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Better  
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Briefing

40

**‘Race’, racism  
and participation  
in sport**

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## Key messages

- 1 Racism and racialised inequalities significantly influence black and minority ethnic communities' access, participation and experiences of sport.
- 2 Black and minority ethnic community experiences of racism differ within and across ethnic groups. Intersections between gender, class, age and disability also influence experiences and participation in sport.
- 3 In light of the existence of racism in sport, it is unsurprising that many black and minority ethnic groups favour physical activity (PA) and health programmes that can be pursued away from the mainstream.
- 4 Race equality in sport requires a critical approach that understands the nuances of tackling different experiences of racism in policy and practice. One size does not fit all.

## Introduction

This briefing outlines three propositions in what is an increasingly complex field of theory, policy and practice:

- 1) 'Race'<sup>1</sup> and ethnicity influence the way sport is accessed and experienced;
- 2) Responses to racial disparities and discrimination require coherent and specific approaches at multiple levels (individual, organisational, structural);
- 3) Race equality policies require clear thought but implementation needs thoughtful action.

In outlining these propositions it must be noted that although racism in sport is a regular topic for debate in the media and, to some extent, policy, there remains a paucity of research evidence on the interconnections of 'race', racism and participation in sport. However, even though this briefing draws upon most of the significant available research in the UK, some pieces may seem dated but are included because they are formative and still significant. This paper considers "sport" in both a formal context of active participation, and participation in physical activity more generally, considering possible preferences for informal or community contexts for some black and minority ethnic groups. It also explores the role that formal structures and bodies can play in increasing participation amongst these individuals.

### 1 Racism and racialised inequalities significantly influence black and minority ethnic communities' access, participation and experiences of sport

Racial and ethnic barriers have been the focus of a small but coherent body of research that has considered the dynamics of ethnic differences and identities, nation and relations in and through sport. Whilst other possible barriers to sport include time, income, socio-economic background, culture and religion, age, disability, gender, and location, there is extensive evidence that the experiences of black and minority ethnic people in sport are mediated by racism (Hylton, 2009; Hylton and Morpeth, 2014; Long *et al.*, 2014; Spracklen *et al.*, 2014).

1. 'Race' is a problematic term that is used in everyday parlance to include issues of ethnicity. In this paper it is being used pragmatically to do so rather than restricting it to skin colour and physiognomy. Please see Hylton (2009) where these issues are examined in more detail.



In the most significant systematic review of literature on black and minority ethnic communities in sport to date, commissioned by Sporting Equals<sup>2</sup>, Long *et al.* (2009) highlighted the nature and extent of racist experiences in England and Wales (Burley and Fleming, 1997; Moran, 2000), Scotland (ScottPorterResearch, 2001), and Northern Ireland (Connolly, 2002). The review (Long *et al.*, 2009) stated that diverse forms of racism have a negative effect on the participation of black and minority ethnic groups in sport. The studies considered by Long *et al.* (2009) noted that racism is experienced at all levels, by men and women, and have manifested in different ways from overt to covert activity. This might include direct abuse, stereotypes based on cultural or ethnic background, or structural factors, such as a failure to accommodate cultural needs, for example, dress codes. Any one of these factors could limit or arrest attempts to take part in sport, though there is the potential for such barriers to reoccur and for individuals to experience multiples of them during their lives (Burdsey, 2007; Norman *et al.*, 2014; Flintoff, 2015).

Surveys of football fanzine editors and stadium managers carried out by Garland and Rowe (1999), and football supporters by Cleland and Cashmore (2014), emphasise that sport is an arena of racialised conflict. Some of this conflict is regionalised according to Burley and Fleming's research in Wales (1997) and Long *et al.* (2015); caused by a fear of real or perceived racism (ScottPorterResearch, 2001); and by perceptions of differential treatment in terms of intellect and athletic ability (Welch, 2001; SportsPeoplesThinkTank, 2014). Welch's (2001) study of basketball resonates over a decade later after the ex-owner of the LA Clippers' Donald Sterling's controversial subordination of black players in basketball when he announced that they were not welcome in VIP suites at games. More specifically, he was especially unhappy with his partner appearing in the media with African American players, which led to mass protests by his team and other franchises (Barrabi, 2014).

**2 Black and minority ethnic experiences of racism in sport differ within and across ethnic groups and intersect with issues relating to gender, class and disability**

Any analysis of participation in sport with regards to ethnicity must be approached with caution. Where used uncritically or expediently, labels relating to ethnicity are likely to miss the diversity between and within ethnic groups, enforcing ideas of homogeneity.

The 2013/14 Active People Survey in England data [Table 1] suggests rates of participation in 'some sport, but less than three times a week' are higher amongst individuals from black and minority ethnic than White British backgrounds (25.3% and 24.2%). However, when the black and minority ethnic figure is broken down into narrower categories, 'Mixed', 'Chinese' and 'Other' groups are shown to participate more frequently than those who identify as 'Black' or 'Asian'<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, men participate more than women (Hylton and Totten, 2013), and there is a constant decrease in participation as all ethnic groups grow older [see Table 2]. What these statistics tell us is that participation among all ethnic groups is complex and that attention should be paid to intersectional identifiers when seeking to explain patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

**Table 1: Active People Survey 8 (2013/14) [Sport England]**

		Sport
		All Sports
Ethnicity	White British	24.2%
	Black and Minority Ethnic Groups	25.3%

White British; black and minority ethnic – Some [sports], but less than three times a week

2. A race equality in sport organisation established in 1998 to promote ethnic diversity in sport and physical activity.  
 3. This pattern is consistent amongst all but the Chinese ethnic group.



**Table 2: Active People Survey 8 (2013/14) [Sport England]**

		Sport	
		All Sports	
Demographics	Gender	Male	26.0%
		Female	22.7%
	Age Range	16 - 25	30.7%
		26 - 34	30.8%
		35 - 44	28.6%
		45 - 54	24.8%
		55 - 64	20.5%
		65 and over	14.2%
	Ethnicity	White British	24.2%
		Black and Minority Ethnic Groups	25.3%
		White - other	26.4%
		Asian	23.8%
		Black	23.3%
		Mixed	28.9%
Chinese		38.6%	
Other		26.8%	

Demographics – Some [sports], but less than three times a week

For example, racism is not restricted to male sport only (Scraton *et al.*, 2005; Ratna, 2011; Ratna, 2014). Flintoff (2015) argues that basic sexist assumptions regarding PA affect all girls even if they experience PA in different ways. Such assumptions can also emerge as part of other political struggles as emphasised by Carrington's (1998) ethnography of a black cricket club in the north of England that showed the club was used by black men as a space for resistance against white racism (see also Burdsey, 2007; Fletcher and Walle 2015). However, in creating a productive black masculinity, the marginalisation of black women was maintained. In other words, even within emancipatory spaces, like sports teams, policy-makers and practitioners must be aware of the contradictions, tensions and complexities of racism, anti-racism and intersectionality (Carrington, 1998; Burdsey, 2007).

Where research has focused on Muslim Asian girls and young women, ill-health was a significant factor affecting low levels of participation, though experiences are not uniform (Carroll *et al.*, 2002; Lowrey and Kay, 2005; Lawton *et al.*, 2006). Wray (2002) stated that the women in her study were not interested in matching their bodies to a Western feminine ideal, and therefore that body image was less important than health for Muslim women as a motivating factor for participation in sport.

A further analysis of these data sets also indicate that those in a higher socio-economic category will generally have more time and disposable income to participate in sport than those in a lower socio-economic category. In addition to socio-economics, other social factors affecting participation rates are illustrated by Hylton and Totten (2013) in their analysis of sport, games and physical activities that include gender, age, disability, marital status and ethnicity [Table 2]. Whichever metrics are used, a combination of youth, whiteness, higher socio-economic status, and maleness is likely to locate an individual level with, or above, average participation rates. In addition to ethnicity, as these demographics intersect they can either improve or constrain an individual's ability to participate in sport. Long *et al.* (2009: 37) argue that,



*"In other words, even within emancipatory spaces, policy-makers and practitioners must be aware of the contradictions, tensions and complexities of racism, anti-racism and intersectionality."*

### 3 Many black and minority ethnic groups favour physical activity and health programmes that can be pursued in less competitive environments

Responses to racism are neither predictable nor logical. Racism is often subtle and may not register even with those on the receiving end of it (Spracklen, 2007; Hylton, 2013). While some individuals show a willingness to carry on regardless of "what the world can throw at them" (Carrington, 1998; Long, 2000), others will challenge racism proactively on and off the field of play (King, 2004a; King, 2004b; Hylton, 2011).

For example, Snape, Binks and Such (2008) state that many black and minority ethnic groups favour physical activity and health programmes. Reasons for this include the influence of 'race', culture and racism in more competitive and public environments. Though physical activity has been well documented for its potential for physical and mental health benefits, it must be noted that sport participation is but one form of physical activity. Where sport can be competitive, over-regulated and often formalised (in terms of dress/kit, cost, equipment, environment, time), hostile (over-competitive, violence, recourse to bigotry/racial slurs/biological reductionism and stereotypes), elicit cultural challenges (clubs and drinking culture, male environments), physical activity can fall into a number of other more controllable categories. Hylton *et al.* (2015) and Chalip (2006: 5) outline that these categories might include activities that can be more freely chosen and done on an individual's own terms and without added external pressures related to 'race', ethnicity and culture:

*"Exercise (e.g., calisthenics, walking), physical recreation (e.g., gardening, dance), and purposive physical activity (e.g., climbing stairs, biking to work) can provide health benefits, as well as sport, and can do so without engaging sport bureaucracies."*

### 4 One size does not fit all: achieving race equality in sport requires understanding of different experiences

Some providers may adopt 'level playing field' ideologies or notions of 'meritocracy' as a response to racism. In her study of British Asian girls and women, Ratna (2007) argues that this can be problematic as sport administrators, managers and development officers will lay the blame on an individual for their failure to participate in freely available sports, rather than accept their own responsibilities in challenging forms of racialised exclusion and discrimination based on established customs and practices (see also Hylton, 2005, 2013; Carrington and McDonald, 2008).

It is imperative that sport stakeholders canvas black and minority ethnic communities for their reasons for participation/non-participation, to avoid analyses based on racial stereotypes and assumptions. However, Lawton *et al.* (2006) also emphasise the need to put the ideas of participants into practice as many community sport participation programmes continue to lack cultural sensitivity. Lawton *et al.* (2006) and Wray (2002) found that many Pakistani and Indian women were unable to participate in programmes because providers had failed to take into account their particular religious and cultural beliefs.

Hylton *et al.*'s (2015) research for the Yorkshire Cricket Partnership established that the relatively low participation of South Asian communities in formal cricket environments against their high participation in informal formats was the result of a complex set of barriers and constraints. These constraints included a



mixture of lifestyle and individual preferences *in addition to* broader racialised issues. In response to these findings, the Yorkshire Cricket Partnership plan to change their programmes to include more support for informal/unaffiliated players in order to more fully understand the previously misconstrued tastes and preferences of South Asian cricketers in the region (see Hylton *et al.*, 2015).

## 5 Sport bodies and race equality

Key stakeholders in sport and related industries have attempted to use policies, interventions and campaigns to promote race equality, inclusion and diversity, and tackle racism (Garland and Rowe, 2001; van Sterkenburg *et al.*, 2005; Burdsey, 2007; Norman *et al.*, 2014; FA, 2015). In some cases, it has been argued that there is an over-emphasis on activities that challenge overt, often individualized behaviours over the more pervasive systemic processes and practices of discrimination and inequalities (Barlow *et al.*, 2007; Garland and Rowe, 2001). For example, in Malcolm's (2000) study on the English Cricket Board (ECB) he posits that existing literature on institutional racism and sport policy implementation was ignored thus resulting in a narrow application of forms of racism in the ECB's racial equality policies (see Horne, 1995; Long *et al.*, 1995; Solomos and Back, 1995; Bains and Patel, 1996; MacClancy, 1996; Long *et al.*, 1997; Bains and Johal, 1998; Football Task Force, 1998; Back *et al.*, 1999; Hylton, 1999). Such issues are still prevalent today (Spracklen *et al.*, 2006; Long and Spracklen, 2011; Cleland and Cashmore, 2014).

### Case studies of sports bodies addressing race equality

#### Kick it Out [www.kickitout.org](http://www.kickitout.org)

*Kick it Out* is an internationally acclaimed anti-racism in football organisation established in 1993 by dissatisfied stakeholders, including fans and the Football Association, unhappy with the spread of racism in the game. Although still working towards tackling racism, *Kick it Out* has broadened its strategic aims to incorporate inclusion and diversity; the sharing of good practice and recognition of the benefits of action against oppression and subordination in football.

Campaigns include addressing Asian under-representation in football through the implementation of leadership and coaching initiatives, and collaboration with organisations including the Muslim Women's Sport Foundation to raise the representation and profile of women in football. Further, *Kick it Out's* faith campaigns have responded to the growth of Islamophobia, sectarianism and anti-Semitism whilst issues of inclusion and access frame their campaign work on disability and LGBT issues in football.

*Kick it Out* has also been instrumental in keeping professional football clubs focused on broad issues of inclusion and diversity with its use of the Equality Standard (based on its original Racial Equality Standard). The Equality Standard has three levels for clubs to benchmark against to plan and document their practice concerning equality. *Kick it Out* accredit clubs against their work at different levels:

- i) Preliminary (Where are we now?)
- ii) Intermediate (What are we doing?)
- iii) Advanced (What has changed?)



Aston Villa and Arsenal football clubs have led the field in achieving the highest, advanced, level with four others having achieved the intermediate level. These successes for the professional game after ten years of the Equality Standard present a clear indication of the work still to be done across the 92 clubs in the four professional leagues.

*Kick it Out* also provide fans with a discrimination reporting system, which has been vital in monitoring the widespread on and off pitch racial controversies in recent times, including a recent case in which Chelsea fans racially abused a Black Parisian on the Metro in Paris. *Kick it Out* reported a significant rise in the number of cases of discrimination in 2014 compared to the same period in 2013, in particular, racism, anti-Semitism, sexism and social media hate-crimes.

### Stand Up, Speak Up

The Thierry Henry/Nike *Stand Up, Speak Up* campaign took a similar approach to *Kick it Out*, although it was hindered by some philosophical and practical problems. By encouraging fans to purchase and wear interlocking black and white bracelets, there was a tension between raising awareness of racism in sport and trivializing a major issue. A number of issues were raised

- the idea that anti-racism was a “fashion”, with swapping of different coloured bracelets on eBay and similar such sites;
- the implication that racism in sport had been ‘tackled’ by individuals’ buying of such bracelets; and
- the failure to establish active reporting systems to demonstrate impact.

### Show Racism the Red Card [www.srtrc.org](http://www.srtrc.org)

*Show Racism the Red Card* was established in January 1996 and uses feature films starring famous footballers; school and workplace based education programmes and events in football stadiums to tackle racism in society. The organisation delivers training to raise awareness and combat racism to more than 50,000 individuals per year.

### Get a Grip [www.getagripuk.org.uk](http://www.getagripuk.org.uk)

The *Kick it Out* and *Stand Up, Speak Up* campaigns highlight the potential for action to engender more inclusive environments while illustrating the potential of partial action by those engaging less critically with campaigns. The *Get a Grip* cricket campaign raises awareness of racism in sport but also generates funds for victims of racism. *Get a Grip* encourages fans to ‘stand up and make a difference’ and it uses sport as a vehicle for fundraising for a particular end result to support victim abuse.

### Sporting Equals [www.sportingequals.org.uk](http://www.sportingequals.org.uk)

*Sporting Equals* is an organisation which aims to understand the needs of black and minority ethnic communities within sport and physical activity with a view to increasing participation. They seek to work with communities to help make change sustainable, whilst offering a strategic service to policy-makers and other stakeholders to encourage an inclusive approach for under-represented groups. In particular they have been successful in creating links between national governing bodies (NGBs) and third sector sporting organisations that NGBs have traditionally found hard to reach and which help NGBs to encourage disengaged black and minority ethnic communities to participate in projects. Further, their research function has drawn on the expertise of specialists in the field to enable high profile work to inform policymakers and practitioners (for example, Long *et al.*'s, 2009, systematic review of literature on black and minority ethnic communities in sport).



## 6 Sport for All?

Though 'sport for all' is a common mantra inside and outside the industry, sport can be accused of offering piecemeal and ad hoc approaches to this important issue (Spracklen *et al.*, 2006; Long *et al.*; 2009, Hylton, 2010). Assessing the Sporting Equals Racial Equality Standard, Long *et al.* (2003) recognised the limitations of a system that could encourage a 'tick-box' approach, but also identified the major advantages of charters and standards providing a critical friend in the shape of Sporting Equals staff and of giving sympathetic individuals inside NGBs and other sports organisations a rationale for promoting racial equality up the agenda. For all its virtuousness, the main reason for some of the national sports organisations taking the exercise seriously was Sport England's insistence that it be a condition of future funding.

The Equalities Act 2010 has raised awareness of equality and diversity for public organisations by making it obligatory for public funded organisations to promote equality among individuals with protected characteristics<sup>4</sup>. For example, in recent years the Rugby Football League (RFL) has shown a commitment to race equality and diversity based on three core beliefs: that *it is the right thing to do, it makes good business sense, and compliance with legislation*. The RFL states that its moral and social duty to ensure rugby league is inclusive and welcoming is reflected in their core values: care, share, fair and dare. Their work on equality and diversity has been described by them as:

- 1) Aiming for equality for all;
- 2) Social justice;
- 3) Saying no to discrimination;
- 4) Making the best use of human resources;
- 5) Making services accessible;
- 6) Offering a fair chance for jobs;
- 7) Meeting legal obligations (see Bagilhole, 2009: 29).

The ethical case for equality and diversity is a persuasive component for its inclusion as a policy in any organisation. However, this has been a limiting element of its ability to be 'owned' and implemented by those motivated in more extrinsic ways that more obviously benefit them or their sport, for example, in terms of increased participation and improved profitability. In addition to a business case, compliance is still an important consideration for the RFL, though they are developing policies, and implementing initiatives that pre-empt or go beyond this.

In line with the Equality Act, the RFL does not focus on 'minorities' but seeks to counter the exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage of individuals with any protected characteristic, including women. This intersectional approach to race equality and diversity has given a lead to other governing bodies of sport on ways to manage concerns of race equality.

4. Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics are: gender, gender reassignment, 'race', religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership



## Conclusion

Sport participation in relation to race equality is complex and requires a critical understanding of terminology, intersectionality, systemic racism and racial inequalities, experiences of racism, attitudes to racism, and the potential for success of diverse approaches to these constraints and barriers. Arguments in favour of 'race' equality and diversity are not all based on moral or social justice issues. Sport is a microcosm of society and as a result broader issues are played out in its contested arena. Yet some like to argue that by being proactive in regards to the more easily identifiable overt racism in sport, the UK has managed to eradicate the isolated perpetrators of racism and understands the challenge of racial disparities. We argue instead that the examples presented in this briefing show the persistence of racial disparities and discrimination in sport, and that despite some progress, various forms of racism are still evident. 'Race' is a signifier of deeper and more pernicious concerns related to racism. These issues intersect with other identities that can act as (dis)empowering forces as they affect experiences and opportunities for inclusion and exclusion. Organisational policies and practices in UK sport must work more systematically to adequately tackle these issues, while recognising the frequently ambiguous 'everyday' nature of racialised processes and practices, the diversity of ethnic groups (across and within) and their own institutional processes.



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#### All website links checked November 2015

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We welcome feedback on this paper and on all aspects of our work. Please email [briefings@racefound.org.uk](mailto:briefings@racefound.org.uk)

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