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Commitment, resistance and institutional change*

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**Diversity Work in Community Sport Organizations:  
Commitment, Resistance and Institutional Change**

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## **Abstract**

Diversity is a key term used in a range of public and private organizations to describe institutional goals, values and practices. Sport is a prominent social institution where the language of diversity is frequently and positively used; yet, this rhetoric does not necessarily translate into actual practice within sport organizations. This paper critically examines diversity work in community sports clubs. Drawing upon qualitative research at 31 amateur sports clubs in Australia, the findings show that diversity work in community sport organizations is often haphazard and accidental, rather than a strategic response or adaptation to policy. This paper concludes that while individual champions are critical to the promotion of diversity, persistent tensions and resistance arise when they seek to translate the language of diversity into institutional practice.

## **Introduction**

Diversity is a key term used in a range of public and private institutions to describe institutional goals, values and practices. The assumed benefits of diversity to organizational performance are well documented, such as increased sales revenue, more customers, and greater relative profits (Herring, 2009). Organizations increasingly recognize the need to promote and manage diversity (Konrad et al., 2006), to the point where managing diversity has become a core feature of countries that have workforces with people from a range of racial, ethnic, gender, social and cultural backgrounds (Strachan et al., 2010). Yet, diversity

management is contentious (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Embrick, 2011). Research shows that diversity policies do not necessarily result in commensurate changes in actual practices and behaviours within organizations (Ahmed, 2007; Spracklen et al., 2006). As Brayboy (2003: 73) argues, institutions ‘often view diversity as a free-standing policy, and the way that diversity is something that can be implemented without necessarily changing the underlying structure of the institution and its day-to-day operations’.

Sport is of great significance in this regard, as a prominent social institution where the language of diversity is frequently and positively used. Diversity has been identified as a key issue confronting sport organizations (Doherty and Chelladurai, 1999; Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2006). For example, Cunningham (2015: 4) argues that it is crucial that sport managers, coaches, and other sport professionals ‘understand the effects of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, as well as the underlying reasons for these dynamics. This understanding will allow for effective teams and workplaces, inclusive of all persons.’ There is now a sizeable body of scholarship that explores various aspects of diversity in sport, such as organizational change (Spracklen et al., 2006), organizational cultures and practices (Cunningham, 2015), diversity discourses in sport organizations (Hovden, 2012; Knoppers et al., 2015; Bury, 2015), gender diversity in sport governance and leadership (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2008; Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013), and sport employees’ and parental attitudes toward LGBT members (Melton and Cunningham, 2014; Cunningham and Melton, 2014).

Much of this growing literature focuses on diversity in leadership and typically on one social relation such as gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality. Moreover, most of the research focuses on employees of professional and college sport organizations and less on volunteers at the grassroots level. This paper extends these investigations by focusing on the ways volunteers in community sport organizations attempt to promote diversity in daily organizational life. Community sports clubs are local voluntary organizations whose core aim

is to provide opportunities for people to participate in sport. The focus of this paper is on diversity of club membership (i.e., sport participants) and on how volunteers who run such clubs try to promote it. In addition, the focus is not solely on one type of diversity, such as gender or ethnic diversity, but rather covers a broader spectrum of social relations that volunteers consider relevant to diversity work. Diversity work can be defined as actions that are aimed at creating greater diversity of members from various backgrounds in formal and informal organizational structures (Mor Barak, 2014). In the context of community sport organizations, diversity work may be undertaken by a range of volunteers, including club office holders, committee members, coaches, or other club members. This paper will critically examine how stated commitments to diversity relate to actual practice in community sport organizations. We do so by asking how and why diversity work is performed in sports clubs.

### **Diversity, organizational life and resistance**

The empirical focus of the paper is the Australian sport sector. Diversity in public and private organizations in Australia has many contours (Strachan et al., 2010). Most organizations have introduced diversity policies with the view that such policies return benefits to the organization and its members. The Australian sport sector has shown a similar interest in promoting diversity in sport organizations. Recent policy statements recognize the need to ensure Australian sport reflects and caters for the country's diverse population (Australian Sports Commission, 2015). This need is articulated in, for example, the Australian government's stated commitment to ensure 'sporting opportunities are safe, fun and inclusive for all of our community members and to supporting sport to ensure that our nation's diversity is reflected in participation' (Australian Government, 2010: 4).

This type of diversity management discourse has attracted powerful critiques (e.g. Prasad et al., 1997; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Noon, 2007). One area of critique focuses on the way diversity is actually managed within institutions. It is this work, and especially the writings by Sara Ahmed (2006, 2007, 2012), that, in conjunction with the latest scholarship on diversity in sport organizations (e.g. Melton and Cunningham, 2014), provide the theoretical framework for this paper. Collectively, this work offers a critical analytical lens for investigating diversity practice in different institutional contexts, including sport. More specifically, whereas previous work has used Ahmed's ideas to critique the 'non-performative' speech acts of sport governing bodies' diversity policies (Bury, 2015), in this paper focus on the dynamics of diversity in daily organizational life – that which lies behind such policies. The analysis focuses on the role and motivations of diversity champions and the resistance they encounter in their efforts to promote diversity.

Like other critical diversity scholars, Ahmed problematizes the discursive qualities and uses of diversity in institutional life. The language of diversity represents a turn away from the language of equity and social justice, which was considered an over-used terminology that has created conditions in which it was increasingly resisted (Ahmed, 2007). According to Ahmed (2012: 65), the language of diversity appeals because it is understood as less political and less threatening to institutions (yet, as shown later on in this paper, diversity can also be politicized, especially among those in positions of privilege). Diversity rhetoric 'enables action because it does not get associated with the histories of struggle evoked by more "marked" terms such as equality and social justice' (Ahmed, 2007: 238). In this context, Embrick (2011: 542) argues that the language of diversity 'has enabled many organizations to curtail deeper investigations into the gender and racial inequalities that continue to persist in the workplace'. His study of *Fortune* 1000 upper-level managers found that managers often minimize or overlook race and gender in their definitions of diversity.

Discursively, diversity, as a term and as an agent for change, poses dilemmas and challenges for practitioners who seek to translate the language of diversity into institutional practice. Diversity workers present diversity as a variety of ‘cases’ to appeal to the different audiences they address, ‘without one case being attributed as the “real reason”, or as the underlying motivation behind the appeal’ (Ahmed, 2007: 242). Ahmed (2007) argues that in order to make diversity appealing, contradictory arguments are used simultaneously or interchangeably based on the political or financial considerations at stake and the person or people making the decision. Thus, diversity practitioners tend to ‘move between the business case and social justice case arguments, between a politics of good and bad feeling, and between compliance- and value-based arguments’ (Ahmed, 2007: 248). The cases they make are pragmatic in orientation and work to associate the term ‘diversity’ with the ideal image the institution has of itself. As such, analysis of diversity policy and its implementation becomes ‘a question of “what works”, where what is meant by “diversity” is kept undefined for strategic reasons’, (Ahmed, 2007: 242). This process can also be found in the sport sector, where the business case (that diversity is good for business) and the social justice case (that diversity is important for social justice reasons and is the right thing to pursue) for diversity are employed depending on the context and audience. For example, diversity advocates whose commitment is based on the moral imperative to give people from all backgrounds equitable opportunities to play sport regularly use the business case for diversity to convince resistant groups within their institution (Spaij et al., 2014).

Diversity work depends on the commitment institutions display toward diversity and how diversity is considered in relation to the organization’s core values and business model, as well as on the social and cultural demographics and location of the organization, and on the attitudes and actions of its members. Further, diversity work is situated within broader conversations about what the institution stands for or what its ‘brand’ is. However, when

diversity practitioners evoke commitment they often describe it as something individuals, especially those characterized as ‘diversity champions’, have and/or do (Ahmed, 2012), that is, people who have a genuine commitment to diversity and who value this commitment by speaking up and actioning certain policies or programs within the organization. Yet, such individual commitment is not necessarily matched by a formal, institutional commitment.

Resistance is an intrinsic part of diversity work and culture change (Dass and Parker, 1999). Ahmed explains how diversity practitioners see their work as ‘banging your head against a brick wall (Ahmed, 2012: 26). She notes: ‘The feeling of doing diversity is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible. The institution becomes that which you are up against’ (Ahmed, 2012: 26). Ahmed uses the metaphor of the brick wall to highlight a dilemma of diversity work, namely that by persisting to make diversity into an explicit institutional end and by bringing diversity to the foreground within an organization, the diversity practitioner becomes a troublemaker who disrupts the institutional status quo. According to Ahmed, this might be the essence of diversity work if diversity is to become part of what an organization is doing: ‘We might need to be the cause of the obstruction. We might need to get in the way if we are to get anywhere. We might need to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points’ (Ahmed, 2012: 187). This, she argues, requires ‘a resistance to the discourse of compliance, a resistance which requires linking diversity to what is “good” for the university, where “good” is not reducible to economic benefits’ (Ahmed, 2007: 246-7). To do so requires persistence to go against the institutional grain. As will be shown in this paper, Ahmed’s arguments are highly relevant to the field of sport. The next section discusses the research methods used to investigate diversity practice in community sport organizations.



## Methods

This paper draws on four years of empirical research into how diversity is understood, experienced and managed in community sport organizations in Australia. The research sought to understand how and to what extent community sports organizations welcomed and supported people of diverse backgrounds and abilities within their club.

A total of 31 community sports clubs participated in the study. Clubs were invited to participate in the research through a formal invitation letter that described the research aims and methodology and the nature of participation. The 31 clubs that volunteered to participate in the study varied in terms of their membership size, which ranged from 80 to 450 members, and the sports involved: Australian Rules football (Aussie rules), football (soccer), netball, cricket, hockey, basketball and lawn bowls. These mass participation sports were selected to maximize variation of participants by gender, race/ethnicity, (dis)ability, and age. As Australian sport is largely gender segregated, we selected clubs within both female-dominated (e.g., netball) and male-dominated (e.g., Aussie rules) sports. Twenty-nine clubs were based in urban areas, while two clubs were located in regional areas. The project was approved by the committees of all participating clubs. While it is outside the scope of this paper to report the findings by type of sport, the selection of clubs was made to enable a broad range of responses to questions about diversity and diversity work.

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from 123 semi-structured interviews that were conducted by the research team across the 31 community sport organizations. Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling technique which sought to select those club members who had knowledge and experience of diversity work within their clubs. The members were provided with a plain language statement that explained the nature of the research project and of their participation, and any questions they raised were addressed by

the researchers. Those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to sign a written consent form. The respondents performed a range of roles at the clubs, such as committee members, coaches, volunteers, parents and players. This included several individuals who sought to promote diversity through their respective roles as, for instance, club president, committee member, or parent. The majority of interviews were conducted at local sports venues, such as club rooms or offices, while some were conducted at the respondent's home, at the university, or in a local café. The interviews lasted an average of one hour. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Full human ethics approval was obtained from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The interview questions were developed with the intent of capturing the participants' commitment and attitudes to diversity, perceptions and experiences of diversity at their club, specific actions they had taken to promote diversity at the club, and perceptions and experiences of resistance to change. Questions either pertained directly to the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section (e.g., What things have you done to make people from different backgrounds feel comfortable at the club? Do you think your efforts have changed the club at all?), or were framed in a more general way (e.g., How would you describe what diversity is at the club?).

The interview transcripts were entered into Nvivo 11 data analysis software and coded using thematic analysis techniques. Six of the investigators independently read a proportion (10%) of the transcripts and coded passages of text firstly using an open (or initial meaning code) and secondly an axial (or categorization of open codes) coding scheme. For example, the statement *'We've only got so many people doing things and it's becomes about the amount of work you put in and what comes back out ... getting disability teams up and running is a lot of work and it will likely not lead to that many members'* would initially be coded as Resistance. After similar statements related to the theme Resistance were open

coded, all the statements under this code would then be coded a second time to further categorize the statement. In this example, the statement would be further coded under the axial code—cost/benefit. Dialogue among all the investigators resulted in intersubjective agreement on the interpretation of the identified passages and codes. Two of the investigators then coded the transcripts line by line; a third investigator reviewed the coding to further strengthen the dependability of the findings.

The trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings were enhanced in a number of ways. Notably, a pilot interview study was initially conducted to develop and test both the theoretical framework for this study and the adequacy and appropriateness of the interview questions. Based on the pilot study the interview guide was refined and a number of questions were reformulated and added. In addition, ongoing discussion and reflection within the research team allowed for researcher triangulation, whereby investigators who are experts in specific diversity issues (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, Indigenous) provide advice and input into the development of the interview guide.

In this paper, we focus primarily on interviews conducted with club representatives at community sport organizations that engaged in diversity work. The majority of data presented below was collected at fourteen clubs that were relatively active in promoting diversity. Diversity management is not being adopted widely among local sports clubs (Spaaij et al., 2014), and most of the clubs examined in this paper are thus atypical or outlier cases. Yet, these atypical cases are especially important for the purpose of this paper as they reveal more information than the potentially representative case. The cases examined here have strategic importance in relation to the question addressed in this paper: how and why is diversity work done in community sport organizations? We were particularly interested in organizations where members have made explicit attempts to implement strategies to increase diversity. The next section presents the research findings.

## **Why do clubs engage in diversity work?**

Why would voluntary sports clubs be committed to diversity? Our data indicate the interplay of internal and external factors.

### *External drivers of diversity work*

External drivers of diversity work were diverse and comprised both demographic changes as well as perceived changes in community attitudes and values in relation to gender, sexuality, cultural diversity and other social relations. However, at most of the clubs we studied volunteers focused on either cultural diversity or gender, which are examined below. As we have previously written (Spaaij et al., 2014), there was often a discrepancy between how sports clubs defined diversity and how they responded to it in practice. They tended to define diversity in broad terms, but they typically operationalized it in narrow terms. In daily organizational practice, sports clubs often emphasized one axis of diversity over others in ways that neglected at least some of the key social relations and their intersections (Spaaij et al., 2014).

One external factor that led clubs to diversity work was wider demographic changes due to migration flows in the neighbourhoods in which the clubs are located. These have been significant to two clubs, Clubs #1 and #4, but for different reasons. Club #1 noticed the increasing cultural diversity of the suburb in which the club is located, including the arrival of growing numbers of African migrants with relatively low socioeconomic status who predominantly moved into social housing in close proximity to the club. A committee member traced this development to 2008 when the club was contacted by various social agencies seeking to enter newly arrived migrant youth into the club as part of a strategy

aimed at integrating them into the local community. This challenged the club as traditionally they had required forms to be signed and parents of new players to attend a meeting but that was often not possible due to varying family situations of the newly arrived migrant youth. The club realized it had to become more proactive and flexible in its approach to engaging these youth. The club did so by opening up its club facilities to non-members, introducing a subsidized fees policy and hiring a multicultural aid to assist in engaging migrant young people, among other strategies. The local demographic change was the driver for the alteration of the club's approach to diversity but with positive results as the club was able to expand its numbers significantly while also developing a more diverse membership base.

Demographic changes also affected the local community Club #4 was located in, but unlike Club #1, which was approached and asked to engage the migrant young people, the self-styled 'white, Anglo' club had been gradually losing playing members as newly arrived migrants were not coming to the club and this membership loss drove the club to embrace diversity more readily. A committee member reflected:

Six years ago I came on board as a committee member we were actually starting to lose the bottom tier of our age group ... So one of our first keys was to sit down and really assess where the club was at. We really needed to have a bit more of a 'bigger picture' look. We knew on the surface we were lacking volunteers, we were lacking kids, but did we have all the things in place to be attractive to people that wanted to come and play? (Committee member, Club #4)

This respondent indicated that the club took an honest approach to assessing how it operated and what it looked like to this changing local community:

[It] was about facing our faults as much as our challenges...Looking at the demographics and the different nationalities [in the local area], what the different nationalities needed and wanted, how could we offer that, what were the stumbling blocks? Language being one that stands out fairly clear. You know most of the children had some form of English because they were in the school environment, but a lot of the parents had no English. The kids would go home and speak their nationality's language and so mum and dad weren't learning English. So they didn't feel comfortable speaking to us.

The club employed strategies to engage with these families, the most successful being the production of club information in multiple languages. This strategy was 'about making them feel they belong, and this is a place they can come and feel safe. And no matter where they are in their life span they're accepted into our environment' (Committee member, Club #4). It took the club five years to embed cultural diversity as an institutional paradigm that they would operate within. The changes were institutionalized because they were considered essential to all club stakeholders and to the club's future success.

The broader context in which to view the external force placed upon these organizations relates to Australia's diverse population and its impact on community sports clubs. Clubs' promotion of gender diversity can also be viewed in this light. A club president (Club #2) explained how the club he first joined was a 'boys club' but recognized that over time society had changed and so too had the club. Referring to an 'old club versus new club' descriptor, he considered the need to drive change from a men's club to a community club open to all:

But you know, that's just society and you either go with it or you don't and we choose to go with it, but that's our philosophy, we want an open door policy that anyone can come and play a game of footie or come and watch a game of footie... [at] a community club and that's what we aim to be.

He elaborated that 'the old theory of whatever happens on a football field stays out there and you go and have a beer afterwards. And unfortunately life's not going to be like that anymore because that's just not the way it is'. A female member (Club #2) involved in the girls teams indicated that there has been considerable change from when she first joined the club a decade ago:

I think back then too we might have felt like we weren't fully involved as a whole club, that we still felt sort of segregated from the entire club. So we've worked really hard over the last few years to bring it all in closer and be more involved...and really get that family atmosphere happening (Committee member, Club #2).

Indicating the overall effect on this 'new club', the president reported:

Frankly, if anyone tried to come into the club and wanted to do things a different way and it wasn't the right way you'd pull them into line pretty quickly. So there's a general maturity about the whole club in the fact that people just know what the rules are without even being told I think and that's you know again it's an acceptance of having different people around the place and you know everyone knows where they stand.

Both clubs indicated that while there had been resistance to embracing diversity from some members, most stakeholders were on board. The diversity drive and subsequent organizational change was supported by others at Club #2, a typical comment being: ‘in being diverse you have got to be prepared to change to improve, and if you don’t you actually slide backwards’ (Coach, Club #2).

Demographic change was the main external driver of diversity work for the clubs in this study. Although several of the sports had diversity policies, no clubs expressed those policies as driving them to embrace diversity and put in place diversity management strategies.

#### *Internal drivers of diversity work*

Two approaches dominated clubs’ narratives of internal drivers of diversity work: the committee-driven approach and the champion-driven approach. These two approaches, discussed below, shape how the clubs do diversity work.

The committee-driven approach has been alluded to in the previous section with club committees realizing that as local populations or societal attitudes changed, the club had to adapt. Club committees are responsible for governance and administration. The committee structure is how community sport organizations make decisions about its commitments, even if their decisions cannot be treated as institutional commitments. At one of the cricket clubs, committee members argued that diversity work was a collective social responsibility, a ‘duty’ (Committee member, Club #30). The club was located in a multicultural working-class suburb of Melbourne and had a culturally diverse membership. The committee members explained that they had remained steadfast in their mission to create a welcoming club environment, despite resistance from some club members:



There has been some resistance, definitely. It hasn't been an easy sell for everybody. But where people didn't understand it and really resisted, you know we were steadfast in our message that unfortunately this club is for equal participation. We were crystal clear that this is what we're about, these are our values, and we're sticking to it, we hope you understand. (Committee member, Club #30)

Here we find traces of how diversity has been incorporated as a value by club committee members, who are 'institutional insiders', to the point where it becomes 'part of how the institution feels and thinks' (Ahmed, 2012: 113). Yet, committee leadership does not occur in a vacuum; instead, it relies on engagement with, and buy-in from, club members. As a committee member at a different club noted:

It's vital that your members, everyone needs to be on the same page. It's no point a committee trying to steer the ship one way and you've got membership base that's gone 'we're not on board'...So we needed our members to buy in...We were lucky that through, again, through the committee being projecting the fact they [members] were confident in what they'd put forward...we were able to show over time by doing the hard yards we actually started to reap rewards. (Committee member, Club #4)

More common than the committee-driven approach was the champion-driven approach to diversity. The latter involved an individual at the club who took on diversity work at the club, often based on their professional or personal experience with diversity, for example because they have a family member or close friend who has a disability (cf. Melton and Cunningham, 2014). A committee member (Club #10) had personal experience with disability and decided to organize an All Abilities program, a program to foster participation of people with a

disability, while a female volunteer at a football club (Club #27) was inspired by her work at a migrant resource centre to support newly arrived migrants at her club. A coach at another football club got involved because the club his son played at did not have a girls' team for his daughter to participate in. This coach reflected:

Unless someone was willing to put their hand up and go 'This is my passion. I'm going to take this on and I'm going to do it.'...I think five years ago they didn't have a girls' team at all in the whole club, until someone said 'I'm going to take this on and do it' and that person [the speaker] single-handedly got it up. (Coach, Club #29)

At other clubs an individual volunteer was also single-handedly responsible for establishing an All Abilities program with each having a child with a disability whose needs at the club were not catered for in the same way they were for their able-bodied siblings. A participation officer at a basketball club gave a specific example:

[The parent's] son has a mild intellectual disability.....most of the credit should go to [the parent], she's done a lot of work with the local schools, the local about six schools, that cater for special needs participants in basketball. So she's done a lot of, you know, driving them around and getting people to the games and away from the games, and organizing social functions and organizing the Monday trainings, getting kids there. So yeah, she's definitely the key driver of the program, I just help to facilitate it, but it's mainly [the parent]. (Participation officer, Club #23)

The same situation occurred at a different basketball club (Club #18), where a parent of a child with a disability championed the provision of participation opportunities for children with a disability.

At two clubs the champion-driven and committee-driven diversity work fused when a committee member decided to promote disability provision by establishing an All Abilities program. At one cricket club, the president added this to his already significant duties but with reward in his view:

The best thing about the All Abilities program has been to get some of these real ocker Aussie blokes who swear like troopers and would never care less about someone with a disability unless it was their own and [I] get them involved and [I] actually watch them and see the turnaround in them. And after the program's finished or in years to come they're just completely different, completely different people and actually nine times out of ten turn out to be the best advocates. (President, Club #20)

This arguably is an unintended consequence of the trickle-down effect of the diversity champion, but it is clear that, at least at this club, without diversity work instigated by the champion such club members would most likely not get involved in the All Abilities team.

At another cricket club, a committee member (Club #21) took responsibility to run an All Abilities program but said that he had full committee support for doing so. This he felt made it much easier to establish and embed the program in the club. On this point, however, the committee member stated that diversity work at the club had 'been more accidental than anything else', and acknowledged that without his championing of the disability program (by pushing it on the agenda and subsequently implementing it) it might have never been achieved.

Of the two key internal drivers, the champion-led approach was much more common. Most clubs were happy to leave the promotion of diversity to their champions rather than having committees decide that diversity was needed and putting in place steps to attract diverse participation at the club. This finding echoes Ahmed's (2007) observation that institutions have commitment to diversity only to the extent that individuals within the institutions commit to diversity.

The reliance on individual diversity champions in the community sports clubs we interviewed has significant implications, insofar as the values of, and action toward, diversity are embodied by individuals rather than by the club as a whole. This is a well-known dilemma in diversity work. Committed individuals are key to making diversity work happen; yet, the champion-driven approach often proves unsustainable and ineffective in the longer term, particularly in organizations with limited organizational capacity. As volunteers come and go, or as their priorities change, so too diversity work comes and goes (Ahmed, 2012: 135). This dilemma was noted at several clubs. For instance, a female football committee member (Club #27) explained how a volunteer had championed the participation of newly arrived migrants at the club. When this volunteer left to pursue a new career, her diversity work went too. The club sought to obtain funding from the national governing body for football because 'we actually wanted to employ someone part time to recruit and liaise with families and really go all out'. The committee member lamented that 'they didn't [provide the funding], they only gave a fraction of what we asked for so we didn't get enough money to do that.' As a result, the promotion of cultural diversity at the club had waned considerably in recent years. Similar concerns were voiced at other clubs.

A key challenge for diversity workers, then, is to translate individual commitment into institutionalized commitment and action. This may create organizational tension which can manifest itself as resistance. It is to this issue that we now turn.

## **Resistance and the brick wall**

When clubs decided to pursue diversity work, the actual doing of the work raised further challenges, even where the club committee was driving the change. Earlier we noted how diversity workers come up against a brick wall: ‘the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible’ (Ahmed, 2012: 26). Our research uncovered similar experiences within the context of community sport organizations. Resistance to change is an issue those seeking to promote diversity regularly face. The metaphor of the brick wall was explicitly mentioned by some respondents. A female coach (Club #2) who was involved with the girls teams of the Aussie rules club found the early years difficult due to the male-dominated club culture and felt that trying to promote gender equity was ‘like we were banging a few heads against the wall’. In a similar vein, a football club committee member (Club #3) who sought to champion gender equity commented that ‘you get to the point where you sort of get to the end of your tethers and you think “I’ve contributed enough to this and I’ve been hit by the wall for long enough”’. These comments indicate the existence of ‘the wall’ in community sport organizations. In this section we explore the types of resistance faced by those involved in diversity work in the clubs under study.

The first form of resistance that was frequently noted concerned organizational capacity and, in particular, the critical reliance on volunteers and the relative shortage of economic resources (cf. Doherty et al., 2014). This specifically concerned the way clubs were already over-burdened with core tasks and functions to the point that many members and volunteers considered diversity work a step too far or preferred to put it in the ‘too hard’ basket. Put differently, diversity work was often not considered a club’s core business (Spaij

et al., 2014). As a cricket club president (Club #20) stated: ‘People’s time is very limited and the easiest thing for most clubs is to say, “why worry about this [diversity] stuff when we’ve got to worry about all of our important stuff”. That would be their attitude.’ A football coach elaborated:

“Yeah, it’s a great idea, but who’s going to do it?” you know, that kind of thing. So, they’re such a stretched entity that they’re struggling just to get quality coaches for the kids who are capable and able to be there, let alone to try and include other groups, or target other groups. I think that’s their big... you know, the big issue (Coach, Club #29)

In the same vein, the vice-president of a hockey club stated:

Well that’s to me it seems that’s our number one problem. Whether it’s running external programs or any, you know, cultural diverse programs or anything. We struggle to get all our coaches for our teams, we struggle for people in the canteen, you know. So these are things that we’re faced with weekly, you know. But we love to run like programs yeah, we would, but again, it’s just the resources and people available, you know, and that’s the hard thing...if we had 13 new kids rock up at the start of the year, it doesn’t matter what nationality, we’d struggle to cope with such a massive influx. (Vice-president, Club #22)

Relying on people to volunteer their time was a key constraint in this regard. Promoting diversity was seen by many as too much to handle for already busy club members. A committee member at a basketball club (Club #1) indicated that ‘some people...just don’t

have enough time...and I am sure it's not always because they don't care, they just...they're too busy'. A fellow committee member expanded on this:

Like a lot of volunteer organizations it's probably more difficult to get volunteers in a lot of capacities now. People think they're too busy and they're working longer hours or their kids are doing three million things and so they haven't got time to help with the projects, with the organizations, that their kids are doing things with. (Committee member, Club #1)

Likewise, at one of the cricket clubs (Club #7), members stated they did not want to field and run the All Abilities teams because it would involve too much work due to the lack of volunteers within the club and lack of funding to cater for the teams.

The brick wall also revealed itself in other situations, such as when attempts to introduce new initiatives were perceived by club members as disrupting or bypassing the 'normal' operation and decision-making processes at the club. For example, the commitment of two senior members of a cricket club (Club #7), the club president and a development officer, to increase disability provision within the club caused tensions amongst committee members. One committee member reflected on the creation of the All Abilities program as follows:

That wasn't voted on by the Committee. That was done by [the president] and [the development officer]. And that's the thing, I've got no problem with it, but I would have liked to have a vote on it. Because we originally got [the development officer] as our junior coordinator, but now he has this role, now going to the All Abilities kind of thing.

The perceived lack of resources meant that several members were concerned that the club would be taking on too much, and would not have the resources to cater for new teams.

Other aspects of resistance also emerged from the interviews, including the resistance individuals sometimes faced from the club committee. The coach (Club #29) who established the girls' teams at his football club felt that the committee resisted his efforts:

I created a website, put my own policies up there and I wrote my own coaching, sort of, what I believe in, belief statements and I sent it to [the committee], so they absolutely knew what I expected and what they were going to get...I sent it to a couple of people, but I got nothing, you know, doughnuts. They probably thought I'm... I think they think I'm a bit of a wacko actually.

In a similar vein, the Club #2 president had difficulties with certain members who tried to keep the 'old boys club' alive rather than embracing the 'new club' that the president envisioned. At Club #4, a coach commented that 'a lot of people are just ignorant and just do not understand'. This view was shared by a committee member at a basketball club (Club #1), who considered that some parents of junior club members did not 'really care what else is happening outside of their own vision', a point related to by a coach at a football club (Club #8) who said of the information he sent members: 'people just don't read it, just pure and simple'.

A recurring theme in the narratives of the diversity workers interviewed is the need to have the whole of the organization onside. This theme echoes a key challenge in diversity work: how to translate individual commitment into collective commitment (Ahmed, 2012). Individual champions of diversity or committed committees were considered vital to



promoting diversity and associated programs, but the reliance on individuals who champion diversity was also seen as a limitation, in the sense that the values of equity and diversity are embodied by such people, rather than by the club as a whole. A diversity champion at Club #7 stated that education was critical in this respect, specifically with the creation of the All Abilities program at the cricket club. This was because no club members or volunteers offered to assist with the program team when it was introduced, and getting them 'on board' was a key challenge. He expressed:

I guess it's the education. A lot of people don't know. Their perception of All Abilities means people in wheelchairs, so we have to upgrade our toilet facilities. No, we don't have to. 'Oh it'll be too hard, there's too many people we've got to look after with carers around.' No, you don't have to. The perception [is] we have to buy a lot of equipment to cater for them. No, you don't have to.

At some clubs, gender equity was promoted through a deliberate policy of electing women to the committee. The president of a football/netball club justified this approach as follows:

There's always the risk that the guys will just do what the guys want to do, and we've got to be mindful of that and having women in the organization it helps you think a bit more laterally and not with the tunnel vision of 'it's football, football, football'. So I think that gives us a lot more reason to think the way we do. Again, that's why I insisted we had women on there. (President, Club #2)

A committee member at an Aussie rules club got involved as a volunteer solely because at the time the club had a woman president. She accepts that this is seen as different to the norm:

I still think in the wider community sometimes females aren't necessarily treated with the same high degree as what males are and sometimes I think they look at our club and see that the president is a female and the secretary is a female and that's quite unusual. (Committee member, Club #4)

However, both clubs indicated that the presence of women at committee level was a vital message regarding the club's stance on diversity.

Two approaches to creating organizational buy-in for diversity work stood out. Some clubs sought to provide explicit recognition and reward for volunteers and, in particular, for individual champions. As a committee member at Club #4 explained, 'we reward our volunteers. So there was a real... they could see we were buying in to this, so they bought in to it. But if we couldn't get them to buy in we were... you might as well have given up'. The rewards involved certain financial remuneration for fuel, free social events and discount membership fees for themselves and their children which were formal and tangible rewards. Other clubs took a more informal approach:

We try not to put too much structure in place. One because we haven't had a need to and we feel that it's certainly... well it's not that you can run the risk that you're actually starting to, as you say, putting certain policies in you may excluded others as well. You don't really want to have that 'us' and 'them' and the 'big stick approach'.  
(Committee member, Club #21)

Diversity workers sought to expose and navigate 'the wall' in different ways depending on the institutional context and resistance they encountered.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper critically examines how and why diversity work is done in community sport organizations. The findings show that diversity work in sports clubs is mostly haphazard or accidental, at least initially, responding to a combination of external and internal factors. There were relatively few instances where diversity practice was in direct response to external policy drivers. Commitment to and action toward diversity almost invariably begins with an individual or small group of individuals taking on the role of diversity champion who exhibits extra-role behaviours aimed at ensuring the success of diversity initiatives. Diversity work in sports clubs often emerges by chance, typically through an individual member with certain standing within the club, such as a committee member or experienced volunteer, who is committed to diversity based on personal values.

Our findings reveal a key tension within diversity work. On the one hand, individual champions are key to the promotion of diversity; without them, it is likely to fall off the agenda. Our study reinforces previous research which suggests that champions can play a key role in creating more welcoming and accepting environments by modelling supportive behaviours and positive attitudes towards minorities and by providing minorities with greater participation opportunities (Melton and Cunningham, 2014). On the other hand, the heavy reliance on diversity champions has serious limits. While committed individuals are key to making diversity work happen, the champion-driven approach often proves unsustainable and insufficient to achieve organizational change. Our findings thus echo Brayboy's (2003: 72) conclusion that change efforts are 'bound to fail in the absence of an institutional commitment to incorporating strategies for diversity'.

The resistance faced by diversity champions in community sports organizations provides insight into this tension within diversity work. The transformation of diversity into an institutional end was experienced as an ongoing challenge that inevitably involved working through resistance. Individuals seeking to promote diversity within their organization often faced a brick wall, which reveals both diversity work itself as resistance and the resistance diversity champions face in their follow-up actions, which other members often considered as being at odds with their own attitudes or, more commonly, as infeasible initiatives that could (and should) not be resourced. This resistance indicates that in community sport organizations diversity is typically not an institutional commitment in the strong sense of the term, as something the organization wholeheartedly supports and embodies. Yet, the ability of champions to advance change initiatives was also mediated by their power and status within the organization. Similar to Melton and Cunningham (2014), we found that those who held power in the club as ‘institutional insiders’ (Ahmed, 2012), such as the president, were often in a better position to advocate for diversity and to overcome resistance.

Overall, our findings reinforce Ahmed’s (2012) argument that it is of critical import to transform the haphazard nature of diversity work into a structure. She describes diversity work as ‘resistance to the casualization of the commitment to diversity’ (Ahmed, 2012: 132). The personal commitment not only of diversity champions but of leadership is a starting point. In a practical sense, this means that organizations should take steps to ensure that members who want to become champions have the necessary training, skills and resources to become effective diversity workers in the organization (Melton and Cunningham, 2014). Yet, in order to be effective, diversity work also necessitates the transformation of individual commitment into collective, ‘lived’ commitment across all levels of the organization. This will require a critical evaluation of the organizational structure and culture to ensure members are afforded

the power and support to promote inclusive practices in their organization. As this paper highlights, resistance and the experience of a brick wall are integral parts of this process and will have a bearing on whether change initiatives will succeed or fail. This is precisely where diversity work in community sport derives its essential function and value, by seeking to close the gap between policy rhetoric and actual practice.

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