equality work with policies and practices linked to strategies can be a step too far for some in sport. In many ways this approach is one that some organisations accept, while others reject and therefore remain static.

We hint at the promise of progress in Rankin's study of the race equality landscape of sport where the under-representation of Black and minority ethnic coaches is the result of denial and misdirected ideologies of merit and opportunity. We illustrate how racialised outcomes in sport can be discerned and associated with influential hierarchies that perpetuate power relations and patterns of inclusion. They are subtle and seemingly unconscious, thus making any challenge to them a complicated project (Bonilla-Silva 2006/2010). However, the politics of "race" and sport is multifaceted complex and a subtle lived reality (Carrington 2010; Long and Hylton 2014). Systemic tensions concerning individual and institutionalised processes lead to decisions that can constrain and disempower, while we must be alive to the prospect that, conversely, opportunities exist for them to be disrupted (Hylton and Morpeth 2012).

Note

1 Pseudonyms were used for NGBs only.

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