



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Beyond the playing field: Experiences of sport, social capital, and integration among Somalis in Australia

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Spaaij, Ramon (2011) Beyond the playing field: Experiences of sport, social capital, and integration among Somalis in Australia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35 (9). pp. 1519-1538. ISSN 0141-9870 (print) 1466-4356 (online)

The publisher's official version can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.2011.592205>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/24923/>

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Ethnic and Racial Studies [copyright Taylor & Francis]

Ethnic and Racial Studies 35(9): 1519-1538

Beyond the Playing Field: Experiences of Sport, Social Capital and Integration among Somalis in Australia

Ramón Spaaij

La Trobe University, Australia

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

This paper explores the role of recreational sport as a means and marker of social integration by analysing the lived experiences of Somali people from refugee backgrounds with sport. Drawing on a three-year multi-sided ethnography, the paper examines the extent to and ways in which participation in sport contributes to Somali Australians' bonding, bridging and linking social capital. It is shown how social bonds and bridges developed in the sports context assist in the (re)building of community networks that have been eroded by war and displacement. Sport's contribution to social capital should however be neither over-stated nor over-generalised. Bridging social capital in sport is relatively weak and few bridges are established between Somalis and the host community. Negative social encounters such as discrimination and aggression can highlight and reinforce group boundaries. Access to and use of linking social capital is also unequally distributed across gender, age, ethnic and socio-economic lines.

Keywords: Refugees, sport, social capital, integration, Somali, Australia

Introduction

The experiences of resettled refugees seeking to build a better life in a new country are often analysed from an ‘integration’ perspective. As a social and political construct, integration is a value-laden and contested concept. In recent research the concept has received more systematic treatment, being defined as the ability to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political activities while maintaining one’s cultural identity, as well as a two-way process ‘by which settling persons become part of the social, institutional and cultural fabric of a society’ (Valtonen 2004, p. 74), requiring adaptation on the part of both the migrant and the host society (Castles et al. 2002). Ager and Strang (2004) identify four ‘markers and means’ that are seen as critical in the integration process: employment, housing, education and health. Achievement in each of these four domains should not be viewed merely as an ‘outcome’ of integration, but also as a means to that end because ‘success’ in these domains is likely to assist achievement in other areas.

Beyond these four domains recreational sport, as a popular form of leisure, can also be viewed as a means and marker of integration. Sport serves as a significant site for civic participation, potentially enabling resettled refugees to foster social relationships with, and cultural knowledge of, the host community. The role of sport in the integration process is increasingly acknowledged in international policy and research. Sport is a significant item on the European policy agenda on social integration (Gasparini and Cometti 2010). The White Paper on Sport adopted by the European Commission in 2007 notes that sport ‘makes an important contribution to economic and social cohesion and more integrated societies’ (European Commission 2007, p. 7). Organisations such as the Refugee Council of Australia (2010) and the Centre for Multicultural Youth (2007) identify sport as a priority for refugee

youth and recommend that more resources be devoted to it. The academic literature is also beginning to show that sport can play a significant role in refugees' adaptation to challenges in a new environment (Amara et al. 2004). As sites for socialization experiences, sports activities may help cultivate a sense of belonging and reduce social isolation, especially when they are connected positively within the social fabric of local communities (Spaaij 2011).

This paper extends our understanding of the social integration of resettled refugees through a critical analysis of the lived experiences of Somali people from refugee backgrounds with sport. It draws on ethnographic research among members of the Melbourne Giants Football Club in Melbourne, Australia, to examine the extent to and ways in which participation in sport contributes to Somalis' social capital.¹ The paper first discusses the concept of social capital and the research methods used to test this concept. It then presents and reflects on the research data to explore how the Somalis being studied experience sport participation.

Conceptualizing social capital

The framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2004) points to the fundamental role that social connection is seen to play in driving the process of integration at the local level. Ager and Strang (2004, p. 3) argue that the aforementioned markers and means of integration 'do not fully explain what integration is about for people as they experience it in their lives', and that we should also focus on the role of social connections. Their viewpoint resonates with dominant political and policy interpretations of integration which emphasize the need for societal participation and inter-ethnic contact, and the divisive effects of ethnic enclaves and self-exclusion. From this perspective, 'successful integration' is discursively juxtaposed with the scenario of 'parallel societies', ethnically bound subgroups with supposedly very little

connection to the wider society (Schneider and Crul 2010, p. 1144). As will be seen, respondents recognise the import of social connections across ethnic and social groupings, however they vary in their views on what successful integration entails or how it can best be achieved. This diversity highlights the socially constructed nature of integration, in particular the question of who is defining the term (i.e. policymakers, researchers, practitioners and/or refugees) (Castles et al. 2002; Korac 2003). This paper approaches the integration process from an actor-centred perspective, that is, from the perspective of resettled refugees themselves.

The popularization of the notion of social capital, particularly its Putnam-inspired version, has resulted in its merging into broader ideas of social cohesion. In the process, the concept has lost much of its distinct meaning and ‘risks becoming synonymous with each and all things that are positive in social life’ (Portes 2000, p. 3). For the present purpose, social capital needs to be conceptualized more precisely to highlight its distinctive meanings, notably how it is laden with power and inequalities. Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of social capital is particularly useful in this regard. Bourdieu defines social capital as ‘the sum of the resources ... that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 119). Social capital resides in social connections, group membership and interaction with others, for instance through participation in community associations, the workplace, public institutions and informal networking. For Bourdieu, social capital refers to an unequally distributed resource that is produced and invested in by social actors for their individual and mutual benefit. However, social capital is not necessarily consciously pursued as such; it may also arise as a by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes.

In the work of Putnam (2000) and his followers, social capital is a largely unproblematic, functional concept. They view the accumulation of social capital to be almost entirely positive in terms of its outcomes, despite some peripheral discussion of potential ‘downsides’ of social capital. A major limitation of this interpretation of social capital is its failure to adequately address issues of power and structural inequality (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000). Bourdieu (1986), on the other hand, offers a critical perspective which focuses on social inequalities and their reproduction. For Bourdieu, social capital is not a benign force working equally in the interests of each and all; rather, it is a means by which the powerful may protect and further their interests against subordinate groups. Social capital tends to be positive for in-group members but serves to bolster and reproduce inequality in the wider world (Field 2008, p. 85). Social capital may be experienced differently according to gender, class or ethnic background (e.g. Lin 2000).

It is possible to add to Bourdieu’s approach to social capital by drawing upon the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital, which is reflected in Ager and Strang’s (2004) categorization of social bonds, bridges and links. Bonding social capital refers to social ties between like persons, such as relatives, kin and close friends. It is viewed to promote homogeneity and particularized trust, while also being more likely to be inward-looking and less tolerant of diversity. Putnam (2000, p. 22) notes that bonding social capital ‘is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity’. According to Ager and Strang (2004, p. 19), refugees themselves understand that a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic, religious or geographical community is ‘crucial’. Without this sense of identification, integration risks being mere assimilation. However, bonding social capital can also have a restrictive effect on integration and social mobility, for example by enforcing time-consuming and professionally limiting expectations (Domínguez and Watkins 2003).

Bridging social capital refers to more distant ties with like persons, such as loose friendships and work colleagues. This type of social capital is usually associated with resources that help individuals to generate broader identities and reciprocity (Putnam 2000, pp. 22-3). Putnam (2000, p. 22) considers bridging networks to be 'better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion'. In refugee research, bridging social capital is commonly taken as 'social mixing' between refugees and the host community. For example, Ager and Strang (2004, p. 18) argue that 'establishing social connections with those of other national, ethnic or religious groupings ... is essential' because it opens up opportunities for intercultural understanding and social cohesion. Korac (2003) shows the importance of bridging social capital in how refugees perceive their integration success, providing them with a sense of rootedness and wider social participation.

Linking social capital refers to ties between people in dissimilar social situations, such as those who are entirely outside of the local community, thereby enabling individuals and groups to access a wider range of resources including from formal institutions (Woolcock 1998). Ager and Strang (2004, p. 20) argue that 'engagement with local governmental and non-governmental services, civic duties, political processes etc. demonstrate a further set of social connections supporting integration.' However, linking social capital in the form of state-controlled assistance can also have the unanticipated consequence of diminishing refugees' personal agency and coping strategies (Korac 2003).

Somewhat problematic in the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is the claim that social bridges are inherently benign, whereas the exclusionary aspects of social relationships are reserved only for bonding social capital. Although dense social bonds can easily form the basis for out-group vilification, bonding social capital is also frequently associated with positively perceived outcomes such as increased educational attainment and reduced costs of job search (Field 2008). Moreover, as we will see, bridging social capital is

itself not exempt from exclusionary mechanisms. It is therefore important not to draw too sharp a distinction between bonding, bridging and linking ties. A Bourdieuan approach suggests that social capital – in whatever shape or form – is border creating and maintaining, hence exclusionary and laden with power. Furthermore, different forms of social capital can enable the creation of new identities or the (re)affirmation of particular aspects of self (Weller 2010). The next section outlines the research methods which were used to explore these issues with regard to the sport participation of Somalis in Melbourne.

Methods

In this paper data are drawn from a three-year ethnographic study (2008-2010) of Somali people with refugee backgrounds and their participation in football (soccer), which is by far the most popular sport among Somalis. The choice of research methods in this study flows from its objective to capture the voices, experiences and meaning-giving processes of the people being studied. Ethnography and other qualitative research strategies are considered particularly appropriate for gaining in-depth knowledge about refugee resettlement experiences (Korac 2003). The study's primary focus is the Melbourne Giants Football Club located in a north-western suburb of Melbourne. The research initially covered this single club, but over time developed into a multi-sited ethnography designed around paths and conjunctions of locations in which the researcher establishes a physical presence, with an explicit logic of connection among sites (Marcus 1995). After closely following a group of players and volunteers for almost two years, a large proportion of this group moved on to other clubs. The study was expanded to include their experiences at their new clubs, which brought a unique comparative perspective to the study.

The research combined multiple complementary data sources. In addition to participant observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-nine players, club officials and volunteers, and a further twelve interviews with local residents and community workers. The interviews were conducted at a variety of locations such as sports grounds, community centres and cafés. Key respondents were interviewed multiple times at regular intervals, in some cases up to eight times throughout the data collection process. This provided the opportunity to gather longitudinal data on individuals' life trajectories and their evolving experience of sport. A focus group was conducted to complement the interviews, enabling me to study the interaction within the group and the collective construction of meaning. The dynamics of a focus group can produce data that would not arise from an interview in which particular questions have been scripted by a researcher. Eight coaches and players participated in the focus group. Research participants' socio-demographic backgrounds were diverse in terms of gender, age, education and employment. These backgrounds are specified in the remainder of the paper to contextualize the research findings.

Melbourne Giants and the Somali diaspora

Melbourne Giants is a grassroots initiative established in the late 1990s to provide sporting opportunities to African refugees, particularly Somalis. The voluntary contribution of community residents has been instrumental in the club's day-to-day management and operation. The club is also supported by local community organizations which provide limited funds and resources. Melbourne Giants has been awarded small grants by government and sport agencies, enabling the club to acquire football jerseys and training materials, and to lower its membership fees to reduce the cost barrier to participation. The club has

approximately sixty paying members and is significantly smaller in size than one of the other clubs in the multi-sided ethnography, which has more than 150 registered players.

Somalis constitute one of the largest refugee populations from Africa currently living in Australia. The 2006 Census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded 4,310 Somalia-born people in Australia. The state of Victoria has by far the largest number of Somalia-born people with 2,620 (60.8%), followed by Western Australia (14.6%) and New South Wales (13.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Almost all Somalia-born people in Victoria reside in Melbourne (99%), the main concentrations being in the inner northern and western suburbs. In these suburbs Somali community associations play a significant role in building a vibrant community life and articulating communal interests and identities. However, the Somali associational landscape is highly fragmented and several Somalis feel marginalized in terms of service provision (Hopkins 2006). Clan divisions have been particularly salient at the level of community associations that compete for power and funding. This is one reason why Somali community leaders in Melbourne emphasize the need for meaningful, purposeful and enjoyable leisure activities as a way of helping newcomers to find their way in the host society, with sport in particular being seen as relatively inclusive and free from clan politics. In this context, Yunus, a taxi driver in his forties, praises Melbourne Giants' efforts to 'bring the community together ... Because we don't have, you know, any association or any activity for the kids, and the kids will not see one another. We are having this club so they are having an awareness of who is who.'

Clanship acts as an identity marker for many Somalis in Melbourne who have been experiencing the crisis in Somalia in terms of clan conflict and division, and the crisis 'at home' continues to affect their social identities in the diaspora (Omar 2009). Interviewees stress that cross-clan bonding in the football context has overcome some of the clan-based

cleavages which were endemic in Somalia, thereby contributing to the internal cohesion of Melbourne's Somali community. Abdisalam, a community organizer in his forties, argues:

Sport, especially soccer, has no clan borders. In that sense it can strengthen the community bonds, the community relationships. It can, in a way, minimize clan tension. Most other activities are linked in one way or another to clan divisions and clan lines, but when it comes to sport, sport is actually above clan lines. It helps to integrate the community itself among its members.

Melbourne Giants player Abu Hassan, a taxi driver in his late twenties, observes that his club 'is a model for community integration. It brings different clans and to some extent different Muslim communities together.' His friend Ahmed, who is a fulltime student, asserts:

We are all different clans, different tribes. But for us, at the end of the day, we're there for the club and to look after the kids. That's the main reason behind it. And they realize that even though there are so many different communities, we have them on the right track. And hopefully for the future we can set the right example for the Somali community: to be only one.

These remarks indicate that respondents view sport, and football in particular, as a forum for social connectedness and community engagement. These issues are explored further in the next section through the prism of social capital.

Bonding social capital

Policymakers identify sport as a key sphere for social mixing between different ethnic groups due to its relatively low threshold for entry and participation. This argument is premised on the belief that culturally diverse sports clubs stimulate the social integration of minority ethnic groups in ways that ethno-specific sports associations do not. Pooley (1976), for example, argues that in general the policies and practices of ethnic football clubs inhibit the integration of their members. What is absent in this view is the strong preference among several Somalis with diverging age, gender and socio-economic backgrounds to be among those with whom social interaction is uncomplicated, symmetrical and meaningful. Bonding relationships with one's own ethno-cultural community are important for a sense of belonging, for learning from others 'like me', and for accessing the social and material resources shared among family and ethnic networks (Loizos 2000). Former Melbourne Giants coach Mohammed, a civil servant in his forties, expresses this as follows:

People don't ask the question why some Somalis prefer to play in their own soccer clubs. They think it's a sign of arrogance, of deliberate exclusion. But it's not. There are many reasons. The mother doesn't speak much English so she prefers to talk to other Somali women at soccer. Easier interaction. High level of trust as well: they don't really know what happens to their kids when they drop them off at another club, whereas here they know other people will look after them. Also more flexible: they adapt playing and training times to school times, mosque, Ramadan, et cetera. Normal clubs don't do that. Playing fees are also an issue. They cannot afford to pay \$400 per child. [Melbourne Giants] is much cheaper, and has easy access as they live near.

Participation in the club allows Somalis to temporarily escape social spheres with potentially tense relations and to be among members with similar ethno-cultural backgrounds. Many young people in the study express their desire to create a safe and relaxed environment to come together to play football, to socialize with other Somalis, or to just ‘hang out’. They also use the club as a site for strengthening already-established friendships. Many of them have close friends among their teammates, and in several cases they joined Melbourne Giants as a result of information provided by friends who were already involved in the club. In other words, bonding social capital is not merely a potential *outcome* of sports activities; it is also put to work to negotiate *access* to sports clubs.

Participation in football is seen to contribute to the (re)building of social networks that have been eroded or disrupted by war and displacement. Omar, a volunteer and former player in his twenties, observes:

The club gives players and their families an environment where they can come together and develop friendships. Even though many of them live in the same area, they don’t always know each other. It gives them a socializing environment where they can chitchat and come out of their houses and into the public area. Some of them are really good friends now, not only those who play but also those who just come and watch. So it can provide that environment where they make a stronger bond of friendship. It also contributes to a general sense of respect, where people respect each other more.

Omar, a fulltime student, is one of several young males who spend significant time at the club. Social encounters in sport are important to them, arguably more important than the sports activity itself. Players frequently consult one another on work and family issues.

Members also regularly help each other out, for instance in completing or translating forms, driving their children to and from matches or school, moving items or providing information about job opportunities or courses (Verweel, Janssens and Roques 2005). Abdifatih, a civil engineer in his thirties, explains that ‘soccer is quite unique’ in this regard because ‘outside of the Friday prayer or a wedding, you hardly see anyone, only your closest friends and family.’ Abdifatih believes that the type of leadership role he fulfils in Melbourne Giants (as treasurer) is not available to him at the clubs where he and his friend used to play:

[Ahmed] and I used to play for [Club B]. ... We left two years ago because we have our own club which is a role model to us and we wanted to coach the junior teams. To me, playing for [Club B] they needed me as a player, but to actually develop the club or promote the club they didn’t need me. But [Melbourne Giants] actually needs me because we are the same people and together we’re trying to promote the club and our own culture. We want to be able to say that we own ... our own club. But there we were just participants. It’s also harder to get into leadership roles at other clubs. ... If you’re not one of them and you are a good player, they may want you to play for them, but they will do nothing for you administratively. At the end of the day when I won trophies at [Club B] ... I didn’t really feel that I won something. But last year with [Melbourne Giants] I actually felt that I won something, because it’s my own club.

This comment reveals not only Abdifatih’s pride in his Somali heritage and his desire to invest time and effort into developing Melbourne Giants, but also the subtle processes of social exclusion that can occur within sports clubs, in this case in relation to access to high-status positions. His story suggests that social mixing in sport does not automatically lead to

full acceptance or integration into club life. Abdifatih experienced that that he did not fully fit into the club environment at his previous clubs. Playing football among those with similar cultural backgrounds, he argues, provides him with greater opportunities to take on a leadership roles in the club.

Bridging social capital

The narratives of Abdifatih and other interviewees illustrate how being part of a sports club can contribute to the development of bridging social capital. Although Somalis predominate, the clubs being studied have some players and spectators from other backgrounds, notably from other African countries such as Eritrea, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Abdullahi, a university graduate in his late twenties, argues that social interaction with members of other African communities is ‘not a problem’ because ‘they feel comfortable here.’ He explains how socializing with other Africans in sport makes him ‘more comfortable, because we’re the same color and everything. Most clubs can call you any name they like, like “chocolate”. You want another person to say, like, “I’m chocolate too”.’

Abdullahi’s remarks point to the role of race and skin color as an identity marker in structuring the social relationships between the Somalis and other social groups. For some Somalis, religious identity and values are also significant identity markers that inform their bridging efforts. Abdifatih explains how a shared Muslim identity binds most people at the club, including the handful of Saudis, Lebanese, Iranian and Afghani immigrants who visit the club at times: ‘Where else do you see Muslims from different backgrounds get together? Only at the mosque and at soccer. Soccer is a very prominent activity for this type of interaction.’ Thus, a focus on perceived similarities can be an important aspect of bridging, just as it is of bonding. Bridging networks are also created with Muslim players on opposing

teams. For example, football player Yusuf, aged in his late teens and currently unemployed, notes: ‘I find a lot of times when we play against, say, Turkish teams, we have a lot more in common ... Islamic way and all that, different ways of greeting ... That makes it easier [to socialize with them] because you have something in common.’ In most cases, however, these social bridges are relatively weak and largely confined to match days.

A recurrent theme in research participants’ understanding of bridging and bonding opportunities in sport is the historical association between migrant communities and the game of football in Australia. Football in Australia has long been distinguished by its popularity among sections of migrant minorities, and many amateur football clubs have been founded and organized along non-Anglo lines. This historical association is readily observable in the leagues in which the Melbourne Giants teams compete, where most clubs are aligned with a particular ethnic group, notably the Greek, Italian, Turkish, Iraqi, Macedonian and Croatian communities. Ethnic divisions of this kind do not preclude the development of bridging social capital. Some Somalis have actually played for clubs associated with other ethnic groups and maintained social relationships at these clubs. Nevertheless, inter-ethnic bridges created in such instances are largely restricted to the sports activity itself. Ayan, a female student in her 20s who used to volunteer at Melbourne Giants, argues: ‘There aren’t many opportunities created between the players [of different teams]. It’s very much limited to when they play. It would be good to have more interaction with other teams.’

The narratives of research participants indicate that few close or durable bridges are created across the boundaries of immigrants/non-immigrants (Walseth 2008), that is, between Somalis and the ‘host community’. This should be understood in relation to the structural conditions for bridging networks in the neighbourhood in which Melbourne Giants is located, which has a strong concentration of new immigrant groups, mainly from Africa. There are few players of non-immigrant background in this area, and none at Melbourne Giants. Some

research participants recognize this and express their desire to create more bridges and links with the host community, which they believe would also aid their integration in other spheres. Mohamed, a former player and coach in his mid twenties, argues: 'It's very important to have Anglo Saxon people here. They would not only come on board as members, they already probably ... know how to run a club'. Mohamed, who works in the public service, uses other ethnically-based football clubs in Melbourne as an example: 'Even if you go back to other generations that were before us, the Greeks and people with different identities, they would have had clubs that were just based on Italians and Greeks. We are just going through that phase now, but down the track I don't see the reason why it shouldn't open up, and it will open up.' A similar sentiment is voiced by club secretary Samatar:

I'd like to see a mixed club in the future, a club which consists not only of Somalis or Eritreans or Ethiopians, for example, but also other ethnicities ... Indigenous Australians, European Australians, and other people as well. So we get a diversity; a multicultural team. At the moment the players are mainly Somali ... It's kind of hard to see a fully mixed team due to the demographics of the area we live in. It's mainly African background in this area. But the club is not restricted to any particular group and we would really like to get everyone on board and be part of the team.

Negative social encounters: the 'dark side' of bridging social capital

Several research participants indicate that opportunities for bonding and bridging in sport play a significant role in the process of cultural negotiation. However, the data show that bridging encounters in sport are not always peaceful exchanges (Krouwel et al. 2006). Sporting encounters between Somalis and other ethnic groups can magnify inter-group

differences and tensions. Miscommunication, distrust, verbal abuse and discrimination can even lead to physical violence in a context of direct sporting confrontation. On one occasion during the study a brawl occurred between players and spectators of Melbourne Giants and the opposing team, which consisted predominantly of Polish immigrants. The brawl followed a controversial refereeing decision, to which a few supporters reacted by running on to the ground. The incident received significant coverage in the local media, and the Melbourne Giants team was suspended for the remainder of the season. Those implicated in the incident reject the media's attribution of blame, which portrays the Somalis as the sole culprits. Abdi, who was a football coach at the time of the incident, says: 'We know some kids have got bad temper and we were trying to work around them, but there are also other clubs who are throwing racism comments and sometimes kids just can't handle that.'

Abdi, a youth worker in his forties, further suggests that discrimination in sport can have a significant impact on wellbeing, and he is not alone in this regard. Some players report that they are regularly subjected to discriminatory remarks relating to their skin color or their cultural or religious background. The question 'Have you ever personally experienced discrimination or racism in football?' elicited the following volley of responses among male focus group participants:

Roble: It's common.

Yusuf: Yes, absolutely!

Asad: That's normal, very common. ... They would call you all names during the game. [...]

Yusuf: We were playing with [our previous team] against an Italian team. They had a very good player, a striker, and our coach asked me to man-mark him the whole

game. So I did. The whole crowd turned against me, calling me a monkey and shouting ‘uh, uh.’

Fadumo, a university student in her twenties, gives the following example of discrimination on the football field:

There have been some very, very horrible examples [of racism]. For example there was one time when the staff of the opposing team accused our players of... [she starts to laugh] ... they said that our children and women were in fear and in danger. Just because there were all these black boys. Imagine that, what an exaggeration. It sounds like something out of the 1800s or something. And the police came, they were called. ... Yeah, incidents like that have occurred.

Although most research participants acknowledge the existence of discrimination, they seem to deal with it in very different ways. Some try to ignore it or ‘laugh it off’, whereas others advocate a more proactive approach. Mohamed is typical of the latter in taking a stance against victimhood:

If people discriminate against you, go up to them, invite them, you know. I said to them ‘why don’t we just hold one day called African day, you know we put posters around the whole of [the neighbourhood], everywhere, everyone is invited, you’re all welcome, and we showcase our culture, we showcase who we are to the Australian population.’

Mohamed's viewpoint emphasizes the importance of personal agency in cultural negotiation and integration experiences, as well as the significance of developing positive and mutually respectful social bridges and links with the host community.

Linking social capital

Mohamed's experience is not unique in this respect. Samatar, the club secretary who is in his twenties, skilfully creates and taps opportunities for diversified social capital. Samatar is highly educated, having recently completed a BA degree and a prestigious leadership program. His cultural capital, social confidence, English proficiency and commitment to enhancing the wellbeing of the Somali community co-shape his proactive attitude towards developing linkages with institutional agents. Like some other young people in the study, Samatar has developed what Stanton-Salazar (1997) calls a bicultural network orientation. This orientation involves 'a consciousness that facilitates the crossing of cultural borders and the overcoming of institutional barriers', and thereby enables access to 'multiple community and institutional settings where diversified social capital can be generated' by means of instrumental action (Stanton-Salazar 1997, p. 25). Samatar refers to this as his 'knowledge of the system', a form of knowledge which he feels many older Somalis lack. He expresses this as follows in relation to Melbourne Giants:

The club is in a situation where it cannot support itself. So it's good to see that it gets outside support where needed. There is this support but the management of the club don't really know where the support is. They don't have the experience to know how to get support, how to fill in forms and applications. We need people who know the system and ... the language.

Samatar feels that his involvement in the club as an administrator and former player has contributed to the development of his bicultural network orientation, and that the linking and bridging social capital derived from this involvement also extends to other spheres of social integration. For example, he reports that besides providing ‘great satisfaction’, working with the club ‘increases my awareness of the community and their relation to other communities. ... I learn different cultures from these different people [at other clubs], how their clubs are organized, and all sorts of things.’ He has leveraged resources through his sport-based interactions with formal institutions, including local government and NGOs. In sum, Samatar exhibits the language and cultural knowledge which Ager and Strang (2004) consider a key facilitating factor for social integration. Samatar’s story illustrates how such skills can facilitate social connection with other communities and with state and voluntary agencies. However, as noted, he also stresses that linking social capital is unevenly distributed: Somalis with low educational attainment and limited comprehension of the English language, including older men and women, are often unable to access and utilise linking opportunities that present themselves in sport.

Samatar’s experience points to the ways in which Somalis can generate social capital for others. Samatar seeks to share the acquired resources and networks with his family members and other community residents. He plays an important role in assisting his mother and older sister with negotiating the school system and state institutions, for example by translating and completing forms and applications, and by attending parent-teacher meetings. He also acts as a tutor for his siblings, nephews and nieces. Further, Samatar is the co-founder of a community association that provides cultural activities for Somali youth. In sport, Samatar seeks to transmit part of the social and cultural resources accessed through his bridging and linking networks to other club volunteers. He assists them in their administrative

tasks, grant applications, media engagement and negotiation with sports organizations and public institutions. Other research participants similarly report how they appreciate and contribute to the social network maintained through the football club. Former club secretary Bashir, aged in his late twenties, observes:

When we've got away games mothers ask me 'can you take my kids, can you take him in the car?' I do it with pleasure. When it comes to club members gathering for an occasion they are always doing things together. It becomes like a family thing, you know, even when they are not related in terms of blood, they see each other as united.

Remarks like these indicate that, for respondents, participation in football is a meaningful collective experience that can enhance social connectedness. However, they also suggest that social capital in sport is unevenly distributed and boundary reinforcing in some respects. Earlier it was noted how inter-ethnic tensions may be magnified in the sports context, and how those who do not possess a bicultural network orientation may struggle to accumulate linking and bridging social capital. Below another potentially exclusionary aspect of sport participation is discussed, namely gender inequalities.

Gender inequalities in social capital

The issue of gender inequalities is particularly significant in the context of Somali women's experience of loss of social networks and social capital. Many Somali women in Australia speak of the erosion of social networks following the war, displacement and resettlement, which is seen as a significant source of sadness, distress, anxiety and depression (McMichael and Manderson 2004). Social events, religious gatherings and celebrations play an important

role in women's lives, providing shared spaces and social encounters which are a major source of (bonding) social capital. On the other hand, women experience relatively few opportunities for full participation in Somali community organizations, which predominantly involve and are run by males. This raises the question whether women themselves consider sport, and Melbourne Giants in particular, an appropriate site for cultivating social capital.

There is certainly a demand for sports activities among young Somali women even though the clubs under study do not provide game-playing opportunities for females. Their motivation to participate in sport is fuelled in part by their desire to engage in social interactions and community life. Halima, a health worker in her sixties, believes that sports activities provide an important social space 'for the women too, because many of them are stuck at home and don't go out.' Ayan, a student in her 20s, points to the opportunities for bonding social capital despite being excluded from playing football. Some of her brothers and cousins play at Melbourne Giants and, until recently, she was actively involved in the club as a volunteer. Ayan sees the club as a 'family and community link' where people can come together to share stories, exchange information and have fun. She explains: 'I have my son around at the club and I get my family involved, they get their friends involved. Just invite everyone. ... It serves a great purpose. For me it was a way to get the community together and to create a community.' This positive view of the bonding social capital created in the sports context is shared by most female respondents (cf. Palmer 2009). Some women spend significant time at the club and fulfil important support roles, such as driving children to matches, laundering uniforms, cleaning the premises, running the canteen and organizing social activities. These activities are seen as a significant form of community engagement and a source of bonding social capital.

Women's experiences of linking and bridging social capital, however, are not always positive. Experienced racial discrimination, as discussed earlier, is not the only form of

negative social encounter that female respondents report. Some women feel that they have few opportunities for developing linking social capital in sport due to their restricted access to high-status positions within sports clubs. Ayan's experience is a case in point. After having been involved in the day-to-day management of the club for two years, she was told by male club officials that her contributions were no longer appreciated. Ayan feels that the hostility directed towards her was based on gender role expectations: 'I feel that there was an issue with me being a female and being very outspoken. And some men didn't agree with that. This is typical Somali ... They just totally pushed me out.' Although Ayan is quick to qualify her personal experience – 'I don't want to make any general statements' – the situation was later confirmed by a male respondent in his forties, who believes that Ayan was pushed out 'because she is a woman and because she has a strong opinion, which they found it hard to deal with. The older generation [of Somali men] is quite conservative.'

Conclusion

The data presented in this paper demonstrate some of the key contexts and processes through which participation in sport can contribute to Somalis' bonding, bridging and linking social capital. The football clubs under study provide a context for meaningful, purposeful and pleasurable socialization experiences. Research participants from different age, gender and socio-economic backgrounds emphasize the significance of such a context for facilitating the development of bonding social capital with other Somali immigrants, including those representing different clans. These social bonds are deemed important in (re)building community networks that have been disrupted or eroded by war and displacement, and can extend to other social spheres. Although involvement in ethno-specific sports clubs (as opposed to mixed clubs) is often dismissed by policymakers as a sign of insufficient social

integration, respondents find participation in Melbourne Giants a meaningful and comfortable way of spending their spare time, which also creates opportunities to participate more fully in the local community. It also enables them to temporarily escape social spheres with potentially tense relations (education, housing, labour market). Mono-ethnic sports clubs should therefore not automatically be viewed as working against social integration (Krouwel et al. 2006).

Ethno-specific sports clubs like Melbourne Giants offer some Somalis distinctive advantages, particularly in terms of the accessibility of high-status positions. A number of male research participants report that management positions are more accessible to them in ethno-specific sports clubs than in mixed sports associations, and that the former also tend to provide a greater sense of ownership and enable social linkages to be developed. For some highly educated young males these opportunities have been a major reason for joining Melbourne Giants, grounded in their desire to build a vibrant community hub. However, opportunities for the development of linking social capital associated with high-status positions within sports clubs are unequally distributed. Not only are these opportunities mainly available to those with relatively high levels of education and/or a bicultural network orientation, female respondents report that their access to linking social capital in the clubs being studied is restricted, which is reflective of their restricted access to leadership positions in Somali community associations more generally.

The above suggests that the role of sport participation as a means of social capital and social integration should be neither over-stated nor over-generalised. Although recreational sport might seem ideal for developing bridging social capital through social encounters between people with different ethnic backgrounds, the social bridges created and maintained in the sports context tend to be relatively weak and largely confined to match days. Few close or durable bridges are created between Somalis and the host community. Moreover, where

inter-ethnic sporting encounters occur they may highlight and reinforce group boundaries instead of bridge them due to the logic of competition that is inherent to sport and because inter-ethnic tensions may be imported into these sports activities (Krouwel et al. 2006). Discrimination, aggression and violence in sport can even lead to the reinforcement of group boundaries outside of sport, which can have a detrimental effect on Somalis' bridging and linking social capital in other spheres. This is indicative of the complex inter-linkages between different domains of integration and the potential impacts that actions in any of the domains can have on others (Ager and Strang 2004).

There is yet another way in which participation in sport can inhibit or work against 'successful' integration: it can enforce time-consuming and professionally limiting pressures that may negatively affect achievement in other domains. The reluctance of several older Somalis to volunteer in sport due to pressing work and family commitments is a case in point. Some are also critical of young people who are committed to furthering their sporting careers as a means of social mobility, arguing that this may lead to the neglect of more likely pathways to social capital and social advancement, most notably education and employment. For many Somalis in Australia sport, in the final analysis, is of secondary import to employment, education, housing and health as means and markers of integration. The notion that sport, by and of itself, can somehow integrate resettled refugees and overcome challenges and tensions in other social spheres proves unrealistic.

Note

¹ The fictitious name Melbourne Giants is used to preserve the anonymity of respondents and to prevent any potential damage to the club or the community under study. All personal names are pseudonyms.

References

- AGER, A. and STRANG, A. 2004 *Indicators of Integration: Final Report*, London: Home Office Development and Practice Report 28
- AMARA, M. *et al.* 2004 *The Roles of Sport and Education in the Social Inclusion of Asylum Seekers and Refugees: An Evaluation of Policy and Practice in the UK*, Loughborough: Loughborough University
- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS 2006 *Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra: ABS
- BOURDIEU, P. 1986 'The Forms of Capital', in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood, pp. 241-258
- BOURDIEU, P. and WACQUANT, L. 1992 *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- CASTLES, S., KORAC, M., VASTA, E. and VERTOVEC, S. 2002 *Integration: Mapping the Field*, London: The University of Oxford Centre for Migration and Policy Research and Refugee Studies Centre
- CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH 2007 *Playing for the Future: The Role of Sport and Recreation in Supporting Refugee Young People to 'Settle Well' in Australia*, Melbourne: CMY
- DOMINGUEZ, S. and WATKINS, C. 2003 'Creating Networks for Survival and Mobility: Social Capital among African-American and Latin-American Low-Income Mothers', *Social Problems*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 111-135
- EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2007 *White Paper on Sport*, Brussels: European Commission
- FIELD, J. 2008 *Social Capital*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge

- GASPARINI, W. and COMETTI, A. (eds) 2010 *Sport Facing the Test of Cultural Diversity*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing
- HOPKINS, G. 2006 'Somali Community Organizations in London and Toronto: Collaboration and Effectiveness', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 361-380
- KORAC, M. 2003 'Integration and How We Facilitate It: A Comparative Study of the Settlement Experiences of Refugees in Italy and the Netherlands', *Sociology*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 51-68.
- KROUWEL, A., BOONSTRA, N., DUUVENDAK, J.W. and VELDBOER, L. 2006 'A Good Sport? Research into the Capacity of Recreational Sport to Integrate Dutch Minorities', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 165-180
- LIN, N. 2000 'Inequality in Social Capital', *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 6, pp. 785-795
- LOIZOS, P. 2000 'Are Refugees Social Capitalists?', in S. Baron, J. Field and T. Schuller (eds) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 124-141
- MARCUS, G. 1995 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 95-117
- MCMICHAEL, C. and MANDERSON, L. 2004 'Somali Women and Well-Being: Social Networks and Social Capital among Immigrant Women in Australia', *Human Organization*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 88-99
- OMAR, Y. 2009 'Somali Youth in Diaspora: A Comparative Study of Gender Perceptions of Further Studies and Future Career (Case Study: Somali Youth Melbourne, Australia)', *Bildhaan: International Journal of Somali Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 52-95
- PALMER, C. 2009 'Soccer and the Politics of Identity for Young Muslim Refugee Women in South Australia', *Sport in Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 27-38

- POOLEY, J. 1976 'Ethnic Soccer Clubs in Milwaukee: A Study of Assimilation', in M. Hart (ed.) *Sport in the Socio-Cultural Process*, 2nd edn, Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown, pp. 475-492
- PORTES, A. 1998 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 1-24
- PUTNAM, R. D. 2000 *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster
- REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA 2010 *A Bridge to a New Culture: Promoting the Participation of Refugees in Sporting Activities*, Sydney: RCOA
- SCHNEIDER, J. and CRUL, M. 2010 'New Insights into Assimilation and Integration Theory', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 33, no. 7, pp. 1143-1148
- SCHULLER, T., BARON, S. and FIELD, J. 2000 'Social Capital: A Review and Critique', in S. Baron, J. Field and T. Schuller (eds) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-38
- SPAAIJ, R. 2011 *Sport and Social Mobility: Crossing Boundaries*, New York: Routledge
- STANTON-SALAZAR, R. D. 1997 'A Social Capital Framework for Understanding the Socialization of Racial Minority Children and Youths', *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 67, no. 1, pp. 1-40
- VALTONEN, K. 2004 'From the Margin to the Mainstream: Conceptualizing Refugee Resettlement Processes', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 70-96
- VERWEEL, P., JANSSENS, J. and ROQUES, C. 2005 'Kleurrijke zuilen: Over de ontwikkeling van sociaal kapitaal door allochtonen in eigen en gemengde sportverenigingen', *Vrijtijdsstudies*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 7-21
- WALSETH, K. 2008 'Bridging and Bonding Social Capital in Sport: Experiences of Young Women with an Immigrant Background', *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 1-

WELLER, S. 2010 'Young People's Social Capital: Complex Identities, Dynamic Networks', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 872-888

WOOLCOCK, M. 1998 'Social Capital and Economic Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework', *Theory and Society*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 151-208

RAMÓN SPAAIJ is Senior Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University and at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research.

ADDRESS: School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Victoria 3086, Australia. Email: r.spaij@latrobe.edu.au