

## **The rhetoric of exclusion: Perspectives of cultural diversity in Australian netball**

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### **Abstract**

This research investigated issues of cultural diversity and inclusiveness in women's netball in Australia using the rhetoric of exclusion. Attitudes and perceptions of the cultural inclusiveness of netball were investigated through a series of interviews with women and girls from culturally diverse backgrounds, and netball administrators. There were many similar stories, but there were also many differences. Women who did not have English as a first language spoke of reinforced difference and cultural assimilation in their netball experiences. The women interviewed who were born in other English-speaking countries recalled feelings of inclusion and limited cultural dissonance when joining netball clubs after migration. Women from this grouping indicated that netball helped them feel part of their new community and gain social capital via participation. None of the interview participants reported experiences of explicit exclusion or racial discrimination but some women reported a strong sense cultural conformity to Anglo-centric expectations of behaviour. The stories told and experiences related by women interviewed for this project suggest that women from culturally diverse backgrounds have found few opportunities to express their culturally distinctiveness through mainstream Australian sports such as netball. The netball administrators interviewed confirmed that encouraging cultural diverse participants in the sport was not a priority and that policies on cultural diversity were non-existent. The conclusion reached after this examination is that the rhetoric of exclusion is pervasive in Australian netball and unlikely to change in the near future.

## **Gender and cultural diversity in sport**

It has been well established that gender inequalities exist at all levels of sport in Australia amongst participants, administrators and decision-makers (McKay, 1998). In particular, women from culturally diverse backgrounds are significantly less likely to participate in sport activities; engage in physical activity; or be sport spectators (Armstrong, Bauman & Davies, 2000; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994, 1998, 1999; Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and the Territories, 1991, 1996). They are also less likely to hold either volunteer roles or paid positions in sporting organisations (Fitzpatrick & Brimage, 1998). However, while the role that sporting practices play in constructing gender relations and identities has been the subject of much research, the nexus between sport, gender and ethnicity is relatively underdeveloped.

How do issues of migration, oppression, racism and/or social inequity interact with sporting practices? Using existing national data as a starting point this study investigated perceptions of cultural diversity and sport from the perspective of women from culturally diverse backgrounds and sport administrators. Previous works in Australia (Booth & Tatz, 2000; Taylor & Toohey, 1999), North America (Allison, 1999; Doherty & Chelladuri, 1999; Hall, 1996; Weise-Bjornastal, 1997), the United Kingdom (Hargreaves, 1993; Phillip, 1995; Long, Carrington & Spracklen, 1997) and Europe (Fasting, Pfister, Scranton, & Bunuel, 1998; Harahousou & Kabitsis, 1995; Thomsson, 1998) have indicated that our understandings about cultural difference in sport are limited and warrant further investigation.

While the dominant male paradigm of sport has been the focus of much scrutiny and racial issues in sport have garnered increasing attention, inquiry into gender relations and cultural diversity in sport has been minimal. Sport and ethnicity investigations have been driven by predominantly male-focussed theory (Bale and Sang, 1996; Entine, 1999; Floyd and Shiness, 1999; Hughson, 2000; Jarvie, 1991; Long, Carrington & Spracklen, 1997; Mosely, 1994). Sport and Indigenous peoples has been the topic of some research in Australia (Tatz, 1981, 1984, 1995, 1996), Canada (Paraschak, 1995; 1996; 1997; 1999; 2000) and the United States (MacDonald and MacAvoy, 1997). However, these works have not fully explored the gendered nature of sport. Up until the 1990s most research on women and sport was essentially ethnocentric and conceptually drew from the experiences of 'White', educated, heterosexual women and women from the dominant cultural group of the society under study (Bhandari, 1991, hooks, 1989; Wearing, 1998; Wright and Dewar, 1997). Research on ethnic minority women has largely been concentrated on African-American women in the USA (Abney, 1999; Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Henderson, & Bialeschki, 1994, Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001, Stratta, 1995) and Asian women in England (Carrington, Chilvers, & Williams, 1987; Dixey, 1982). Thus there is a need to add to these existing studies with investigations of a more diverse set of migrant populations.

Migration affects women and men differently, depending on the social, political, and cultural context of the migration decision, as well as the settlement experience. Gender relations are maintained, negotiated, and reconfigured in light of the host country's social and cultural contexts. Gendered processes are further evident in the way in which migrants interact with social institutions in the settlement country.

Sport is one of these institutions. An awareness of gender differences and experiences in sport will help us gain a better sense of the texture of migrant lives. To date most research on the sporting experiences of Australian migrants and migrant communities has failed to address gendering processes. We have a limited understanding of the gendered opportunities, constraints and different forms of exclusion faced by female migrants, or how women use sport to negotiate the multiple realities of settlement. Policy and practice communities to be aware of how gender structures the dynamics of migration and settlement, and how these intersect with dimensions of sport.

The propositions provided by the 'rhetoric of exclusion' (Bottomley, de Lepervanche and Martin, 1991) are used here to examine issues of cultural inclusion in women's sport in Australia. Contemporary use of the rhetoric of exclusion is subtly removed from explicit cultural racism and the two often co-exist. Cultural racism posits that different ethnic groups have distinct and incompatible lifestyles and customs, and that the values of these groups are inferior to the mainstream population. Within the rhetoric of exclusion there is an implied assumption that a country's cultural integrity and national identity is placed under threat by immigrant groups who wish to maintain their distinctiveness (Stolcke, 1999). The cultural identity, traditions and heritage of the host country are given precedence. However, instead of an outright rejection of other cultures the rhetoric of exclusion facilitates a pathway of cultural assimilation to safeguard host values and lifestyle. The two fundamental propositions of the rhetoric are that national identity is produced and disseminated via cultural forms such as sport; and that cultural similarity is the ultimate goal. Within these conjectures, national identity is derived from a cultural exclusiveness wherein aspects of power and culture are central. The premise is that the mainstream population do not want their social

institutions overwhelmed by minority ethnic groups whose values may necessitate change to traditional cultural practices thereby threatening the host country's national identity.

Why ethnic minority female sport involvement? Migration affects women and men differently, depending on the social, political, and cultural context of the migration decision, as well as the settlement experience. Gender relations are maintained, negotiated, and reconfigured in light of the host country's social and cultural contexts. Gendered processes are further evident in the way in which migrants interact with social institutions in the settlement country. Sport is one of these institutions. An awareness of gender differences and experiences in sport will help us gain a better sense of the texture of migrant lives. To date most research on the sporting experiences of Australian migrants and migrant communities has failed to address gendering processes. We have a limited understanding of the gendered opportunities, constraints and different forms of exclusion faced by female migrants, or how women use sport to negotiate the multiple realities of settlement. Policy and practice should be informed by an understanding of how gender structures the dynamics of migration and settlement, and how these intersect with dimensions of sport.

The rhetoric of exclusion in everyday discourse influences the way we think about diversity and demands that we talk about differences as if they were inevitable but not desirable. Diversity is presented in ways that reinforce racial and other differences. Cultural practices create differences in the first place and do these practices act to maintain social inequalities. Whether the rhetoric of exclusion exists within Australian

sport practices is investigated here via the study of women from culturally diverse backgrounds in netball.

The present research investigates if sport facilitates or reinforces gendered cultural identities and how national identity feeds into institutional practices of cultural inclusion or exclusion. As Carrington and McDonald (2001) state 'given its ability to both produce and counter contemporary racism, sport needs to be analysed and understood more fully than has tended to be the case' (p2). This examination explores the premise of the rhetoric of exclusion through an examination of the netball experiences of women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Several questions about the rhetoric of exclusion are asked in this research. Is netball involvement perceived by migrant women to be culturally exclusionary? Do women who play netball feel that they are pressured to culturally assimilate? Does netball provide opportunities for women from culturally diverse backgrounds to establish social capital in their new country? Does netball serve to reinforce 'Australian' cultural integrity and national identity?

### **Terminology**

Within cultural diversity studies differentiating terminology is used to empirically group people according to their country of origin for the purpose of identifying commonalities and to explore experiences of culturally constituted difference. Such groupings and their associated labels carry both cultural and symbolic content. Terms such as 'non-English-speaking background'; and 'from culturally diverse backgrounds' may imply an 'us and them' position, and their use

also puts a homogeneous label on a heterogeneous set of individuals. However, these terms are found in this paper because they are expressions in common use in both academic and public discussions. Cultural diversity is fraught with complexities, as is gender, however, just because the experiences and identities of women from and within each ethnic group are different, this difference should not limit the exploration of commonalities. Given this, 'cultural diversity' is used here to designate a social group within a cultural and social system that achieves its distinction on the basis of complex and variable traits such as religion, language, country of birth, or race.

### **Australian migration policy and its legacy**

It has been said that to better understand the present we need to reflect on the past. In discussing the study of sport, Sage (1998: 278) stated that analyses should be 'rooted in an understanding of the social, economic and political context . . . the key to understanding sport as a cultural phenomenon.' Therefore, it is crucial to note that Australia's present national policy of encouraging cultural diversity is a relatively recent occurrence, emerging after over a century of assumed white supremacy (Jupp, 1992). From the initial days of white settlement the colonisers favoured British/Irish immigration. Tellingly, the first act of parliament after Australian federation was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Unofficially termed the 'White Australia' policy, its premise of preferred white migration remained unchanged until 1965 (Sherington, 1990). All arriving migrants were expected to assimilate into the host culture by speaking English and becoming 'Australian'. Assimilation is the process of becoming culturally and socially absorbed into the mainstream culture; it assumes that minority groups will change their culture to become part of a mono-cultural society where homogeneity is valorised, that is, 'everyone would learn English, everyone would look



basically alike, and everyone would share values, beliefs and practices' (Jupp, 1992:25). From 1965-1973 migration policy began a slow process of change and in 1973 multiculturalism, which promoted the acceptance of different cultures, was adopted as the new policy approach. Over the next two decades multiculturalism was gradually replaced by cultural diversity, which encouraged diverse groups to maintain their original language and heritage as long as these fit within acceptable limits.

The trajectory of sport organisations has, by and large, paralleled these same phases in government immigration policies. However, most major sports remain relatively monocultural (Australian Sports Commission, 2000). A national survey of 252 sport associations found while most sport clubs (72%) indicated that they were open/friendly to cultural diversity only a small number (12%) could actually point to specific policies that encouraged or valued cultural diversity. Soccer clubs were the sport most likely to have policies (30%) and softball the least likely (4%), netball clubs came in at 9 percent (Taylor, 2002).

Previous research has also indicated that most sports are indifferent to increasing ethnic minority participation (Cashman, 1997). Australian Rules Football, and to a lesser degree rugby league, have been more culturally integrative (Stoddart, 1994). Stewart, Hess and Dixon (1997) suggested that Australian Rules Football was particularly appealing to immigrants because it was the most prominent sport played in the suburbs where newly arrived migrants settled; clubs developed links with particular ethnic communities; and it provided financial rewards at the elite level and the players became role models for the young males from their communities.

However, players faced assimilation pressures and racist taunts and labelling (Booth & Tatz, 2000).

The only large participation sport that has evolved into a strongly multi-ethnic game is soccer. As Murphy (1993:188) observed, 'sport was probably the best path to reducing the barbs ... one is less a "wog" if one can display even a modicum of prowess at running or at football'. More than any other sport, soccer has been described as the saviour of many migrants to Australia, its influence extensively documented (see Hallinan & Krotee, 1993; Hughson, 1993, 1997, 2000; Mosely, 1994; O'Hara, 1994). 'The soccer club was frequently the first organisation established by a migrant community. The reason was simple. Single young males who formed the vanguard of most migration were not passionate for the game but desperate for companionship' (Mosely, 1994:199). Hughson (2000:8) even claimed that 'the expression of ethnic identity through soccer support is a postwar cultural tradition in Australia.' However, he should have qualified this statement by adding 'for men'. There is little evidence that migrant women have been able to use any of the major mainstream female sports for the same self-identifying and social capital outcomes as men.

Three main contemporary sport policy initiatives have been developed to encourage cultural diversity. Firstly, Active Australia, a collaborative venture that encompasses federal, state and local governments and sports industries, has advocated that females from non-English-speaking backgrounds should be specifically targeted for increased physical activity. This would widen the opportunities for involvement increases market share, raises membership and participant revenue and increases the talent pool for volunteers and participants.

The *National Policy on Women and Girls in Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity 1999-2002* was developed from initiatives taken by Active Australia. The policy states that, 'Australian women and girls, regardless of social, economic, cultural or physical backgrounds and circumstances, should have opportunities equal to men and boys to participate in every aspect of sport, recreation and physical activity, and when they do so, be treated equitably' (Australian Sports Commission, 1999: 6). The policy states that equitable provision would benefit individual women and girls, the Australian community and sports providers. The disadvantage of female from non-English-speaking backgrounds was targeted for specific attention.

The third policy initiative relates to the 1999 National Physical Activity Survey. Research was undertaken to provide an indication of the impact of the Active Australia campaign and suggest directions for health policy (Armstrong, Bauman & Davies, 2000). The research found that overall levels of participation were declining and women from non-English-speaking backgrounds with lower levels of education were particularly 'at risk'. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has developed health policy initiatives for all at risk groups to increase levels of physical activity that in turn will decrease health risk factors for these populations.

However, despite government policy directives a review of Commonwealth involvement in sports and recreation concluded that strategies have not increased participation over the last 25 years (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). The review found that women were still under-represented in sports participation and leadership and recommended that more action be taken to increase female and culturally diverse

participation. It was recommended that sports and recreation clubs, 'must be more creative and adaptable in order to capture this market' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999: 85). It was also stated that sports would need to become more self-reliant for funding, implying that sports organisations would not remain financially viable unless they broadened their market base.

### **The case of netball**

Netball is an extremely popular sport for women and girls in Australia, it has been dominant for nearly a century following its inception in the early 1900s. Netball is played in schools, community and state competitions and at representative and professional levels across Australia. The game has had a unique history in that women were involved in both developing and administering the sport from its inception and men were excluded from formal involvement until recently. Netball has been the antithesis to the traditional domination of men in sport, as it has allowed females to become elite athletes and manage their sport at all levels of participation. It is a separate game and has not traditionally had to compete or justify its existence with a male counterpart, as has been the case with so many other sports.

Contemporary netball has had the highest level of female participation of any team sport in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Netball increased its participant numbers by 49 per cent between 1975 and 1998 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). For young girls aged 5-14 years, netball and swimming were by far the most popular sports or physical activities with participation rates of 20.5 per cent and 15.0 per cent respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). A recent study

of over 18 year olds concluded that the average netball participant is female, aged between 18 and 24 years, Australian-born, never married and employed full-time.

Non-Australian born players are significantly under represented in netball, 8.2% play the game despite comprising 21% of the general population (Australian Sports Commission, 2000). Netball attracted over 312,000 spectators to matches in 1995 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998) and it was the only sport for which significantly more females than males attended games away from home (33,600 females and 11,700 males) in 1995-96. A minuscule proportion of spectators were from culturally diverse backgrounds, the numbers too small to be deemed statistically significant.

The lack of women and girls from culturally diverse backgrounds in netball is of particular interest given it was founded and built on a premise of being a sport designed in a way which allows for 'every woman and girl' to play. The sport's promotional material emphasises that social players do not need to be fast, tall, agile, strong or of any particular body shape. While netball purports to meet the needs of all women the statistics would suggest that it is not meeting the requirements of migrant women and girls. To understand why few women from culturally diverse backgrounds engaged in the most popular female sport in the country a project involving interviews with migrant women who had some level of involvement with netball were undertaken.

### **Exploring female perspectives of netball**

Eighteen women were invited to discuss their views, attitudes and feelings toward sport in general, and netball, in particular. Interviews with netball administrators about their feelings, experiences and perceptions about cultural

diversity in the sport were also conducted to obtain an organisational viewpoint. To obtain the interview sample, permission to approach members was gained from the state netball association. Three regional associations located in areas with relatively high levels of migrant populations were then targeted. The researcher attended a number of games in each region, personally speaking to match co-ordinators and managers about possible interview participants. From these discussions a number of candidates were approached to volunteer to be in the study.

The sample was not meant to be random or representative; the women were selected to cover a range of cultural backgrounds and migration profiles. Ten of the women interviewed were from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and four women were born outside of Australia in an English-speaking Commonwealth country. Additionally, netball officials were interviewed to provide an administrative and policy based perspective. The officials included three women and one male who were born in Australia and who were interviewed in relation to their lengthy and significant association with netball, including the administration dimension of the sport. Table 1 indicates the country of origin of the interview participants.

Insert table 1 here

The interviews ranged from 25 to 75 minutes in duration. A female interviewer facilitated all the sessions, as it was felt that this was a vital consideration for the female participants. While gender itself is not sufficient to establish rapport, it is a factor, and contributed to the establishment of trust between the parties involved. The interview method was drawn from Franklin's (1997) conceptualisation of the

shared understanding model of interviewing, wherein the interview is seen as a situation in which the interviewer attempts to gain understanding of how the interviewee experiences aspects of her own life as well as the world of objects and other persons. The decision to structure the interviews in this manner was also influenced by Smith's (1992) suggestion that women's behaviour can be studied as a reflection of social context, discussing everyday routines and social practices and then locating these in structural contexts and social processes. The conversational-style questioning allowed for flexibility in terms of inherent language issues and acknowledgment of cultural values and sensitivities. Migration is a complicated process involving different circumstances, social ties, strategies, and economic status of which the interviewer should be aware. Consultations with ethnic community workers on how to phrase questions, relevant cultural mores and potentially sensitive areas were invaluable<sup>i</sup>. This process involved the interviewer acknowledging in the introductory opening remarks in each interview that time, space, spirituality, human relationships and consequently involvement in sporting activity are culture bound.

The interviews encompassed the place of sport and netball in each woman's life, and exploration of issues related to their cultural background. The aim was to create an interview environment where a natural flow of discussion occurred and the issues could be covered without rigid adherence to order or precise wording of the interview items (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Consequently, while the subject matter of the interviews was ostensibly non-threatening, the directions of discussions were to a certain extent unstructured and the potential existed for the conversation to move to sensitive issues. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to ensure interviewee anonymity.

The interviews with the netball administrators were conducted to explore service providers' perspectives on cultural diversity. The richness of the data collected in these interviews varied considerably. In the first instance, the amount and extent of experience that the interviewee had with different cultures impacted on the expansiveness and depth of their contribution. Secondly, the level of candour with which the participants spoke about their experiences was clearly influenced by their perceptions of organisational expectations and political correctness. While the data obtained in these interviews provide valuable insights into netball provision it has been interpreted within these limitations.

All of the interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read through several times to obtain an overall sense of the content before being themed and coded for analysis. Individual experiences and reflections were initially grouped by concept theme and then further differentiated by category as a framework for organisation, analysis and reporting of the findings. Although it is acknowledged that each woman's experience of sport and her own expression of this experience was unique, exemplars derived from these constituting factors were consistently identified throughout the data.

In providing a forum for some women to speak about their sporting experiences I have, by implication, silenced many other voices. Furthermore, my disclosure to all interview participants that I was an academic interested in gender, cultural diversity and sport is likely to have impacted the interview conversation and has undoubtedly influenced the way in which the narratives are interpreted in this



paper. These aspects should be taken into account when reading the remainder of the paper.

### **The interview stories**

Data collected in the interviews is presented in two sections, firstly, women with pre-migration playing experience and secondly, women whose netball involvement began in Australia. Within each of these two categories the women interviewed speak from the perspective of different generations of migration. The change in experiences over time within their stories is apparent, from the older women who were expected to fully assimilate through to the more recent migrant experience of a greater level of acceptance of cultural diversity. The narratives are used to examine how cultural difference and the rhetoric of exclusion can impact decisions to start or continue sport in a new country and how that involvement is constructed.

#### *Pre-migration experiences*

The seven women with pre-migration netball experience had many shared experiences. All had chosen netball because it was popular amongst their peers, it was offered in school, and it was considered acceptably feminine.

Aishu was born in Singapore and came to Australia six years ago, when she was in her late teens, to go to university. Aishu explained that she began playing netball because the best players in her school were idolised, '*I was desperate to play and to be popular it was the sport to be seen playing.*' Her parents were supportive, all of her friends played and she did not consider it anything unusual. Aishu continued

to play netball through school but when she moved to Australia she stopped playing. This was mainly due to time and work pressures, *'it was scary to find a new club, new friends, it wasn't a priority for me I had other things to deal with in this new place.'* Aishu also said she felt slightly intimidated about playing in Australia, she thought that her skills would not match up to those of local netball players and that Asian girls were perceived as not naturally good at the sport. Instead she joined a tennis club where she felt her Asianess *'didn't make me stand out.'*

Li was born in Hong Kong, she is in her early twenties and has lived in Australia three years. Li played netball at her school before coming to Australia and now plays at university. Li explained that she wanted to keep playing when she migrated so she approached the university sports officer and joined the club. Li said that initially she was hesitant because she was the only Asian player and she felt that she stood out, but *'when I got on the court all my thoughts were on the game and I loved it.'* Li has competed at two Australian University Games as a member of the netball team, a fact that surprises many of her classmates. *'When I mention that I'm going to the Games it's surprising how many of them immediately assume I'm going for badminton or tennis, when I say netball they are shocked.'* Li said that in her experience the stereotype of Asian girls is that they are not good at team sports and do not have the same level of ball skills as their Anglo counterparts.

Sarah was born in England and came to Australia when she was eight years old, she is now in her early thirties. Sarah said that she just naturally moved into netball, *'My mother and all my sisters played netball, so I suppose you could say it was a family tradition. Mom coached my team for years and Dad used to be one of the*

*loudest barrackers so I suppose you could say all of us girls had plenty of family support.'* Sarah continued to play netball at school and for a local community club after she immigrated. Later, she played for her university and the district team and when she started work she entered a team into an evening competition with her friends. Netball became Sarah's main sport due to both family tradition and lack of other viable alternatives. She had played soccer at primary school but there were no girls' teams at her high school. *'I wanted to keep playing but it was too difficult so I just kept with my netball ... some of my friends played cricket but they were always getting called "lessies" so I steered way clear of cricket even though I was interested in playing. Looking back I guess you could say that I did netball 'cause it was girlie and we could flounce around in our short skirts.'* Sarah still plays netball and explained, *'I know it so well, I don't have to think about it and 'cause I've played for so long I'm good. It keeps me fit and we have a great social side.'*

Ros moved to Australia from England when she was in her early twenties, nearly fifteen years ago. Ros played netball at school and her sisters and mother had also played. She felt that, *'everyone I grew up with played netball'*. Ros was invited to be on a work-based netball team when she first moved to Australia and has been playing ever since. Reflecting on her experiences Ros said that joining the team had given her an easy and fun pathway into the social networks at work. She found the cultural variations were 'minor'.

Lesley had played netball in New Zealand before moving to Australia in her teens, she is now in her early thirties. *'All the girls in my form played netball and hockey, those were the two most popular sports at school for girls. I would've liked to*

*play rugby like the boys did but it wasn't offered. Now the girls can play rugby at school but when I was there it was only the guys.'* She continued to play netball throughout her school years and was on the regional and state representative teams. Lesley commented about how her family were always supportive of her netball, especially her mother, remembering, *'now I think back and wonder how mum did it all, driving me to practice, to the games, coaching clinics, umpiring, helping manage the team and working in the tuck shop during games. She put so much time into those things and at the time I just took it all for granted.'* She believed that her mother's involvement allowed her to become totally committed to playing netball and achieving her full potential.

Lesley is an accredited umpire and has coached girls' teams. In reply to a question about her observations of cultural diversity in netball she replied, *'I never really thought about it, but now that you ask I can't think of many girls that were from other countries. And in my club there aren't many Asian girls even though lotsa Asian families now live in the area.'* Lesley said that, *'although I speak with a funny accent and get all the standard Kiwi jokes I never felt different or that that made any difference to my sporting chances.'*

Dianne was also born in New Zealand; she is now married with two daughters who both play netta (netball for young girls). Dianne had played netball in New Zealand from the age of eight years and joined a local team when she moved to Australia in the early 1980s. *'It was really great, I called up the state office and they gave me the number of a club down the road. The women were very friendly when I called and I went to training and we all went to the pub for drinks after.'* Dianne explained that she

felt comfortable going alone to the first training session because she had played netball for years and believed, *'it's one big community. It doesn't matter if you are from NZ or Australia, the game's the same and I felt at home.'* She encouraged her daughters to learn to play netball because, *'I got so much from the game and I hope that they will feel the same. Also, I think that it's best to learn to play when you are young then you can decide if you want to keep playing or not. Getting the ball skills early gives you options.'* Dianne also believed that the social component is important, *'all the girls' friends play and their mothers come to the games and we all cheer them on together.'*

When asked about the cultural diversity of netball Dianne thought that Australian netball was less multicultural than New Zealand netball, *'in NZ you get heaps of Maori girls that are really good players, and some of the players from the Pacific Islands are really tall and really good too. Here you certainly don't see many Aboriginal girls playing, maybe you would in the outback areas but not here in the city. We do have a Jewish club in the competition, and several of the girls' parents are South African.'*

These women all played netball from an early age, in both school sports and for netball clubs. All of the women indicated that their families were supportive of their sport. The women who emigrated when they were young appeared to easily slip to netball as it was offered in all Australian schools and those who came to Australia after completing school seemed to have few difficulties or qualms in tracking down the information about their local netball club and joining. The women from English speaking backgrounds reported an almost seamless transition into the Australian sport

environment whereas the interview participants from Hong Kong and Singapore spoke about feelings of difference and dissonance.

### *Post-migration experiences*

The second grouping of interviewees comprised women who did not play netball until after they arrived in Australia. Feng was originally from Hong Kong and joined netball at her Australian school when she first arrived at the age of twelve years; she is now in her early twenties. Feng felt *'that's what Aussie girls do, play netball . . . I tried to play but it was never quite right.'* Feng explained her teacher put her in a team with all the other girls who had come from overseas, *'we were mainly Asians and we just lost game after game as we didn't know much of the rules.'* She felt so discouraged by the constant losses that she quit. Feng believed that she received little coaching or skill development in netball because her teachers stereotyped her as low potential due to her cultural background. *'it was as if - do you see any Asian girls on the state or national teams?'*

Akiko, a Japanese-born woman said that she really wanted to play baseball when she first came to Australia as a teenager three years ago. She had played baseball in Japan and practiced with her father and brothers. However, she thought that only boys played baseball in Australia so she opted for netball instead. Similar to Feng's experience, Akiko was placed in a school team that comprised new arrivals and felt dissatisfied. *'I was very good at baseball and would have been good at netball too if I was given more of a chance. I quit for tennis.'* She thought that her racial background was used to stereotype her sporting abilities and interest.

Maria was born in Australia and is of Maltese heritage. She became involved in netball when she saw some netball courts, *'so I went over to see what was happening and mom told me what it was and she asked me if I'd like to play.'* Her mother had played netball, *'I remember going to watch her play netball only playing with the moms that had their daughters playing netball, she enjoyed that'*. In reflecting on her years playing netball Maria observed, *'you don't see a lot of girls from NESB [non-English speaking background] playing netball, especially at the representative level. You know a lot of ethnic girls are bigger and they get embarrassed by showing their body and doing that sort of thing ... You know a lot of ethnic girls are probably quite hairy you know and that's embarrassing for them and they don't like having to wear a short skirt and t-shirt because they're dark they can feel embarrassed.'*

Aneta played basketball in Serbia and commented that she would have liked to continue but it was not offered at her high school when she arrived in Australia some thirty years ago as a teenager. *'The Australian society, or the government, or sports and recreation, or whoever was in charge at the time, they didn't give much thought to immigrants and their different needs for sport'*. Aneta played school netball but found the process very discouraging. Adjusting to a new game and a new language made playing difficult, *'with lack of English, with netball, I couldn't remember the rules. Like, what did she, the umpire, mean by "holding" and by "defence"? I had nobody to ask. The umpire couldn't explain it to me because she didn't know my language. So that was just trial and error'*.

Maria arrived from Italy in the 1960s when she was a teenager. She explained that she had never heard of netball before but since it was so popular at her school she joined the team. *'I wanted to be part of the team but I was always sitting out, the last one to put on the court . . . me and my friends who were all new to Australia.'* Maria played on and off throughout school and joined a mother's team when her daughters started to play. *'This time I could speak better English and did not feel like an outsider as much. We are the bottom team but it is fun.'* Maria said that she had felt that sport was not very open to migrant girls when she was growing up, unlike her brothers and father who were members of an Italian community club which fielded several sporting teams and where they spend many hours not just playing sport but socialising as well.

Hua emigrated from China five years ago and has a daughter that plays netball. Hua said her daughter wanted to play with the other girls in her class. Hua was happy for her daughter to play netball because she believed it was not a rough sport. However, Hua felt hesitant because she was not familiar with how the sport was organised and she felt that she might not fit in with the other families whose daughters were playing netball.

Xia, who was also born in China, also said that she felt that her knowledge of particular sports and the sport system impacted on the sports that she, and other Chinese migrants, encouraged their daughters to play. *'You can get the son into soccer or football or something like that because the other fellows on the job know about the soccer club. But mum she's at home and doesn't know how to get the daughters into the sport.'* Xia played netball in school after she migrated and therefore had some knowledge of the rules and netball club structure. Xia explained that due to this



experience she acted as a liaison for many of her friends who had daughters playing netball but were unsure of how the sport worked. Asked about how she felt she fitted into the netball scene Xia said, '*No person said racist things it was little things that mattered like not being put on the canteen roster.*' Xia also noted that she was never asked to manage a team or help with practices even though she had more playing experience than many of the other mothers.

A first-generation Croatian, Karola played some netball in school in the 1960s but did not play for long. Karola said that she would have preferred to play for her community club. However, the Croatian sports club where she was a member focussed on male sports. Therefore, unlike her male counterparts, who could play sport and use their native language with the support of a Croatian club, she did not have this same opportunity. This meant that to play sport required Karola to forgo the public use of her first language and cultural expressions. Karola's daughter plays netball at school and her son plays soccer both at school and for the local Croatian sport club. Karola feels that her son is able to maintain his Croatian identity through his soccer affiliations but her daughter does not, '*she's just another Aussie.*'

#### *Netball administrators*

The administrators interviewed, Sue, Judy, Joan and Kylie, all had a long association with netball, as players, administrators and coaches. Their stories covered both personal playing experiences and reflections from the administrative side of netball. Col, the most senior netball executive at the time of the interview was included in the study for his perspective on current netball policy and future initiatives.

In 1956 when Sue first played netball it was one of the few sports offered at her Catholic girls' school, *'probably because it was about all the nuns knew ... I went along to the trial and would you believe I got to be centre and my mother said that you're not playing netball.'* Judy continued to play despite her mother's desire for her to play tennis, which was considered more socially useful, and she played throughout school and into her work years. Judy explained that when she started work netball was the only sport available to women in the public service lunchtime sports competition.

Joan also began playing at an early age in the 1960s and played netball for several years before becoming an umpire and then a salaried administrator. She also believed that for many years netball had an advantage over other sports because it was played in most schools and schoolgirls had few other choices. *'I think for a while there as far as women's sport was concerned we had no competitors. Every girl played netball at school and when you left you could play netball or hockey, that was about it.'*

Twenty years later not much had changed when Kylie began playing netball at school in the late 1980s. *'When I was at school a few years ago, basically girls could only play one or two winter sports which was hockey or netball. We didn't have the choices that kids at school now have, soccer and touch ... so I decided to play netball which I think was a majority participation and because it was kind of a mind sport.'* She has played netball since she was seven and coached from the time she was 14 years old. While she has witnessed a number of changes she believed that netball will always have strong female support, *'it is such a women's sport that girls always gravitate towards netball rather than, you know, previously male dominated sports ... but I think because it's seen as a women's sport that that's where they go to'.*

This situation of near exclusive access to girls who want to play sport has begun to change, as Col, a senior netball executive noted, *‘in the past four months alone my daughter who is 11 has probably played in excess of five different sports and been introduced into five different sports and had the marketing approach of five different sports ... netball’s cognisant of the fact that the marketing approach that it used 10 or 15 years ago which was in all likelihood sufficient, is no longer sufficient ... there is greater competition for the kids.’*

When specifically asked about cultural diversity in netball all of the interviewees replied that while they knew of several schemes to encourage Indigenous Australian girls to play netball they had no knowledge of any action at the national level to specifically target girls or women from ethnic minority communities. Although Joan did say, *‘I know that exceptions have been made to allow people to be able to wear their own ethnic dress which is different to the uniform ... I think that should be the case that they be allowed to wear whatever head covering or full length uniform’*. When asked if this might be extended to allow competitions to be held in female-only environments, her response was *‘it’s really going to be quite hard cause obviously you will have to start a competition for those girls cause Dads, brothers, grandfathers all go and watch so it’s really hard to say females only, that’s discouraging some to play sport and we want to encourage as many as we can but if we just restrict it to girls only then it’s not really good for the sport.’*

Sue said that in her experience many girls from culturally diverse backgrounds did not play netball because of inadequate family support. *‘Between their families*

*they're not encouraging them at all. There are one or two exceptions to the rule but it's not often that you see their parents driving others around.'* She felt that netball currently has such a large player base that they are not overly concerned about targeting specific groups, *'I don't think there's anyone interested in it ... I guess if they were a sport that was just starting out it might be in their interests to target certain communities or coaches but they just don't.'* Col agreed that not much had been done to target players from different backgrounds and questioned the economics of such a move, *'it's probably something you should look at but how many would it attract? Probably the amount of money that would be involved in setting it up ... I don't suppose you could send your netball things out in 65 languages.'*

In aggregate the administrators interviewed were of the opinion that netball was a sport that provided women and girls with uncontested access to facilities and community and work based competitions. Netball also provided these women with a sense of belonging and acceptance, players were encouraged to take on umpiring, coaching and administrative roles and the women interviewed felt that they were able to contribute to the development of the sport.

As for the inclusion of a culturally diverse player base, the administrators interviewed believed the low number of netball players from culturally diverse backgrounds could be mainly attributed to cultural expectations and inadequate family support. They believed that netball has not targeted specific groups in the community because netball has held such a widespread attraction for the mainstream population that it has not had to worry about player participation rates or broadening its appeal to incorporate groups on the margins. To target an 'ethnic' audience was perceived as

inappropriate as it might diminish the appeal of the sport to the 'mainstream'. Comments such as the latter indicate that processes of attributing blame to the 'other' are at play.

## **Discussion**

The interview narratives suggest that the rhetoric of exclusion is active within Australian netball, characterised by a pervading ethnocentricity. Interactions within and between the competing requirements for individual, cultural and national (ie Australian) identity clearly influenced decisions about netball participation. The desire of the women interviewed to retain their distinct cultural identity and respect associated values places another layer to an already complex decision-making process, which includes balancing family and economic priorities.

Societal issues of power and dominance related to cultural homogeneity resonated in the stories. 'Power tends to get translated into a structure of dominance enabling the powerful to write their advantages into the system's very structure' (Sage, 1998:234). Those individuals or groups that control this power are afforded an unequal share of the benefits it affords. The power situation relating to maintaining an advantage was strongly evident in the stories of the women interviewed. The women who were born in Australia, England and New Zealand had a very different set of experiences of netball to the women born in non-English speaking countries. The first generation women from the latter group spoke about their feelings of dissonance, alienation and differentness and how they felt unwelcome in most mainstream sports including netball. First generation mothers not familiar with netball and/or with low levels of English proficiency, were not asked by 'mainstream' mothers to assist with the coaching,

managing or canteen duties and therefore felt excluded. This situation furthered their daughters' sense of 'difference', and in some cases led to alienation, as maternal involvement is a culturally expected aspect of the club netball system. For many first generation culturally diverse women the inclination to participate in netball was more often than not overwhelmed by fears of rejection, discomfort at not being able to understand the English instructions and uneasiness at not being able to fully express their thoughts in English. In contrast, the women from English-speaking backgrounds spoke of their positive experiences of belonging, acceptance and family support and their easy transition into netball participation.

Since white settlement, Australian national identity has been based on an ideal of cultural exclusiveness located within an Anglo centric paradigm. The formation of personal and group identity via cultural forms such as sport has served to facilitate and maintain this desired cultural similarity. The experiences related by the women interviewed for this study support the proposition that sporting communities, in this case netball; can promote expectations of cultural assimilation and conformity. This focus has meant that the cultural transition for the women from Anglo based cultural backgrounds was less dramatic than for women from different cultures, as evidenced in the comments from the former group about their feelings of familiarity, similarity and cultural acceptance. This is in contrast to the experiences of women from non-Anglo cultures who spoke about dissonance, difference and cultural ambiguity. The two Asian women who had played netball before coming to Australia observed that while they had thought nothing about playing in their home country, their situation was different by virtue of their minority status and cultural stereotypes about the sports Asian females play.

The women who perceived that netball involvement was culturally inclusive had all played netball in their country of origin and used their involvement as a form of integration into their new lives in Australia. It was felt that their individual identity and cultural values were not compromised or questioned in the transition, as culturally expectations were similar.

However, some women perceived sport involvement to be framed within culturally limiting parameters. The lack of opportunity to engage in sports that these women had played in their country of origin or sports that they were familiar with was raised as a point of concern. In other studies the absence of minority female role models has been identified as a contributor to low participation of marginalised women in sports (Acosta, 1993; Glanvill, 1995; Harris, 1997; Lirgg, 1992). In netball there are very few role models for the girls from marginalised ethnic groups to emulate (Taylor, 2002; Vescio, Taylor, & Toohey, 1999).

Most of the women who had no previous exposure to netball and began to play after coming to Australia, did so due to lack of alternative sporting choices or opportunities and to assimilate into their new cultural environment. Unlike research which has pointed to the use of sport as a means to maintain cultural identity and expression (Hughson, 2000; Madan, 2000; Mosely, 1994) there was no evidence to suggest that netball afforded the women interviewed such opportunities for reconfiguration of personal identity or subject status. The transition to a new language, culture and environment, was not facilitated by netball participation thus it offered little in the way of social capital.

At the organisational level explicit racism may have gone but a more subtle form of exclusion remains. Despite low levels of involvement of women and girls from culturally diverse backgrounds the netball administrators interviewed did not feel that there was any need to instigate a change in policy or practice to accommodate players from different cultural backgrounds. Previous studies have found that cultural assimilation practices exist in many Australian organisations ranging from the workplace to involvement in community institutions (de Lepervanche & Martin, 1991). Recently a national study found that non-English speaking background (NESB) people are underrepresented in the arts sectors and that NESB artists are largely restricted to minor, token or stereotypical roles in mainstream commercial or funded theatre (Bertone, Keating & Mullably, 2000). The artists interviewed for the study suggested that the greatest influencing factor was Australia's close ties with English theatre traditions, and that contemporary mainstream theatre reflected 'middle class Anglo-Celtic values and preferences, while simultaneously excluding the values and aspirations of 'ethnic' communities and the working class' (Bertone, Keating & Mullably, 2000: ix). In her examination of notions of assimilation of indigenous women, Bartlett (1999) claimed that narratives of femininity and domesticity were crucial to assimilationist rhetoric and conceptualisations of race. She concluded that racial policies have been inseparable from gendered notions of women's work in the public and the private sphere and those assimilationist notions were a fundamental premise of Australian society.

In the case of netball, both the state and national administrators interviewed suggested that it was too costly for the sport to implement cultural diversity strategies.



They were clearly referring to direct financial costs. However, the organisation's hesitation to develop diversity strategies might also be interpreted as wariness about the associated social and psychological costs, which accompany change. There was no mention of cultural diversity in formal netball policy and attempts to identify if it was lurking just below the surface in any way, shape or form draw a blank. Such absences (of key terms) often signal something important (Cheney & Tompkins, 1988) and thus may reveal further examples of a monocultural subtext.

The interviewees involved in netball administration suggested that cultural inclusiveness was not an explicit policy initiative and any inclusion happens through chance rather than through direct planning. According to these administrators it would be an extravagant and financially costly gesture for the associations to cater for the specific needs of different cultures. They felt that netball associations would not be able to satisfy the expectations of the 'mainstream' and 'periphery' conjointly. Maintaining the existing player base was deemed to be of paramount importance. The interview participants seemed to assume that players from different ethnic backgrounds would eventually gravitate into the sport. The stronghold that netball has on school sport and its general popularity with a traditional market has meant that it has not been necessary to actively pursue other avenues of player recruitment. This finding is consistent with other research on organisations that has argued that organisational culture promotes hegemonic cultural practice (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999). Ethnicity is a concept that is socially constructed in discourse, and as such, the production of cultural homogeneity often occurs in policies and practices that constitute social and organizational life. The monocultural organization may subtly but powerfully shape and define these women's experience and ways of knowing and may reproduce hegemonic distinctions between

mainstream and 'other' cultural life. The production of cultural homogeneity often occurs in policies and practices that constitute social and organizational life (such as sport).

Valuing cultural diversity and creating opportunities to make contributions to the construction of a sport, allowing expressions of unique cultural identity through dress or other symbolic representations are lost when sports are culturally homogeneous. The women interviewed for this study felt that Australian netball clubs did not acknowledge cultural diversity nor did they provide avenues for 'other' expressions of culture. Cultural inclusion could be achieved if all players were given the opportunity to contribute to the construction of the club's identity. However, given the strong Anglo-Australian traditions of netball and the lack of a substantial presence of players from different cultural backgrounds the status quo has remained. In countries where non-white player numbers are more substantial the power struggles have begun to emerge. Take the example of a netball team comprised of mainly working class and non-white women in England who wanted to play the game with 'style', which for them meant wearing shorts, crop tops and associated exercise gear instead of the traditional short shirt, matching bloomers and top. Their choice of uniform contradicted the association's dress regulations and created dissent in the competition (Hargreaves, 1992). Another case in point is the New Zealand Aotearoa Netball Oranga Health Lifestyle Trust, which uses netball to promote the wellbeing of Maori women in a culturally appropriate manner (Ellis, Sperling & Toma-Dryden, 1999). The Trust encourages structures activities that implement *Oranga*, a holistic concept of well-being. The values and beliefs of Maori netball are reflected in its administration, which celebrates collectivism, and fosters 'identity and pride in the

achievement of young Maori women through *whakawhanaungatanga* (relationships), *tikanga* (customs) and *te reo rangatira* (Maori language)' (Ellis, Sperling & Tomadryden, 1999:53).

The way in which netball has been formally structured and administered in Australia has left very few openings for such freedom of expression or cultural distinctiveness. For example, previous research has noted the difficulties faced by Muslim women in trying to access sporting opportunities that allow them to participate wearing the *hijab* or with no males present (Taylor & Toohey, 1999). To join netball has meant to conform to the set uniform, rules and unofficial social expectations. For some women this has been constraining and inhibiting but for others it has provided a sense of familiarity and stability that has been a welcome contrast to the other changes they have faced as migrants to a new country.

Collectively, the narratives of both the women and the netball administrators suggest that there is a currently little being done to specifically address the needs of culturally diverse participants. Therefore, players, coaches and administrators need to be encouraged to understand the value of diversity and recognise the need for structural transformation if netball is to truly embrace cultural diversity and to maintain its reputation as a sport for Australian women irrespective of class, ethnicity and religion. To recognise and value cultural diversity would be to move from the rhetoric of exclusion to a more inclusive dialogue in sport.

## **Closing comments**

Encapsulated in the establishment and organisation of codified sport in Australia is over 100 years of white history concentrated in the hands of the dominant cultural hegemony. Organisational reluctance to embrace cultural diversity may be in part explained by concerns about retaining the current mainstream participant base if cultural diversity is simultaneously targeted. The rhetoric of exclusion is a contributing factor to the under representation of culturally diverse females in sport. In turn, low levels of involvement send out a powerful message of lack of engagement in mainstream activities that signify 'Australianness' and lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes that suggest women from particular cultural groups are not interested in sport. It is often that they are not interested in participating in a sport that forces them to abandon or hide their cultural distinctiveness as a condition of involvement.

While drawing general conclusions from a limited set of interviews is dangerous, the stories told by the women interviewed revealed much about the rhetoric of exclusion in the settlement process. Cultural conformity is expected, and sport organisations are avenues by which existing inequities are reinforced, legitimised and reaffirmed. The control, production and distribution of cultural power presently disadvantages women from culturally diverse backgrounds. Sports such as netball are a microcosm for the creation of social structures via the renegotiation of dominant and oppositional ideological positions. The power structures present within sport have proven to be highly resistant to changing these stereotypes. As a consequence, netball is irrelevant in the expression of cultural distinctiveness, emancipation or cultural resistance. On a positive note, the different generational experiences of the interview

participants suggest that sporting opportunities have become easier to access and that cultural exclusion and racial discrimination is rare.

The continued internationalisation of sport, combined with projected high levels of migration into Australia, makes it imperative for organisations to embrace cultural diversity on both the playing field and within the organisation. The development of a hybrid sporting culture that breaks down constraints to participation and promotes inclusivity is an opportunity to challenge existing ethnocentric and patriarchal systems that have been proven to be exclusionary and deterministic. The challenge for sport is expunge the rhetoric of exclusion and create a symbolic space in which ethnic and cultural difference can be accepted and valued. Inequalities in power and opportunity are more likely to be minimised if sport organisations move to achieve cultural integration and foster affiliation and reciprocity.

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**Table 1** Netball interview participants

Country of Birth	Number interviewed
Australia	4
England	2
China	2
Croatia	1
Hong Kong	2
Italy	1
Japan	1
Malta	1
New Zealand	2
Serbia	1
Singapore	1
	18

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<sup>i</sup> In illustration of this point, a Vietnamese woman interviewed had migrated because of very traumatic circumstances in her home country and thus questions related to the reasons for migration were avoided. Briefings about the way in which sport is organized and perceived in the home country of each interviewee provided a starting point for the conversations about culturally constructed difference.