

Rugby culture, ethnicity and concussion

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Abstract: This paper provides the socio-historical background to a research project which includes the investigation of the relationship between school rugby culture, ethnicity and attitudes towards the reporting of a concussion. It examines rugby culture in relation to the reporting of concussion by senior secondary school rugby players. The concept of 'Rugby culture' in the present research was defined as "the importance the school, staff, pupils and parents place on success in rugby" and is explored in-depth with respect to cultural, ethnic and historical parameters. In particular, the paper examines the inter-relationship of Māori culture and rugby culture in general.

Keywords: concussion; Māori; rugby culture; secondary school; sports studies

Introduction

The following quotation from Pringle (2003) encapsulates several themes that are part of the present focus:

Rugby's contemporary place of social importance ensures that it gains pride of place in many secondary schools, family and work conversations, and that it dominates the sports/media complex. (pp. 13-14).

In the 2006 Super 14 final at Jade Stadium Christchurch, between the Canterbury Crusaders and Wellington Hurricanes, Te Aute College old-boy, All Black and Wellington half-back, Piri Weepu, was knocked unconscious after 9-minutes of play. Once he had regained consciousness, Weepu returned to play the rest of the game; a decision that, at the time, was supported by the Wellington team doctor. Later, Weepu reported that following his concussion he could not remember the ensuing play. New Zealand Brain Injury Association Executive Director, Harley Pope, quickly responded to the incident suggesting that Weepu's actions and those of the Hurricane's medical staff "sets a poor example to young players" (<http://tvnz.co.nz/view/page/417227/730490>).

The Weepu case highlights a number of themes in the present paper. In particular, it demonstrates that whilst medical discourses regarding concussion may be accessible and prevalent, there are competing discourses that when combined, normalise Weepu's non-compliance to clear guidelines surrounding concussion. That is, New Zealand's 'rugby culture' serves to devalue the importance a player places on his/her health and well-being in relation to the significance of a game of rugby. The New Zealand public reaction to successive All Black Rugby World Cup 'failures' demonstrates that rugby is not only New Zealand's 'national game'; to many it is a passion, a religion, and a manifestation of 'kiwi' culture. McConnell (1998) argues that while New Zealanders as a whole either love, hate, or are indifferent about the game, "rugby union football shapes New Zealand social history and everyday life" (McConnell, cited in Pringle, 2003, p. 13).

Concussion in Sport

The events surrounding the Weepu case also illustrate an all too frequent response by players to a brain concussion. For many players a concussion or a “knock to the head” is part of the game and is not always recognised as a serious injury (Delaney, Lacroix, Gagne & Antoniou, 2001). Consequently, a concussion is not always reported to medical personnel (McCrea, Hammeke, Olsen, Leo & Guskiewicz, 2004) and this is certainly true for young New Zealand rugby players (Sye, Sullivan & McCrory, 2006). One of the most frequent reasons offered is that the players do not consider the injury serious enough to report or didn’t realise they had been concussed. There are also other factors associated with non-reporting of a concussion in sports such as rugby where the medical regulations governing the game require a player who has been concussed to “stand-down” from games and practices for at least 3 weeks and obtain a medical clearance before returning to play (International Rugby Board, 2008). While the scientific basis of this can be challenged it does provide some degree of management of the condition. It also provides a deterrent to the player who wishes to, or is pressured to continue playing the game, thus placing themselves at risk of further injury. With much of New Zealand community and high school rugby played without medical or even first aid support the identification of a concussion is left to players, coaches, team-mates and parents, whose own knowledge and motivations may be problematic.

While there are many myths associated with the term concussion (McCrory, 1999) it must be recognised that it is an injury to the brain and as such is potentially serious for the individual. It is now universally accepted that the player does not have to be “knocked out” to be concussed with any temporary disturbance of cognitive function underpinning the diagnosis of a concussion (McCrory et al., 2005). While the majority of sports concussions tend to resolve with time others need more intensive medical management. There is debate concerning the potential injury associated with playing while recovering from a concussion and the long term effects of a concussion, and multiple concussions in particular (McCrory, 2007). It is recognised that a concussion can have an impact on school performance (Sullivan Hokowhitu, Williams, Gray, McCrory, & Sye, 2008) and this aspect of the injury is often neglected in the management of the condition and getting the player back to the game. Concussion in rugby has been labelled as a “Hidden Epidemic” due to the high number of injuries (Marshall & Spencer, 2001) and our previous research with New Zealand high school 1st XV players supports the potential seriousness of this situation (Sye, Sullivan & McCrory, 2006). In the New Zealand context the young player is not only exposed to pressures to succeed by tradition, friends, schools and their old boys, families and whanau, they are now presented with the potential of becoming a professional player. These pressures may cloud the identification of a concussion and drive players (and support personnel) to not report a concussion to their doctors or appropriate sports medicine practitioners. Such avoidance increases the potential for the injury to remain unmanaged and to create difficulties for the player in their school work and in some cases, their social interactions.

Socio-history of New Zealand’s rugby culture

The pervasiveness of rugby culture through New Zealand society via education systems, the mass media, and the rugby fraternity, means that rugby is closely aligned with New Zealanders’ local, provincial and national identities. Hence, one of the premises of the present research is that New Zealanders (advertently or inadvertently) imbibe global, national, provincial and local discourses that assume rugby’s significance in the creation of New Zealand identities. A simplistic definition of ‘rugby culture’ suggests that New Zealanders hold certain expectations associated with rugby. The spectrum of such expectations is broad and complex, ranging from rugby being a core sign of national identity when adult New Zealanders, for instance, travel abroad, to expectations placed on children, sometimes from birth (e.g., All Black-branded paraphernalia for infants). Succinctly put, rugby, in part,

determines how New Zealanders see themselves and, in turn, impacts on how we behave. The credence that various New Zealanders impart to rugby culture varies as does the impact of rugby culture on behaviour.

Decisions regarding the health of our bodies (bodily practices) on the sporting field are linked to a society's culture in general. Sporting practices constitute a process of socialisation through and on the body. Moreover, sporting discourses derived from educational texts through to mainstream media inform the player about expected social behaviour. Such discourses are often contradictory. In the case of concussion in rugby, for instance, medical discourses prescribe codes of conduct following a concussion, whilst discourses based on New Zealand's socialised 'rugby culture' demand a tolerance to pain that defies medical codes. Thus, messages regarding health often fly in the face of competing discourses in a society where men, especially, are subject to alternative courses of action: "A male athlete's performance of masculinity is vulnerable if he cannot sustain a display of fearlessness in times of corporeal risk" (Pringle & Markula, 2005, p. 477).

During the early stages of the present research, the hypothesis that rugby culture would be stronger in some educational settings as opposed to others was developed. Some discussion, for instance, centred around an article in *North & South Magazine* entitled 'Two Tribes' (Malcouronne, 2006) which focused on the rugby cultures of Te Aute College (frequently called Te Aute) and Wesley College, honing in on a pivotal day in both Schools' rugby calendars when they played each other. It is probable that school-boy rugby culture and its derivatives, such as an exigency on pain tolerance, is closely linked to boys' boarding school culture in general. As the article outlines:

Along with high-spirited tales of dorm raids and food fights, former students from both schools tell of the ritualised violence of boarding dormitories, including sickening sadism such as 'Two Lines' (where students are forced to run through a gauntlet of peers who kick, punch and sometimes club them with pool cues). (Malcouronne, 2006, p. 78)

The present hypothesis takes the position that those schools steeped in rugby tradition would have environments where either tacit or explicit expectations of their rugby players would lead to the non-reporting of concussion. In relation to gender, it was presumed that the close link between New Zealand masculinity (Phillips, 1987) and rugby would impose a rugby culture upon male students, which was not apparent in the expectations placed upon female students.

Historically, the development of rugby culture within schools can be traced to the British public boys' schools of the nineteenth century. The development of rugby culture in schools was associated with 'muscular Christianity', which "helped shape the Victorian notion of sportsmanship" (Pringle, 2003, p. 49), including fair play, modesty, and adherence to rules. Conversely, boys who did not fully participate in vigorous sports were considered weak, unhealthy and emasculated (Crosset, 1990). The Victorian notion of sportsmanship was based on the idea that sport had inherent educational value that could not be taught within the confines of a classroom. For boys especially, it was thought that the physical nature of sports, such as rugby, instilled moral character fit for leadership in Britain and beyond. Sport, thus, became an important cog in the machine of British imperialism (Hokowhitu, 2004b, 2005). The culture of the rugby field was designed to impart features of imperial masculine leadership: "courage, endurance, assertion, control and self-control" (Dimeo, 2002, p. 80). Related to courage, endurance and self-control was the significance placed on pain tolerance to larger imperial goals. Throughout Britain's Imperial era: "there was a wide-spread view that great empires of the past had fallen because the ruling classes had grown luxurious and effeminate" (Collins, 1998, p. 4). Hence, sports such as rugby came to be seen as crucial to the making of the *man* and the imperial empire.

In the early-days of New Zealand rugby, the boisterous nature of rugby players belied the moral building faculties associated with its development in the public boys' schools of Britain and, as a consequence, the development of rugby as a national pastime met moral opposition from many quarters of New Zealand colonial society (Ryan, 2005). Regardless, rugby did become a prominent component of New Zealand culture and was institutionalised within New Zealand's educational system. As in Britain, it was assumed by many of New Zealand's policy makers that rugby possessed civilising attributes imperative to an emergent country largely comprising of coarse pioneer stock. A crucial moment in New Zealand history was brought about by the success of the 1905 All Blacks. The success of the tour back to 'Mother Britain' ensured that from thenceforth New Zealand nationalism would be tithed to the success of All Black rugby. Interestingly, the manager of the 1905 All Blacks, Mr Dixon, commented:

Rugby football is the New Zealand national game, every boy in the colony plays it, and this team, chosen by almost national assent, is the result of much care and thought. It represents the manhood and virility of the colony. (Cited in Phillips, 1987, p.111)

Subsequently, in the first quarter of the twentieth century rugby came to be seen as an essential component of a boy's education and in boys' secondary schools, rugby participation became compulsory (Pringle, 2003). Accordingly, as Connell (2005) argues "when boys start playing competitive sport they are not just learning a game, they are entering an organised institution" (p. 35).

According to Phillips, rugby culture in early colonial New Zealand was a hybrid culture resulting from the mixture of British discourses of muscular Christianity and the physical robustness of pioneer New Zealand masculinity. The point that both these cultures demanded men to be tolerant of physical pain is a key point for the present research. Phillips' thesis suggests the hybridisation of British and New Zealand pioneer culture created a hyper-masculine or intensified rugby culture, where a high degree of pain tolerance was normalised throughout New Zealand masculinities. Indeed, stories of male rugby bravado (especially in relation to All Black players) saturate New Zealand masculine iconology. Legendary stories such as Wayne 'Buck' Shelford's determination to play on for most of a test-match against Ireland with one testicle hanging torn from its scrotum, and the All Black player who amputated a troublesome finger so that he could travel abroad to play the Springboks. Without question, "the All Blacks provided by far the most significant role model for males in twentieth century New Zealand; and they came to be accepted throughout the society as the purest manifestation of what a New Zealander was" (Phillips, 1987, p. 109). Thus, "From the 1920s to the late 1970s... the dominance of rugby helped circulate and promote the knowledge that *real men* are tough and ignore pain" (Pringle, 2003, p. 56).

Māori and rugby culture

In relation to our hypothesis regarding rugby culture and socialisation, it is contemplated that the emphasis placed on sport in Māori masculine culture and, in particular, highly physical sports such as rugby and rugby league, would suggest that Māori students similarly confront intensified rugby culture discourses. Throughout colonisation, sport and displays of physical prowess were among the few areas where Māori could gain *mana* in the Pākehā world. When the assimilation of Māori into Aotearoa/New Zealand society became inevitable, those in power sought to meld the two peoples. Sport was seen as an area where the positive attributes of Māori physicality could be highlighted.

In relation to Malcouronne's 'Two Tribes' article (2006), we find that Te Aute's rugby culture, for instance, is determined by a history entangled with the muscular Christianity

resonant of Victorian British public boys' schools. The colonial policy of creating a cultural divide between generations, and the increasing desire by Māori to be educated in Pākehā ways, led to the education of a select few Māori boys in elite British-style colonial institutions. Subsequently, an elite group of Māori men was created who learnt the British masculine leadership system. Founded in 1854, Te Aute was conceived as a place where young Māori men could be groomed in the fashion of the English gentry. Te Aute presented:

... an extraordinary blend of various colonial legacies. Over the past 120 years, Anglicanism, Māoritanga [Māori culture] and rugby have combined to form a unique New Zealand institution ... [where Māori] families sent their chosen sons to be educated in a replica of the nineteenth century English boarding school (MacDonald, 1996, pp. 13–14).

It is emphasised that schools such as Te Aute were not the norm for the majority of Māori boys. Up until the 1940s, State education overtly discriminated against Māori by providing them curricula focused on manual instruction (Barrington, 1988; Hokowhitu, 2004b; Simon, 1998).

In 1891, headmaster John Thornton founded the students' association of Te Aute (originally known as The Association for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Māori Race, later named Kotahitanga mo Te Aute [Unity for Te Aute]). Part of the Association's mandate was the advocacy of sport as an integrative practice, along with "dairying and horticulture" (Walker 1990, p. 173). Rugby, in particular, as a form of "muscular Christianity" became readily promoted at Te Aute to impart desirable attributes of manly virtue, that is, the "acceptance of authority, perseverance against the odds, the ability to lead and to win or lose gracefully" (MacDonald, 1996, p. 5). Initially, Thornton advised against Māori playing rugby because of it being "too violent a contact sport, which was likely to cause injuries and rouse the passion and fighting spirit of the Māori" (Walker, 1990, p. 175). Accordingly, he suggested Māori boys play the gentlemanly sports of cricket and tennis. Not dissuaded, "in the years ahead [Māori] were to become passionately devoted to rugby" (Walker, 1990, p. 175). Many of the Māori gentlemen who came out of schools like Te Aute became leaders in their communities, strong, competent, eloquent and able to function between both worlds. Later, as a testament to how far elite Māori masculinity mirrored the British gentry's dominant masculinity, Viscount Bledisloe (one of New Zealand's most respected Governor-Generals) said at the centenary of the Kaiapohia Pa (communal gathering space) that Māori (i.e. Māori gentlemen) "could at least vie with his British comrade in loyalty, dignity, refinement, athletic achievement and eloquent speech" (Slatter, 1970, p. 170).

With regard to the present research, it is suggested that the rugby culture transplanted to Māori boys via institutions such as Te Aute, reflected a general imperial culture imparted to Pākehā boys by way of a schooling system that mirrored the British public school system. Phillips' thesis (1987) suggests a mixture of British and pioneer cultures, which lead to an intensified version of British masculinity. The history of Te Aute provided here similarly suggests a hybridised form of imperial/Māori culture where the expectation of a high pain tolerance, for example, was promulgated.

Stereotypes of Māori men have limited their participation in certain societal roles, while preventing them access to others. As Malcolm Maclean points out, Māori physicality as opposed to intellectuality is central to the myths that lie at the core of Pākehā misconceptions of Māori capabilities: 'Māori, by their savage nature, were supposed to fight – in war or its peacetime substitute, rugby football. Neither required intellect' (MacLean, 1999, p. 21). The over-emphasis on Māori men's feats on the rugby pitch or battlefield depicts Māori masculinity as void of qualities other than physicality. As a warrior in the service of the British army or in rugby: "they showed themselves to be good at those things which Pākehā

men [were also] proud of. Māori were good at war and they were damn good at playing rugby, so they took on a special status of being Kiwi males with a slightly exotic flavour” (Phillips, cited in Schick & Dolan, 1999, p. 56). Yet, war and rugby were two of the few sites where Māori men were able to enter into the Pākehā domain on a ‘level-playing-field’ (MacLean, 1999). Māori were allowed access to these arenas because they were ‘damn good’ at them, but more importantly because the representation of the Māori athlete or the Māori warrior was not in conflict with dominant representations of Māori men as naturally violent, athletic and staunch; a staunchness requiring a tolerance to both physical and emotional suffering.

Moreover, research suggests that dominant contemporary representations of Māori men reinforce the notion that Māori masculinity is staunch, physical and unyielding to pain (Hokowhitu, 2004a). The hybridisation of Māori culture with sporting culture in general and rugby culture specifically can be seen via the use of Māori culture within sporting discourses. Symbols of Māori culture have constantly been linked to sport, and especially to rugby union and rugby league. The National Rugby League team, ‘The Warriors’, for instance, unabashedly links Māori culture with sport and warrior cultures. A link compounded by ‘The Warriors’ motif, a *whakairo upoko* (carved head with protruding tongue). Likewise, the Waikato Super 14 franchise, which is located in the heavily Māori populated areas of Waikato and Bay of Plenty, is suitably named the Waikato Chiefs, while their motif features a hand clasping a *patu* (club-like weapon). The taking over of All Black sponsorship by the global sports clothing company, Adidas, initiated a mass wave of marketing based on selling Māori culture and its inherent savagery. Mass billboards appeared in sites such as London’s Time Square before the 1999 Rugby World Cup, displaying the head of a Māori man with full facial *moko* (tattoo) staring ominously out of a black backdrop. At the same time, Adidas released a dramatised version of the All Blacks’ traditional performance of the ‘Ka mate’ *haka*. Within this advertisement, live footage of the All Blacks performing ‘Ka mate’ is juxtaposed against a montage of a ferocious Māori warrior, with full facial *moko*, dressed in only a *piupiu* (grass-skirt), holding a *taiaha* (close-quarters combat weapon), and back-dropped by bubbling mud pools. Notably, the All Black footage focused on Polynesian players such as Taine Randell, Tana Umaga, Jonah Lomu and Kees Meeuws. The advertisement attempted to show the tradition, passion and intensity of the All Black ethos by bringing forth images of a Māori warrior, who with unremitting savage intensity will maim, kill and die for the cause. The juxtaposition of Polynesian players and the warrior suggests that the primal passion for sport is implicitly interwoven with the primitive physical passion of the warrior. Not surprisingly then, Howard Greive of Saatchi and Saatchi says, “we always wanted to create a sort of primal scary ad” (Primal Team, 1999, p. 22).

It must be recognised how the mass media in this instance has normalised the interweaving of Māori and rugby cultures. It is easy to conceptualise, therefore, how Māori youth would internalise rugby culture as being inherent to their ethnic culture. It is also recognisable, how others ignorant of Māori culture would assume that Māori are more suited to physical as opposed to academic pursuits. Ironically, constant representations over time do come true and Māori people who are successful sportspeople, for example, will be constantly highlighted as evidence that what is represented in the dominant discourse is ‘true’. Farah Palmer (2000), for example, found that many high school teachers viewed Māori achievement purely within the physical or sporting realm. One teacher said:

... there is a certain stereotype for Māori and Pākehā that you have to face up to ... Māori are good at PE ... [We need to] ensure that the structure of courses are shaped around their interests, such as sport, so there is a practical application they can relate to. (Palmer, 2000, p. 275)

Another teacher based her opinions of Māori on their sporting success: “I like the Māori students because they are good at sport and they are enthusiastic about their sport” (Palmer

2000, p. 276). Moreover, initial indications suggest that many New Zealand high school sports academies act as contemporary educational conduits of Māori and Polynesian students into a world where 'making it' as a sport-star is the only available option. New Zealand high school sports academies are typically programmes set up for year 11-13 students to complete sports industry based training. Importantly, State education has no mandate of control on what is taught or what can be achieved through these programmes. Although research in this area is in its infancy, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that Māori and Pacific students are heavily over-represented in high school sports academies, and that many offer little academic merit (Tristram, 2002). Of more significance to the present article is the normalisation of the interrelationship between Māori and rugby cultures. Moreover, in relation to the research from which this article derives, the present discussion suggests that Māori students may be overly influenced by rugby culture to the extent of putting their own health at risk. Confronted with the dilemma of playing on following a concussion or leaving the field, for instance, a Māori student could be more likely to play on because of the importance placed on rugby in dominant representations of Māori culture.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a socio-historical discussion on rugby culture in New Zealand especially in relation to Māori culture. As is typical of a paper of this nature, more questions have been raised than answered. Nevertheless, the discussion points to a deeper understanding of New Zealand's colonial and imperial history and how this history remains today to impact on the behaviours of all New Zealanders. For instance, Piri Weepu, as a New Zealander, Māori, Te Aute College old-boy and All Black, is confronted with a number of discourses (some of them complimentary, some competing) that will inform decisions he makes on and off the rugby field. This review and perspective serve as the theoretical base for our investigation of health behaviours, as in the reporting of a concussion, in young rugby players.

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