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Informal sport and (non)belonging among Hazara migrants in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Sport participation can offer migrants a modality to connect with dominant cultural norms and potentially foster interculturalism, yet it is often fraught with exclusion. Little is known about how informal sports that migrants have introduced into countries of resettlement affect their (non)belonging. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork over a 14-month period, this article examines how Hazara men's involvement in the ethno-specific informal sport of sangarag influences their post-migration experiences of (non)belonging in Australia. The findings indicate that Hazara men's construction of sangarag as a space and resource for belonging needs to be understood as a response to the challenging circumstances they experience in their settlement journeys. The overt and subtle politics of belonging that govern sangarag reinforce intra-group differentiations, most notably in relation to gender and ability. Further tensions stem from sangarag's marginal status outside of the Australian sports system, leaving participants to feel unsupported and misrecognised by local institutions. Implications for policy include the need to recognise and support the value that informal sports can have for migrants' ability to (re)claim a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

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Introduction

Post-migration settlement entails a 'continuation of a fraught journey in which [settlers] must continually seek new strategies to pursue viable futures' (Nunn et al. 2017, 45). This journey is one of the lives in progress and flux, characterised by a fair degree of mobility (Galligan, Boese, and Phillips 2014), 'progressing into something other than a fixed position' (Mackenzie and Guntarik 2015, 75). A prominent source of tension, challenge, and navigation throughout this journey revolves around belonging – a sense of attachment and relationship to people, places, practices, issues and institutions that matter to them (Probyn 1996; Habib and Ward 2019a).

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There is a growing body of research that examines sport and leisure as contexts and resources for belonging, acculturation, and place-making in migration and settlement journeys (Burdsey 2008; Lewis 2015; Stone 2018; Spaaij and Broerse 2019; De Martini Ugolotti 2020; Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021; De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell 2021; Swain, Lashua, and Spracklen 2021; Aquino et al. 2022; Halilovich, Boz, and Kianpour 2022). Research that focuses on engagement in sport has tended to prioritise formal, organised team sports that are culturally dominant in countries of resettlement, such as football (soccer), cricket, and rugby (league and union). Consequently, research has frequently been somewhat narrowly framed around policy categories and priorities in ways that may constrain 'the type of questions asked, the objects of study and the methods and analysis adopted' (Bakewell 2008, 433). This is evident in, for example, the emphasis on 'integration' into mainstream clubs, rather than co-ethnic or informal modalities (e.g. Spaaij and Broerse 2019; Spaaij and Schaillée 2020; Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021), as the preferred mode of participation because of its perceived 'capacity to promote the development of bridging social capital' (Block and Gibbs 2017, 98). This policy ideal of integration into clubs is at odds with the fact that mainstream sports settings can have the effect of assimilation and social control, whereby migrants are expected to fit into existing social structures and club cultures that do not necessarily recognise their identities or meet their needs and aspirations (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Agergaard 2018; Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019).

In this paper, we depart from a focus on formal, 'mainstream' sport to draw attention to informal sports that migrants themselves introduce into countries of resettlement. Such 'physical cultural diversity' remains understudied but can 'shed light on the role of sport in promoting multiculturalism, intercultural understanding, and social inclusion in its broadest sense' (Nakamura and Donnelly 2017, 112). Moreover, we argue that informal sports of this nature can potentially provide safe (yet stratified) spaces for migrant communities that face systemic barriers to participation in mainstream sport, including a great sense of power and ownership over the conditions and quality of their engagement (Spaaij 2012; Spaaij and Broerse 2018). For example, Kukreja (2022) shows how the adoption of the 'in-the-margin' non-elite sport of Kabaddi enables undocumented South Asian migrant men in Greece 'to resist structural discriminations and unequal relations of power impelled by their migrant illegality and racialised masculine otherness' (2). Kukreja argues that, through Kabaddi, these men 'simultaneously engage in creating cultural meaning and wresting subjectivity against border regimes' in ways that are 'both contradictory and exclusionary as they rely on culturally repressive hegemonic masculine norms responsible for the men's forced migration from home countries and [exclude] men unable or unwilling to subscribe to this masculinity' (3). In a similar vein, De Martini Ugolotti (2022) brings into view the relevance in informal sports, such as parkour, as entry points to address post-migrant youth's experiences and negotiations of the politics of belonging and citizenship in contemporary urban contexts.

This article builds on this notion of informal sport as an entry point to understand the settlement experiences of forced migrants. We aim to progress this understanding through a particular focus on engagement in an informal sport that Hazara migrants have introduced into countries of resettlement, namely *sangarag*, which translates from Hazaragi into English as 'rock-target' (or more liberally, rock throwing). Hazaras are a minority Shia Muslim group from the mountainous region of Hazaristan (or

Hazarajat) in central Afghanistan who have for centuries endured persecution, oppression, and slavery at the hands of Sunni Muslim rulers (Majeed 2020, 2021; Radford and Hetz 2021). The research question we aim to address is: how does engagement in sangarag affect Hazara men's experiences of (non)belonging in Australia? We examine this question through qualitative fieldwork comprising observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with sangarag participants over a 14-month (COVID-19 lockdown affected) period. The findings indicate that participants actively re-create sangarag in response to challenging social and health circumstances. Despite non-Hazara Australians being unfamiliar with, or even resistant to, the game, sangarag is anything but trivial to its participants. For its most devoted participants, sangarag constitutes a prominent element of their social lives, with considerable time, attention, and discipline dedicated to it.

In the next section, we provide a brief historical contextualisation to the experiences of Hazaras in Australia. We then outline the theoretical framework that informs this study, drawing on concept of belonging. We proceed by presenting our empirical findings and reflecting upon their implications for research, policy, and practice.

Hazara persecution and resettlement

Twenty years after their removal from power by the United States-led coalition forces, the Taliban reassumed control of Afghanistan in August 2021 following a violent insurgency that brought about the cessation of the US-Taliban peace deal and rapid government collapse. Hazaras have made significant social progress during the two decades of the Allied-supported government rule but the Taliban return to power renders Hazaras' fear of further repression and persecution (Mohammadi and Askaray 2021).

Australia is one of several countries of resettlement for the Hazara. Their exact numbers in Australia are difficult to ascertain as some Hazara are hesitant to publicly reveal their ethnicity due to ongoing fear of persecution (Copolov, Knowles, and Meyer 2018). Census data indicate that 59,797 Afghanistan-born people reside in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022), up from 46,800 in the 2016 census (Department of Home Affairs 2018). The 2016 census revealed that two-thirds of Afghanistan-born people identified as Afghan, 22% as Hazara, and the remainder as either Australian, English, or other. This included a relatively high number of young Hazara men who arrived in Australia as unaccompanied minors. The median age of this migrant group was 31 years, compared to 44 years for all overseas migrants; 61% identify as men, and 39% as women (Department of Home Affairs 2018). At the 2016 Census, 30% of the Afghanistan-born aged 15 years and over had some form of higher non-school qualification, whilst 21% had no qualifications and were still attending an educational institution. The corresponding rates for the total Australian population were 60% and 8.5%, respectively. Among Afghanistan-born people aged 15 years and over, the participation rate in the labour force was 52%, of which 47% were employed in either a skilled managerial, professional or trade occupation. The unemployment rate was nearly 18%, compared to 7% in the total Australian population.

Research affirms the complexities of Hazara migrants' settlement journey to Australia (Lange, Kamalkhani, and Baldassar 2007; Mackenzie and Guntarik 2015; Parkes 2020). Challenges pertain, for example, to health and wellbeing (Iqbal et al. 2012), everyday otherness (Radford 2016), sense of (non)belonging (Mackenzie and Guntarik 2015),

identity and cultural negotiation (Radford and Hetz 2021; Raza 2018; Parkes 2020; Iqbal et al. 2012), education (Iqbal et al. 2012), and the insecurities faced by unaccompanied minors (Neve 2021). Hazara migrants typically experience the resettlement process as extremely challenging due to lengthy visa application processes and the different cultural customs and values, language, and societal and political structures (Lange, Kamalkhani, and Baldassar 2007). The Hazara are largely humanitarian migrants arriving in Australia as refugees or asylum seekers. Media and political labelling of Hazara as 'boat people' draws them into 'the negative discourse on boat people and refugees that has gained such a perverse yet strong grip on the body politic in Australia' (Collins, Watson, and Krivokapic-Skoko 2017, 3), which also informs the othering of the Hazara in everyday encounters between community groups (Radford 2016). Those who arrive in Australia through 'people smuggling' routes are considered 'unlawful non-citizens' and are placed temporarily in detention camps while their refugee status application is assessed, a process that could result in deportation.

Taken together, the literature on Hazara resettlement draws attention to lives in transition, characterised by experiences of becoming, belonging, and exclusion in community and civic life. In most cases, this involves a recognition of hybrid and contested belongings and the shared acquisition of Australian and Hazara symbolic and material resources (Mackenzie and Guntarik 2015; Radford and Hetz 2021). In the next section, we discuss this recognition more theoretically through the concept of (non)belonging.

Forced migration and (non)belonging

Those who experience displacement and subsequently arrive in countries of resettlement in the Global North are expected by the destination country to adjust and integrate into that country's (imagined) dominant culture (Ager and Strang 2008; Castles and Ozkul 2014). Such adjustment is a two-way process (Valtonen 2004) that involves constant negotiations of belonging and community, shaped by the interplay between the aspirations and resources of migrants on the one hand, and structural forces and normative discourses on the other hand (Spaaij and Broerse 2018). In reality, this journey is often fraught with tensions and multifaceted challenges of navigating the health system, securing accommodation, acquiring employment and education opportunities as well as negotiating basic daily survival and support services, often without a command of the English language (Galligan, Boese, and Phillips 2014; Parkes 2020; Radford and Hetz 2021). Mental health issues and social isolation are commonly reported as persisting problems for forced migrants even after resettlement (Strang and Quinn 2019).

As noted earlier, a prominent source of tension, challenge, and negotiation within settlement journeys revolves around (non)belonging. Belonging is a continual, non-linear process that is tied closely to both everyday experiences and common collective experiences – 'a personal dialectic in constant negotiation with one's surroundings' (Habib and Ward 2019b, 1). Belonging is an essential need that involves an active process of forming bonds of connection, 'crucial to those with experience as refugees' (Picton and Banfield 2019, 117). Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti (2021) argue that '(re)creating and strengthening relations of belonging is a critical aspect of resettlement'.

Migration activates relations of (non)belonging with new places, practices, communities, and institutions that are often hostile and precarious (Chopra and Dryden-Peterson 2020). Sporton and Valentine (2007, 19) found that 'a sense of "belonging" in a country develops where a community has a sense of security and space to define its own identity beyond or alongside narrow prescriptions of national identity'. Yet, such security and space is often limited by prevailing politics of nationhood and citizenship that seek to govern which identities are socially acceptable and whose bodies are in – and out of – place (Yuval-Davis 2011; Valentine, Sporton, and Nielsen 2009).

Theories of belonging warn against simplistic or romanticised notions of settling into or belonging to a community. (Non)belonging is influenced by a myriad of pre- and post-migration factors (Galligan, Boese, and Phillips 2014), and it is rarely absolute. We are located within a hierarchy of belonging in a given sphere – hence the insertion of '(non)' in our conceptualising of (non)belonging (Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021). Belonging is mediated by both the desires and resources of those seeking to belong and the politics that govern to whom belonging is granted (Yuval-Davis 2011). This 'granting' power involves what Hage (1998) refers to as 'governmental belonging' (46), which is claimed by those who are in a dominant position and can lead to individuals or groups being excluded from access to membership, participation, and status. For example, national discourse may encourage seemingly innocuous facets of cultural diversity such as food, language, and dress, while simultaneously discouraging the expression of religious and cultural values that are perceived to be at odds with the dominant culture and a threat to social cohesion (Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019). In such circumstances, people can experience a profound sense of non-belonging or 'un-belonging' (Habib and Ward 2019a), which may be reflected in experiences of isolation, powerlessness, and being unable to fully articulate the pressures people feel due to their displacement and settlement challenges. These experiences foreground vital questions of who is a stranger and who does not belong (Yuval-Davis 2011; Baak et al. 2019).

Navigating tensions around becoming part of what it means 'to be Australian', and feeling accepted and recognised as such, is something that Hazara migrants to Australia typically experience as challenging (Radford and Hetz 2021). As part of this navigation process, migrants tend to cultivate a sense of belonging to homeland within the context of diaspora. Brown (2011) has shown how diasporic belonging, understood through a common culture of symbols, values, and practices, is expressed in very different ways depending on, *inter alia*, migrants' circumstances and experiences. These expressions are often hybrid and plural as migrants actively negotiate both ethnic majority and migrant institutions and networks (Erel 2010; Noble, Poynting, and Tabar 1999), hence drawing attention to the importance of migrants' agency in marking out notions of belonging (Habib and Ward 2019a). Brown (2011) argues that an exploration into the agentic attachments derived from the practice of cultural markers such as family, religion, language, and food, 'contributes to our understanding of what it means to belong to a homeland within the context of diaspora'. Reflecting developments in the aforementioned literature (e.g. Joseph 2014; Spaaij and Broerse 2019; De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell 2021), in this paper we extend these cultural markers to include informal sport.

Non(belonging) is further influenced by multiple intersectional categories (Habib and Ward 2019a) that fuel and contour intra- and inter-group differentiations. Opportunities

for creating a sense of migrant belonging in and through sport are gendered and available largely to those who possess an embodied social history grounded in sport acquired pre-migration (Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019; Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021). Engaging in familiar sporting practices can provide a sense of pleasure and freedom, amidst the uncertainties and challenges of resettlement (Spracklen, Long, and Hylton 2015), and an embodied and affective connection community, offering a sense of continuity in the face of significant changes (Spaaij 2015; Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017). However, this resource for belonging may not be available to all who long to belong. For example, Balram, Pang, and Knijnik (2022) show how a triple layer of marginalisation deprived Indo-Fijian girls of real opportunities and rights in sports that also thwarted their national belonging. Aquino et al. (2022) found that the pick-up basketball games Filipino migrants in Singapore played were 'a highly masculine space that signals gendered exclusions operating simultaneously with inter-ethnic/inter-racial inclusion', whilst volleyball games were 'more inclusive across genders' (483). It is therefore crucial to also examine how notions of belonging created in and through cultural practices (re-) produce intra-group hierarchical distinctions and exclusions.

Methods

The data presented in this paper is a case study drawn from a research project examining the health and social implications of informal sport participation. Ethics approval to conduct this research was granted by Monash University's ethics committee. The case was identified by a local government stakeholder in southeast metropolitan Melbourne in part due to concerns raised by community members to the council about a group of 'strangers' who occupied wasteland to throw objects at targets, causing a resident to refer to them as 'terrorists in training'.

The second and fifth authors initially visited the identified sporting reserve and encountered the group on vacant grassland behind a children's play area that adjoined a walking path and car park. After standing on the outer of what turned out to be a sangarag game, the researchers approached the group and were directed to its organisers where casual conversation focused on the identity of the group as Hazara, the background of the group and the nature of the sport, including its rules, scoring mechanism and similarities to sports more familiar to the researchers. The researchers explained the project and after dialogue, which included the researchers accepting an invitation to play in a sangarag game, group leaders granted permission for return visits to occur as part of the research.

During this initial fieldwork, we learned that sangarag is played between two teams of six players with the aim of hitting a block with a rock that is placed halfway up one of two three-foot-high mounds of solid soil approximately 30 metres apart. Players stand in front of one mound to throw an oblong-shaped rock, weighing between one and two kilograms, aiming to hit the other block on the opposite mound. Each player takes a turn to throw and if a player hits it then two points are scored but, if not, one point is awarded by an umpire/scorer for the rock that was closest to the block, at times a contentious decision that generates heated discussion. Players then turn around to throw at the mound they have just come from. The game finishes when one team scores 12 points.

During subsequent site visits, the second author began a familiarisation process to develop trust and rapport with the group which included engaging in casual conversations, sharing Afghani tea and food and playing sangarag. This helped build trust and rapport with the group whose leaders agreed to semi-structured interviews and observations to occur. Resembling multi-sited ethnography (Spaaij 2015), this research relationship facilitated the extension of the research into another site in the same locality where a second sangarag group played. The second author visited this group, who had prior notice of his arrival and consented to be part of the research. This second group organised and hosted the Annual Sangarag Championships with the research team being invited to both the 2021 and 2022 editions, with the second author attending the former, and the first and second author the latter. Both championship events attracted approximately 150 Hazara men, some from outside the locality, to watch 12 teams play a knockout format over consecutive weekends to determine a winning team, with the final day consisting of an awards ceremony and post-championship banquet. Overall, the two research sites – with a sangarag group at each – were regularly visited by the research team across a fourteen-month period, which included a significant break due to lockdown restrictions.

This familiarisation process established that group membership was fluid with 10–50 people attending, with most though not all playing sangarag. The age range was 25–70 years approximately. No group member knew each other previously from their time in Afghanistan; their length of time in Australia ranged from three months to 30 years whilst residency status varied considerably. Some group members had permanent resident status and had been able to sponsor family members to join them from Afghanistan, while others were in the process of sponsoring their family. The rest of the group members were on temporary bridging visas awaiting the assessment of their permanent residency application; they were not allowed to leave Australia until a decision was made. Some of the more established group members were retired, had decent incomes, and/or were home owners, whilst others held low-skilled, low-paid (manual labour) jobs. A small number of participants were unemployed, especially those who had arrived in Australia more recently. More recently arrived migrants were mainly home renters as families or as single men in shared houses.

The interviews ($n = 11$) were negotiated with group leaders who were the first to be interviewed after sufficient trust and rapport had been established. The leaders then acted as gatekeepers to group members for further interviews and identified group members with a level of English proficiency suitable for interview as not all group members were confident enough with their English to be audio recorded. The interviews were recorded with participants' permission and focused on various core themes including establishment of the group, reasons for partaking in sangarag, social inclusion and a sense of belonging. Field notes included records of casual conversations the researchers had with some group members, fieldwork observations, and personal reflections.

Recruitment for formal interviews was hindered not only by the lack of Dari or Hazaragi language proficiency on the part of the researchers, but also by a degree of guardedness on the part of some participants to actively engage in the research, despite the regular attendance of the researchers. This was best attributed to a level of distrust between Hazara and government authorities in Australia that originated in their visa application process and continued into their resettlement process (Lange, Kamalkhani,

and Baldassar 2007). It is possible these group members viewed the researchers as an equivalent of, or proxy for, the Australian government, despite the independent status of the research and the second author (who himself has a migrant background) who conducted the interviews. Thus, even though the researchers established sufficient trust and rapport with the group (e.g. through informal conversations, spending time, and showing genuine interest in their game), this did not always enable a formalised interview upon approach.

Interviews were transcribed in full and along with the field notes were thematically analysed by the first and second authors using Nvivo software. The approach to thematic analysis (TA) taken in this study is best described as 'codebook' TA (Braun and Clarke 2021). The coding contained some inductive processes (e.g. the emergent theme of the tension between sangarag and formal sports, as discussed later on), but primarily comprised the use of a structured coding framework for developing and documenting the analysis. The first and second authors read, discussed, and coded the data in relation to pre-defined codes such as 'origins of the informal sport group' and 'reasons for partaking in informal sport'. The key themes were developed relatively early on by drawing on the aforementioned theoretical notion of belonging.

Findings

The results highlight the meanings that involvement in sangarag holds for the Hazara men who participated in the study. We constructed four main themes from the data: (1) re-establishing sangarag in response to challenging circumstances; (2) sangarag as a meeting place; (3) misrecognition of Hazara Australian cultural practice; and (4) reproducing intra-group differentiations. In this section, we discuss the results for each theme.

Re-establishing sangarag in response to challenging circumstances

Organising sangarag provided an opportunity for Hazara community members to come together to play a sport that offered them a sense of continuity and attachment to homeland and diaspora in the face of multiple migrations and transitions (Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017; Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021). The interviews and observations suggested that sangarag brought a sense of diasporic sporting community to which Hazara players and spectators felt they belonged. Being 'among our own kind' and 'our people' was a significant lure to those attending sangarag, signalling the mobilisation of an essentialised notion of ethnicity (Noble, Poynting, and Tabar 1999). The meaning thereof was accentuated by the historical persecution of the Hazara, the challenges of their hazardous migration journeys, and the uncertainty of their settlement process and legal status. Arriving in Australia as 'boat people' and being placed in the asylum-seeking system were harrowing experiences for many in Australia's Hazara community (Lange, Kamalkhani, and Baldassar 2007).

It is tempting to interpret the popularity of sangarag amongst this group as almost 'natural' given its perceived heritage in Hazara culture, as we will discuss below. However, the empirical evidence suggests that the re-establishing of sangarag should be understood primarily in response to participants' circumstances and experiences. As Erel (2010) points out, cultural practices acquire different meanings and validations

according to the context, as migrants actively construct resources for belonging. This is evident in the way several group members framed their involvement in sangarag within the context of persisting social and health challenges they experienced both pre- and post-migration. As one group leader explained:

> You see, these people here have experienced many, many bad things back in Afghanistan and when here, not so simple, getting the visa, very worrying. There is a lot of challenges, because everyone who came, moved from a country who lost everything that belongs to them, they come here, they have to start from zero, from scratch, culturally, emotionally, economically. Some here without family, back in Afghanistan, cannot help. Very bad. Bad depression.

Depression among the group was prominent according to the participants we spoke with. One member likened sangarag to Men's Sheds, referring to a unique Australian approach for addressing and promoting men's wellbeing by providing biopsychosocial support (Moylan et al. 2015). The 'sangarag men's shed' provided an important space and setting where Hazara participants could experience a temporary escape from the strains of life in Australia, share their feelings, seek friendship and support, and relieve stress:

> Everyone have a depression, for someone is eight year, is no bridging visa or something, no family here, and everyone is sick. That's why they come here [sangarag venue] and see each other and talk and they fresh and going home. This is really good for the people, especially like depression people, you know? It's big help. It's very, very big help. (Participant)

> Instead of they're just staying home with a lot of stress, a lot of tension, they're just coming here, they have a lot of fun, laughing, talking. They're seeing each other; that's the benefit. (Group leader)

> Sangarag is a game for the Hazara and a doctor for the Hazara. A good doctor. People are ill, come to sangarag, talk with friends, feel better and go home feeling better. (Group leader)

These comments indicate how group members perceived the sangarag community as a sanctuary from 'everyday otherness' (Radford 2016) and a source of biopsychosocial support within the context of the difficult experiences they shared both as Hazara in Afghanistan and as Hazara in Australia.

The re-establishment of sangarag in Australia appears to have followed a common trajectory of physical cultural forms introduced by migrants (Nakamura and Donnelly 2017). It involved separate participation by first-generation Hazara migrants, with the activity remaining confined to the Hazara community in Australia. A founding member of one of the groups recalled:

> We just started with three, four people. Slowly, slowly, because this game is really known by people in Afghanistan so they just come together, come together. Now we are like 30, 40 players, plus the people who come and watch.

What this comment hints at, is that the cultural tradition of sangarag was not passively 'unpacked' from the men's 'rucksacks' (Erel 2010) after their arrival in Australia, but rather they actively re-created the cultural practice and – as will we show below – engaged in creating mechanisms of validation for it. Through its practice, the group sought to re-invent what they considered an important Hazara tradition, within a post-resettlement context marked by considerable social and health challenges. In re-

creating this tradition in Australia, participants framed sangarag as a heritage asset. As one participant proudly proclaimed: ‘This is my culture!’ Other participants described this cultural heritage as follows:

> This game is unique to us, to our people. Only our people play it.

> Because all Afghani people is just only playing this game, sangarag, but no other community, only Hazara community do this game. They know how to play this game.

> So, to keep the tradition, it’s a very heritage game for much, much centuries because we have been … Hazara people have been genocide up to 64% about a hundred years ago back in Afghanistan. We had not got a very wide cultural range in sport but there is less left, so the sangarag is one of them which is left from centuries, from our past generation so we do that.

Another player similarly commented on the ancestral significance of the game, stating that he enjoyed sangarag ‘because this is a very good game, because all my grandparents, before, all did the same thing because we are very happy to play here’. One leader commented that ‘actually, this is an original game from my country, in Afghanistan … This is everybody interest in this game and we very happy to continue … 10 year, me and my friend started it’. Echoing the previous comment regarding the narrow range of sports available to Hazaraz, another player described sangarag as a ‘poor man’s sport’ that is played by those who historically have not had access to formal sport facilities.

Sangarag as a meeting place

Social relationships have been shown to be at the core of a sense of belonging for forced migrants (Strang and Quinn 2019), and our data corroborate this. Joining the sangarag community offered a meeting place for Hazara men to connect and make new friendships as part of their efforts to navigate their complex settlement journeys. One participant expressed: ‘We get the community together, see like, most of these guys, we didn’t know each other before. And once we start the game, so one turned up, another one, another one, so now we are good friends now’. This is a critical point given the particularities of the Hazara community and its forced migration journeys; outside of sangarag there are very few, if any, other opportunities to meet with fellow Hazara in Australia. One of the leaders was keen to point out that sangarag offered a key role for newly-arrived Hazara as ‘it’s one of the points that’s good because the settlement and integration process takes a bit long so it doesn’t happen very quickly. So, we have to find some connections to have our own community here’. This leader was proud of how the group had grown from 3–4 to as many as 50 participants, some regularly attending and others not. The unique shared experiences of the Hazara community, the cultural importance of sangarag and life as a member of the Hazara diaspora who had successfully sought refuge in Australia were commonly shared within the sangarag community.

The meeting place that the sangarag venues offered was constructed collaboratively and organically rather than in a top-down manner. Group members used social media and a chat group to ensure that sangarag would take place on a daily basis at both venues. Due to the fluid nature of how the game was organised in practice, group leaders did not have to be present for sangarag to occur. Most players carried two blocks in their rock bag so that a target could be provided for the game to go ahead

regardless of how many players turned up. This organic nature of sangarag was displayed when the researcher attended one evening and asked a player if 'the leader' was there tonight, to which the player replied: 'I did not know we had a leader. We have a Viber [messaging app] group we keep in touch on but I don't think we have a leader'. Their sense of community and shared ownership was on display at the championships: everyone contributed to the organisation in some way, whether it be carrying trays of food, laying out the tarpaulin covering, cleaning up, carrying tables and chairs – no mean feat when the car park was 500 metres away at the venue the Championships was held at.

Misrecognition of Hazara Australian cultural practice

Given the foreignness of the sangarag in the Australian context, the resource for belonging it yields for insiders (i.e. those who play, understand, and appreciate the game) is rather narrow, namely one that produces a sense of in-group solidarity and connection among Hazara men. In terms of national or governmental belonging (Hage 1998), the resources that participation in sangarag offered as a way to feel part of Australian society were rather limited. Respondents relayed how their cultural practice was framed by non-Hazara residents and local institutions as 'problematic' to national belonging or 'integration' (cf. Pang and Macdonald 2016). Sangarag was not recognised as an official sport in Australia, which meant participants were unable to obtain local government funding and support. Participants noted the need for more permanent and appropriate facilities as presently they played on wasteland (without a bathroom or water tap) but had an uncertain future due to residents' complaints, including the aforementioned suspicion that the group constituted 'terrorists in training'. Group leaders perceived their negotiations with local government to be ineffective, suggesting that the council failed to recognise their needs, as this comment after a meeting with council representatives indicates:

> Not yet success with the council, it takes too long and they cautioned them … about the properties of the council how they have to understand what it is and what we're doing and blah, blah, it's taken too long as I told you, it takes a bit long. There is no person to do volunteer and good English to go and follow up with the council too. And the democratic system in the council, they have got the funds special for their own format so it's very hard for us to match with that format. (Participant)

Beyond the local government not supporting their cultural practice, some respondents expressed concern that the council might even shut their group down. This concern led them to keep a low profile: 'We don't talk to council, we don't want them to know we are here and tell us to stop'.

Participants' frustrations over the perceived misrecognition of their cultural practice as a resource for 'settling in' were informed by challenges they experienced when trying to adapt to the demands of national belonging through participation in mainstream sports. Some participants had played other sports when first arriving in Australia, like basketball and squash, but had only done so socially and not as a community sport club member. The Australian community sport system is based primarily on formal clubs but interviewees expressed that this model did not suit the Hazara due to their lack of familiarity with the dominant sports in Australia. One participant explained:

> Our sport much different because this is their footy [Australian football] we can't play because we don't know about the rule of it, that's why we can't do it. The sangarag, we grew up with sangarag because we have said about it, this one we have to save each other, that's why. It's more like cultural thing, that's why. It takes time that we get connected with the other sports because we must have the equipment and everything.

The lack of familiarity with popular sports beyond sangarag was influenced by the historical persecution of the Hazara that had forced them to live in mountainous areas where sports facilities did not exist. Sangarag was perceived as the only option as 'in the mountain area we haven't got much flat area to play soccer or footy or whatever' (Participant). The financial cost of participating in the dominant sports in Australia, which include registration fees and equipment, was also a significant barrier to the study participants. The lack of expense associated with sangarag appealed to them. Group members provided their own rock and the facility did not require booking as it was vacant wasteland converted by the group into a playing arena.

Our observations suggest that some of these challenges may be generational. The first generation of players had all grown up in Afghanistan and played sangarag as their sole pastime. They expressed concern that the game will have less appeal to those Hazara who moved to Australia as children and were educated in Australian schools and exposed to the expansive range of dominant sports. Those who had children after arriving in Australia acknowledged that their children were socialised into these 'Australian' sports, especially at school, and that sangarag was, as one participant observed of his son, 'a sport for their dad'. Indeed, at the championship event it was noticeable that the players were middle- and older-aged men, while the children who attended could be observed kicking a soccer ball and wearing apparel of European soccer clubs. Soccer is becoming increasingly popular with younger Hazara men in Australia, as is evidenced by, for example, the establishment in 2019 of the Victorian Afghan Football Association (VAFA), which consists of 10 soccer clubs and 200 players with the aim to engage young Afghani people in sport and support them to develop their sporting careers.

A closer reading of the data would suggest that the perceived tension between the significance of sangarag for migrant-specific (diasporic) belonging and its lack of recognition as a resource for national belonging should not be viewed as 'either/or'. Rather, there are signs of hybridisation. A recent review calls for further research into how migrants' sport and physical activity patterns evolve throughout the life span, with a particular emphasis on (intergenerational) dynamics of cultural hybridity and fluidity (Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019). Some of the concerns raised by respondents indicate that sangarag may potentially follow the familiar trajectory of separate participation by the first generation of migrant players to decline and result in the virtual disappearance of the sport (Nakamura and Donnelly 2017). And yet, we found evidence of cultural hybridisation, akin to that described in previous studies of migrants' sporting practices and identities (Fletcher 2012; Thangaraj 2015; Halilovich, Boz, and Kianpour 2022). One participant expressed this hybridisation as follows:

> We're a very young community in Australia and the Hazara community is proud to be involved in the community in skills and sports. So, we have - we feel like a very good future and see, now we have in some sports some Hazara boys playing in the national team of Australia, we are part of them so we are looking with a good future of the new generation, they are much educated when they came into the community. Everyone follows

> their passion so the kids as well, so we have got some girls playing in a high level of soccer and we have got some in swimming and we have got much in different sports. So, we hope that everyone doing well but *one of the most important things, everyone who does go to the other sports would be definitely as a sangarag player as well.* [Authors' emphasis]

To realise this vision, respondents demonstrated an astute awareness of the scenarios, explaining their detailed plans to diversify sangarag in an attempt to sustain and grow it, disseminating it both to other parts of Australia and to other migrant communities. A Hazara business owner relayed his plan to develop sangarag in other Australian cities and, ultimately, to establish a national association and championship as part of a broader plan to have sangarag recognised as an official sport in Australia. Additionally, group leaders had approached members of the local Indian community to seek to attract new members:

> We saw some Indian community, they're coming here to watch the game, so it's new for them and they're just coming and ask and then it's very interesting. They're just coming for a look and it's new, it's a new game for them.

The Indian community, who played informal cricket locally, was perceived as a good 'fit' for sangarag due to cultural similarities to the group (i.e. the group also being migrants and all male), the setting (i.e. sparse terrain) and the sporting sense (i.e. throwing at a target, similar to cricket).

Broadening sangarag beyond Hazara was something the group leaders were keen to achieve as for them, 'the more people playing sangarag the better for them'; whether the players were Hazara or not as long as the physical cultural tradition was being maintained and promoted. The group leaders were firm in their view that if different groups were to play sangarag, then the 'Hazara sport' would be thriving as a platform for non-Hazaras to learn about the history of the sport and thus the history of the Hazara people. These comments suggest a potential trajectory towards inclusive participation by subsequent generations of players (Nakamura and Donnelly 2017). Centred in these comments and actions is migrants' creative agency in constructing spaces and resources for belonging (Habib and Ward 2019a), spaces that are not confined to appeal to either diasporic or national belonging but, rather, are increasingly hybrid, plural, and fluid. In doing so, the cultural practice of sangarag can acquire new meanings and validations (Erel 2010) – from a safe space for Haraza men in the face of social and mental health challenges, to a resource for more hybrid, multicultural belonging that can co-exist and intersect harmoniously with other sporting practices.

Reproducing intra-group differentiations

The lived experiences of respondents discussed in the preceding sections frame sangarag as a meeting place and safe space for Hazara Australian men who face challenging circumstances. These narratives gloss over important intra-group distinctions and exclusions that govern access to sangarag as a resource for belonging. It is thus crucial to also interrogate the overt and subtle politics of belonging that govern access, participation, and status (Yuval-Davis 2011). This is particularly important because challenging circumstances, like those faced by Hazara Australians, 'can bring a sense of belonging into sharp relief' (Habib and Ward 2019a, 9).

Gender is the most visible axis along which the politics of belonging operated in the sangarag sites we studied. In these sites, men had power to grant women access to participation, but they considered women's participation culturally inappropriate. For example, when probed about why only men seemed to be involved, participants would typically respond with comments such as 'Women don't play this game', 'They have different activities', and 'Women prepared the food [for the tournament]'. Their discouragement of girls and women to participate in sangarag meant that girls and women were effectively excluded from access to this resource for belonging. This is despite similarities in the challenges (young) Hazara women face in comparison to men, including language challenges, social isolation, trying to settle into their new society, and a degree of pessimism about opportunities for educational and career attainment (Iqbal et al. 2012). While young Hazara women may experience less psychological distress associated with adaptation than young men, they experience additional pressures related to their complex gender roles in Australia (Copolov and Knowles 2021). The gendered politics of belonging that govern the sangarag groups call into question how expansive or inclusive the aforementioned vision for sangarag as a resource for hybrid belonging truly is.

Access to sangarag is further mediated by ability and, more specifically, one's understanding of the game. All participants appeared to possess an embodied social history of sangarag practice acquired pre-migration (cf. Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019; Nunn, Spaaij, and Luguetti 2021). The sense of connection and community that participants expressed was constructed in part through their shared understanding of the historical meanings of the game, their ability to play the game, and their aesthetic appreciation of the game. Observations revealed varying levels of skill amongst players, but it was noticeable that some players were highly competitive, especially at the championships. Some players varied the angles and distance from which they threw, team players consulted each other during the game to devise a strategy, whilst umpire calls were at times questioned for clarification before the next throw. Prior to the championships, one player was identified to the researcher as 'one to watch' due to his throwing skill and accuracy. This player was certainly highly skilled as he hit the block every second or third throw in both the semi-final and final as part of the winning team. This type of sporting prowess was viewed upon favourably by other participants and conferred status, as reflected in comments such as: 'Sometimes we have people in [the venue], they're hitting the target like three times in a row, they're very experienced'.

Even though there was a keen sporting competitiveness to sangarag, the respect among players and spectators to the game was tangible, most visibly displayed when throws that hit the target were praised by all, with the successful player often being congratulated by players from the opposing side. Group leaders also reported that at times too many people turned up looking to play which was not possible to organise, and as a result 'some people get angry and disappointed that they could not play so we have to say they play first next time'. At the same time, we observed more subtle practices of differentiation that shed light onto the politics of belonging surrounding the game. The rocks used in sangarag are a case in point. Each player had their own rock that was transported in a small carry case. Rocks were not shared around from player to player; some players refusing their rock to be touched by anyone else, including the umpire, such was their protection of it. Players were often tending to the rock with a cloth to remove soil and some were even filing at it to keep it smooth. Respondents argued that the rocks were

important personal items that varied in size and weight depending on each player and in some cases had been painted by the owner. In many ways, watching a player tend to their rock was similar to how a cricket bowler tends to the ball or like a batter who cares for the condition of their bat. This dimension added to the enthusiasm and competitiveness of some sangarag players, whilst also clearly marking out those who were 'in the game' from those who were on the margins of it.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the informal sport of sangarag as a window onto Hazara Australian men's lived experiences of (non)belonging. For its most devoted participants, sangarag has cultural significance and constitutes one of few social spaces available to them to experience a sense of belonging in the face of displacement, social isolation, and mental health challenges. This finding resonates with recent studies of other informal, 'in-the-margin' leisure activities practiced by post-migrants (Kukreja 2022; Swain 2021; Swain, Spracklen, and Lashua 2018; Swain, Lashua, and Spracklen 2021). Our study contributes to this literature in three ways.

First, the results indicate how Hazara men's construction of sangarag as a space and resource for belonging needs to be understood as a response to the challenging circumstances they experience in their settlement journeys. Displacement, social isolation, mental health problems, and the barriers and exclusion they experience in relation to participation in dominant sports all contributed to their desire and efforts to re-create sangarag in their country of residence. The findings confirm previous research which found that migrants can experience mental and emotional respite from their everyday struggles in informal sport (Aquino et al. 2022). It also resonates with literature that shows how ethno-specific sport participation is frequently a response to racisms and exclusions within (White) dominant sporting networks, hence as a form of inclusion via exclusion (Bradbury 2011; Smith, Spaaij, and McDonald 2019). Our study adds to this scholarship by demonstrating how cultural practices such as sangarag are not passively 'unpacked' from migrants' 'rucksacks' (Erel 2010) post-migration; instead, they are actively re-created and validated to enable a sense of connection and belonging. In particular, sangarag participants' stories indicate the resilience and creativity of Hazara migrants in actively negotiating their belonging, despite ongoing settlement challenges (Halilovich, Boz, and Kianpour 2022). This finding points to migrants' agency in carving out spaces and resources for belonging (Habib and Ward 2019a).

Second, the findings highlight some of the ways in which modes of governance shape migrants' capacity to occupy sports spaces in ways that can reclaim agency, belonging, and self-care (Aquino et al. 2022). Migrant-driven forms of physical culture exist in complex relation to the 'adaptive' discourse of 'fitting into' sports that are culturally dominant in a country of residence (cf. Pang and Macdonald 2016). Whilst the data suggest that young Hazara Australians may be better equipped to negotiate access and participation in dominant sports (despite the discrimination and exclusion they may still experience), the older participants relied exclusively on sangarag for their sport participation due to the range of barriers they faced. And yet, the latter's involvement in sangarag did not 'grant' them a sense of national belonging; rather, it was generally marked out as problematic

and met with marginalisation and stigmatisation by both non-Hazara residents and local institutions, including community suspicions that sangarag players were 'terrorists in training'. These findings affirm the need to examine spatial injustice in relation to opportunities and provision for informal sport participation (Jeanes et al. 2022). This study suggests the need for policy to recognise and support the value that informal sports such as sangarag can have for people experiencing forced migration, dislocation, and resettlement. It also stresses the importance of ensuring the accessibility of the spaces in which sport activities are played (Aquino et al. 2022).

Third, our findings indicate the overt and subtle politics of belonging that govern migrant-specific cultural practices like sangarag, in ways that reinforce intra-group differentiations. Gender and ability are two major axes of such differentiation, which mirror mechanisms of exclusion in dominant sports (Spaaij, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks 2015). Previous research on comparable migrant-specific leisure practices has found that these can sow divisions within families and communities, potentially generating feelings of suspicion and mistrust particularly amongst women and some youth, and hence 'problematising the cultural foundations of identity and community constructed' in those spaces (Swain, Lashua, and Spracklen 2021, 249). While such divisions were not readily evident in our fieldwork due to the focus on players (rather than also incorporating families and the broader community), our findings echo Kukreja's (2022) conclusion that the effect of this type of cultural practice is likely to remain localised and experienced only within particular sub-groups of migrant men unless it 'overcome[s] the contradictions of employing constrictive and exclusionary hegemonic masculine norms' (15). Herein lies a potentially fertile direction for future research into the intersections of informal sport, migrant belonging, and masculinity.

A limitation of this study is that it offers a snapshot of the lived experiences of Hazara men with sangarag in Australia, as opposed to a more longitudinal analysis. This is reflected in the discussion of participants' interest in broadening sangarag beyond the Hazara community. Previous research shows that physical cultural activities that are sustained over time are ones that are ethnoculturally mixed and inclusive of individuals who may not necessarily identify with the activity's community of origin (Nakamura and Donnelly 2017). Respondents' stated intentions to diversify their game by expanding definitions of who belongs can be interpreted as a move towards such hybridised belonging. The impact of this change on participants' (non)belonging, and the extent to which intercultural encounters in sangarag and simultaneous participation in mainstream and ethnically identified sport may become normalised among Hazara Australian youth over time, are empirical questions for future research.

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