'Representing' the voices of Fijian women rugby players: Working with power differentials in transformative research

Abstract

The politics of research practice has been discussed extensively in ethnographic and methodological literature, and increasingly in sport research literature. In this article we intend to contribute to the growing body of transformative research in the sociology of sport with reflections on our experience as dominant group researchers in a post-colonial, sub-cultural sporting environment; women's rugby union in Fiji. We first examine the dilemmas and uncertainties engendered by our gendered/sexual positionalities and how we have sought to negotiate them. We also place our research in the context of Pacific islanders' continuous effort for knowledge decolonisation and examine the ways in which our research replicates colonial silencing of local voices, however inadvertently. Finally, we explore the broader transformative potentials researchers may contribute to by situating their work as a collective and dialogic project within and beyond academic exercises, between researchers, athletes and others.

Key words

Fiji, gender/sexuality, postcolonial, transformative research, women's rugby

Introduction

Research is a messy process, and its in vivo 'messiness' frequently relates to the multiple methodological challenges and ethical and political dilemmas researchers

encounter, which shape the process and outcomes of research (Bloyce, 2004). These are well documented in ethnographic and methodological literature (e.g., Bergold and Thomas, 2012; Hammersley, 2008; Stanley, 2013), and particularly relevant to researchers who are 'outsiders' in the milieu (e.g., Jones, 2008; Taylor and Rupp, 2005; Truman et al., 2000; Venkatesh, 2008). A recurring question asked by these researchers is: how do we, researchers, construct knowledge while recognising both ourselves and participants as 'biologically constituted, socio-emotionally situated, and socially constructed, … involved in the … reproduction and transformation of social structures and cultures' (Butt and Molnar, 2009: 246)?

The question assumes an added dimension when research is intended as an inquiry that 'recognises inequalities and injustices in society and strives to challenge the status quo' (Mertens, 2007: 212). Such research ranges from feminist research to critical social research (e.g., Harvey, 1990), emancipatory research (e.g., Baker, et al., 2004), transformative research (e.g., Mertens, 2009) and decolonial research (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2012; Mignolo, 2009), informed by theoretical perspectives including feminism, critical theory, Marxism, postcolonialism, decolonialism, queer theory, critical race theory, and disability theory. These researchers regard not only research outcomes but methodologies and practices of research as deeply political, since 'power is an issue that must be addressed at each stage of the research process' (Mertens, 2007: 213). Hence the key concern for them goes beyond the validity of representation and brings to the fore the power relations between the researcher and the researched. Feminist and decolonial/indigenous researchers (e.g., Fonow and Cook, 2005; Mignolo, 2009; Oakley, 2015; Smith, 1999; Sprague, 2005; Stanley, 2013) have been at the forefront of challenging the objectivism underlying (post)positivism and what Grosfoguel (2012: 81–82) calls 'epistemic racism/sexism' –

'the privileging of a Western male canon of thought and the study of the "other" as an object rather than as a knowledge-producing subject.'

There is an expanding body of such critical inquiry – which we refer to as transformative research following Pringle and Falcous (2018) – in the sociology of sport and wider sport research. The 'capacity of the sociology of sport to play an active role in challenging injustices and creating broader social impact' (Pringle and Falcous, 2018: 261) is a key concern to many (e.g., Bairner, 2009; Cooky, 2017; Donnelly, 2015; Sage, 2015; Sugden, 2015; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002). Accordingly, there exists a significant body of critical analysis of Sport for Development and Peace programmes employing postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, Gramscian and other perspectives (Darnell et al., 2018; Darnell and Hayhurst, 2011; Hayhurst, 2011; Lindsey and Grattan, 2012; Sugden, 2010). Gender/feminist perspectives also inform a considerable amount of existing sport research. According to Elling (2015), 25% of all International Review for the Sociology of Sport articles published in the 2000s dealt with women's sport and/or gender. Increasing attention is also paid to the intersection of 'race', gender and sport in the West (e.g., Ifekwunigwe, 2009; Ranta, 2011; Scraton et al., 2005) and in the global South (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000; Harkness and Hongsermeier, 2015). Furthermore, feminist and gender scholars have presented a rich body of analysis of sport and the sporting body as a site for the (re)articulation of sex, gender and sexuality, drawing on poststructuralism, queer theory and other analytical standpoints. Particularly relevant to our interest are explorations of corporeal displays of masculinity by sportswomen that subvert the woman-feminine-heterosexual order (e.g., Broad, 2001; Butler, 1998; Cahn, 1994; Caudwell, 1999, 2003; Gill, 2007; Rand, 2012). Finally, researchers have also presented extensive discussions of methodological trends, challenges and possibilities in transformative

sport research (e.g., Darnell et al., 2018; Darnell and Hayhurst, 2011; Elling, 2015; McDonald and Birrell, 1999; Pringle and Falcous, 2018).

It appears, however, that sport researchers have dedicated less extensive attention to the politics of research practice and its implications for the 'researched', beyond discussions in method sections of research articles. Giardina and Laurendeau (2013: 239) note in relation to evidence, knowledge and research practice:

> As scholars of sport … we understand that the perspectives from which we write … are imbricated with/in the analyses we produce and the ways in which we participate in scholarly and popular dialogue about the social issues and positions we study, debate, argue, and advocate… And yet, too rarely do we see sustained engagements with these kinds of questions in the pages of 'sport' journals.

Among important work on the politics of research practice is King-White's (2013) discussion of challenges in critical interventionist ethnography. He discusses his first ethnographic research in the United States as a failed critical intervention attempt and reflects on dilemmas surrounding researchers' disclosure of their political standpoints with the researched. Olive and Thorpe (2011) present a reflexive account of the sexism and homophobia they encountered as feminist ethnographers researching male-dominated action sports in Australia, the United States and elsewhere, invoking Bourdieu's 'regulated liberties' to explain their strategies for navigating such challenges. Similarly, Obel (2004) discusses the production of her researcher self as a foreign woman researching rugby in New Zealand, and how gender shaped the research process despite her initial reluctance to adopt a gender perspective.

We believe that building on these discussions and critically investigating our experiences as dominant group researchers in a global South sporting context is a meaningful contribution to reflexive methodological inquiry in sport research. In this article, we reflect on our key challenges of 'data' gathering/interpretation and being outsider/dominant group researchers in a post-colonial, sub-cultural sporting environment, i.e., women's rugby union in Fiji. Our engagement with the Fijian rugby field tells a pertinent story about the multiplicity of power inequalities between us and our participants, which have remained throughout and beyond our empirical work.

Yoko is a Japanese woman who has lived in Fiji for two decades, initially as an MA student and currently a university lecturer. She regards herself as cisgender, straight, and occupying multiple social positions in Fiji. As a university academic, she enjoys privileges inaccessible to many Fijians, while, as an Asian woman, she experiences sexism and racism in her interaction with Fijians and Westerners. She considers Fiji her home and feels strong emotional attachment to its people and cultures. Gyozo is a Hungarian who currently lives in the UK. He identifies himself as a cisgender, straight male academic, a father as well as a migrant. Whilst living in Hungary and being part of the dominant social group, i.e. white, Christian men, he was largely unaware about marginalised communities. However, becoming a migrant and engaging with social critique have repositioned his perspectives on power inequalities and social/cultural oppression, which are now central to his research.

Prior to women's rugby, we had explored Fijian male rugby players' experiences as sport migrants and their cultural and economic challenges (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013a,b, 2014). Whilst investigating these, we came across women's rugby, which was emerging as a significant alternative voice challenging the hegemonic rugby discourse. Yoko developed friendships with players and

administrators, which steered our attention towards this academically uncharted sub-culture, leading to over seven-year-long research engagement. The process has been implicated in multi-fold power imbalances between us and women players intersected by gender, sexuality, global location, 'race' and social class, which has demanded constant reflections on 'what it means to do empirical inquiry in an unjust world' (Lather, 1991: 109). Among these, we will focus in this article on the gender/sexual and postcolonial politics of our research, two key challenges we both have grappled with.

Women's rugby in Fiji

Fijian women's relation to rugby is shaped by Fiji's postcolonial history. While rugby was introduced to local communities through colonialism, it has since developed a profoundly indigenised nature and become a key cultural marker of Fijian (ethno-) national identity. Indigenous men dominate the sport, which is often explained by perceived links between indigenous martial and masculinist traditions and the physical, 'combative' nature of rugby (Presterudstuen, 2010). Today, rugby enjoys a privileged status with immense socio-cultural, political and symbolic power aligned with nationalism and traditionalism (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013b,c). The game's association with masculinism and hetero-normativity is consolidated by the country's gender relations, which are heavily influenced by traditional gender/sexual norms and manifested in, for instance, a high prevalence of gender-based violence (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013), homophobia and transphobia (Johnson and Vithal, 2015).

In this context, women rugby players, many of whom are gender non-conforming 'masculine' women, pursue the sport against great adversities. Until

recently, they experienced widespread disapproval, stigmatisation and sometimes physical/verbal abuse in their homes and communities for challenging the masculinist/heteronormative logic central to the hegemonic rugby discourse (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2015b). Male (and some female) spectators ridiculed and shouted sexist and homophobic comments at women players during matches and training sessions. Some players were turned out of their homes and ostracised by their communities for claiming the masculine sport and for their (real or suspected) gender and sexual nonconformity. Conversely, some left their homes/communities by choice, fearing that their gender expression, sexuality and/or dedication to the masculine game might be found out or condemned.

In the face of such relentless punishment and disapproval, the women remained resolutely committed to the game, progressively making international successes, which eventually culminated in the Fijiana's (women's national team) qualification for the 2016 Summer Olympics. The public and media attention attracted by this achievement, attained by only 12 countries in the world, has prompted significant improvement in the sport's social standing (Kanemasu and Johnson, 2017). In 2017, the Fijiana were named among the '70 Inspiring Pacific Women' by a key regional organisation, the Pacific Community (2017). Institutional support similarly increased: the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) today expresses full endorsement of women's rugby. The FRU finances and organises national team selections, training camps and tours, promotes the sport among schoolgirls, and has begun mainstreaming women's games in national competitions.

Nevertheless, this has not resulted in full institutional or community support; a stark gender disparity remains at every level (Kanemasu et al., 2018). While there are over 600 male rugby clubs, women have 28 clubs (Vela Naucukidi, Fiji Rugby Union,

personal communication, 2018). Even as they prepared for the 2016 Olympics, the Fijiana's camp was largely at a budget-style dormitory while the men's team stayed in luxury beachfront accommodation at a tourist resort. Although the family/community sanctions have visibly decreased, at the time of writing this paper, Yoko still routinely witnesses male spectators laughing and making cat calls at women players on the field. Thus, women's rugby in Fiji is a product of many years of struggle and hard-won victories. They have been playing 'in the cultural shadows' of men's rugby, where they incessantly struggle with power disparities.

The research process

To explore what it means for women to play rugby under such formidable circumstances and to contribute through this knowledge to challenging gender- and hetero-normativity in and beyond rugby, we have undertaken primary research, consisting to date of 15 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, a questionnaire survey (n = 70), and ongoing informal conversations with players and administrators. Yoko frequently sees players at a local gym (where she works out and a major women's rugby club trains), visits matches, domestic competitions and fundraising events, and is connected with many of them on Facebook. In 2016, she followed the Fijiana to the World Cup Qualifier in Hong Kong and joined team/prayer meetings before/during the qualifier games. Thus, the interviews, survey and focus groups have constituted only a formal part of our data collection and engagement with the community; personally getting to know the women has given us equally valuable insights. The most recent phase of the research was a consultancy study (Kanemasu and Johnson, 2017; Kanemasu et al., 2018) commissioned by Oceania Rugby and undertaken in collaboration with the FRU, a product of a combination of the rugby

bodies' policy needs and academic inquiry. Our research has therefore encompassed academic pursuits, researcher-practitioner collaboration and personal connections.

From an academic standpoint, our research has revolved around an overarching research question: How do Fijian women rugby players experience and respond to gender and hetero-normativity enforced in and through rugby in Fiji's post-colonial context? Our analysis has been informed by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, which illuminates the ways in which relations of power are both maintained and contested through the medium of ideological and cultural struggle. We have drawn particularly on his view of hegemony as a dynamic process that is 'continually resisted, limited, altered, [and] challenged' (Williams, 1977: 112). This broad perspective is complemented by the post-colonial feminist critique of ethnocentrism and universalism in Western (feminist) scholarship (e.g., Mohanty, 1988). Our aim has been to foreground women athletes' voices as we explore the complex interface between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces at play in and through rugby.

Our research conduct is informed by methodological insights drawn from feminist (e.g., Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Sprague, 2005; Stanley, 2013) and Pacific island researchers (e.g., Durutalo, 1992; Gegeo, 2001; Teaiwa, 2006), especially their call for sustained, personal and reciprocal researcher–participant relationships. Feminist approaches to interviewing have grown vastly over the years from objections to objectivist and masculinist treatment of interviews as a data collection tool to more nuanced investigations into multiple dimensions of and contradictions within feminist interviews and their pursuit of 'rapport' and 'friendship' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Oakley, 2015). We are guided by their continuing conceptualisation of interviewing as a process of knowledge co-construction with

participants, while recognising underlying layers of researcher-researched inequity. We have also relied on Talanoa, a Pacific island methodology (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012), which entails 'engaging in dialogue with or telling stories to each other … [without] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds' (Halapua, 2008: 1). Talanoa mobilises such cultural resources as indigenous values of 'empathy, respect, love and humility' and calls for 'empathic apprenticeship' – 'an intentional, embodied, emotional, and intersubjective process between the researcher and the participant' (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012: 1–2). Our interviews have taken the form of informal conversations on rugby fields, at cafes, over casual chats, etc., which are more conducive to fostering such apprenticeship. The research process has spanned over seven years, because we did not start interviewing until we felt that our research received the community's support, and because we decided not to squeeze interviews into an intensive 'data collection period'. In short, we intended our research to be a journey rather than a project.

Despite these intentions, our research has remained embedded in power imbalances between: the global North and the South; normative and non-normative gender/sexuality; the socio-economically privileged (by virtue of our occupation) and the (majority of the participants who were) unemployed/working-classes; and the researcher and the researched. We have not found strategies to resolve the power imbalances; instead, our research has become a process of 'recognising, debating and working with these power differentials' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 333). In the next sections, we will focus on our gendered/sexual and geopolitical positionalities, how they have framed the process and outcomes of our inquiry, and how we have attempted to negotiate them.

Working with gender/sexual power differentials

As noted above, our initial research attention was focused on men's rugby in a taken-for-granted manner, which in itself reflects male dominance not only in the sport but also in academic inquiry. Once we engaged with the women's rugby community, it soon developed into our primary focus, but it presented new methodological and ethical challenges. As cisgender heterosexuals, neither of us had experienced the pervasive and sometimes brutal forces of gender- and hetero-normativity that our research participants must daily negotiate. It has been argued by many (e.g., Hayfield and Huxley, 2015; McClennen, 2003) that non-affiliated researchers' involvement in a disfranchised community should be scrutinised for its intended and unintended consequences. For instance, McDowell and Fang (2007: 562) ask: 'How safe is it in any given context to ask those from historically marginalised groups to speak out about inequities and to make their resistance overt?' Our research was initiated on the assumption that amplifying the voices of marginalised women athletes would boost their resistance. However, as we soon realised, players are not necessarily open about their gender identity/sexuality; some prefer to separate the sport from discussions of gender/sexuality to shield it from patriarchal and heterosexist backlash. This is because, as is often the case where the scope for formal activism is limited (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013), these women's resistance takes a largely infra-political form. While they openly and boldly display gender nonconformity on the rugby field, such defiance is not always verbalised or formalised, but an unspoken, performative resistance. In this context, it was not clear if 'representing' their voices in a formal, public arena would necessarily be a transformative contribution.

Furthermore, cisgender/straight researchers may unknowingly collude with gender- and hetero-normativity through research practices. Braun (2000: 133) calls

attention to researchers' unintended or unconsidered 'articulation of heterosexual norms in talk'. In advocating 'embodied reflexivity', Burns (2003) points out many researchers' failure to scrutinise the impact of their physical body on research relationships. In our case, it is open to question what impact Yoko's gendered self-presentation (long hair, makeup, dressing, talk, mannerism, etc.) may have had on her relationship with the women and, combined with the socio-economic and geopolitical power inequity between us (see below), if it may have had gender othering consequences. As she came to know the women personally, she simultaneously felt close to them and became conscious of her gendered self. Although they graciously welcomed us into their community in accordance with Fijian cultural protocol of generosity and hospitality towards visitors, a degree of self-conscious uncertainty about the legitimacy of our attempt at creating 'rapport' framed our research, especially in the early stages.

Our approach in negotiating these dilemmas parallels those of other non-affiliated, dominant group researchers who seek consultation with 'indigenous experts' (Wheeler, 2003: 71; see also Hayfield and Huxley, 2015; McClennen, 2003), which also resonates with Talanoa's empathic apprenticeship. We sought guidance from the players, officials and feminist/LGBT/queer activists who had been or become friends with us. Some of these players/officials offered to speak to their teams/friends about the research and have since played a key role in facilitating the data collection, by giving us contacts for possible participants and even setting up interviews for us. In the field, Yoko has been guided by the participants in determining what the nature and scope of their conversations would be. She does not initiate discussion of gender/sexuality unless/until they do, aware that the issue is not necessarily important to their experience of rugby and that they are not necessarily interested in discussing

it with us. While this may limit our information on the nexus of sport, gender/sexuality and power, we receive what the women want to share.

In fact, the majority of our participants have freely discussed gender/sexual politics, with many willing and indeed keen to share the severity of the sexist, transphobic and homophobic oppression that they and their friends experience on and off the rugby field. Notably, even those who have chosen not to directly discuss it are passionate about explaining the sense of empowerment they gain from challenging gender norms on the field, by expressing, for instance: 'I like the part of running and showing your strength, you know… I like the part of being physical, telling the other girls that we are strong; we can do this. I could run through this girl and make a try, I am strong!' Most importantly, as we developed our friendships and empathic apprenticeship with the women, we came to appreciate that these words, in the context of powerful patriarchal and heteronormative sanctions of their communities, were expressions of their unyielding resistance; and that there was, then, no need to frame our conversations in overt political language. The women shared with us their struggles, victories, strengths, pains and hopes without necessarily politically articulating them (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). That is, we learnt to understand their resistance in and on their own terms.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that, while the women trust us enough to reveal some of their greatest struggles and victories, we are unable to represent them in an 'authentic' manner. Moreover, we are complicit in perpetuating their marginalisation by treating their voices as an object of sociological analysis and translating (and in the process transforming and reducing) them into the 'researcher voice' – what Pacific islanders have long questioned about Western researchers.

Working with postcolonial power differentials

Feminist/decolonial critiques of conventional research are shared by Pacific island scholars, who challenge it as not only patriarchal but Western, neo-colonial violence to the voices of Pacific islanders. For over four decades, Wendt (1976), Hau'ofa (1993, 2005), Durutalo (1992), Subramani (2001), Hereniko (2001), Gegeo (2001), Meyer (2008), Teaiwa (2006) and others have called for decolonisation of knowledge construction in and about the Pacific islands. Pacific peoples and cultures have been 'represented' through a plethora of Western visions of the Pacific, from the early missionary/navigator accounts (Connell, 2003), the cult of the Noble Savage (Smith, 1989), and Malinowski's and Mead's anthropological gazes (O'Brien, 2006) to contemporary research literature, consultant reports, policy papers and tourist promotional materials, intersected by Western discourses ranging from romanticism, primitivism, exoticism to scientism and blatant racism.

Pacific islanders have always resisted attempts at silencing their voices. Samoan writer Albert Wendt's 1976 essay 'Towards a New Oceania' and Tongan anthologist Epeli Hau'ofa's 1993 text 'Our Sea of Islands' are seminal sources of Pacific islanders' counter-colonial challenges. Hau'ofa's (1993: 16) appeal, in particular, had great ripple effects across the Pacific Ocean (and beyond):

> We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces … from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.

Fijian sociologist Simione Durutalo (1992: 208) similarly called on Pacific islanders 'to put a stop to the use of these islands as an ethnographic zoo, an anthropological laboratory where trainee Western anthropologists go to "win their academic spurs" while Pacific Islanders are reduced to the role of ethnographic commodities to be studied and written about without their making any input into the exercise.' More recently, David Gegeo (2001: 182), a Solomon Islands scholar, has consistently challenged the violence of Western hegemonic knowledge systems: 'What good is political independence if we remain colonised epistemologically? If we remain unable to think outside Anglo-European frameworks?' In the broader Oceanic region, Māori researchers (Bishop, 1996; Hippolite and Bruce, 2010; Smith, 1999; Walker, 1985) have made key contributions to interrogating the initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation and accountability of Western research on their communities.

In response, Pacific island scholars have pursued a rich diversity of indigenous/local epistemologies and methodologies (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, 2002; Huffer and Qalo, 2004; Johansson-Fua, 2014; Meyer, 2008; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Smith, 2000; Teaiwa, 2006). Notably, in their pursuit of indigenous epistemologies, some have objected to the use of social sciences as totalising Western imposition: 'Every use of disciplinary concepts, theories, and methods asserts not only that continent-based perspectives provide the best ways to comprehend the people of Oceania, but also that all peoples in Oceania can be understood in much the same way' (Wood, 2006: 36). Their objection resonates with decolonial researchers' charge that 'the Westernised university is a machine of global mass production of Eurocentric fundamentalism' (Grosfoguel, 2012: 83). Furthermore, Pacific islanders have presented their own visions and knowledges of the Pacific

through dances, songs, poems, novels, carvings and paintings (e.g., Hau'ofa, 2005; Hereniko and Wilson, 1999; Wendt, 1976). Thus, Pacific islanders have not only challenged colonial legacies and ongoing neo-colonialism in research in/about their communities, but actively sought to (re)vision Pacific island knowledge and its representation.

In this context, we acknowledge that we have undertaken our research from a decidedly Western academic standpoint, using sociological concepts and theories to understand the women' voices, struggles and aspirations. Furthermore, in our interaction with them, we have consistently held positions of power. While Eurocentrism in sport research has been widely interrogated (e.g., Hylton, 2005; Singer, 2005), our research, which involves an Asian female researcher who has lived in Fiji for many years, somewhat blurs the 'white/male vs. indigenous' binary. Nevertheless, as far as our research relationship with the women is concerned, her global North nationality, Western education and middle-class occupation – that is, geopolitical and class relations – place her in a dominant position as she interacts with them, many of whom are disadvantaged in accessing education/employment. Until today, they address her as 'Dr. Yoko', talk to her with deference (as well as warmth and kindness), and often ask her to 'say a few words' at meetings as those of higher status customarily do in Fiji. We have had all our interview requests accepted courteously with no question or hesitation. Many participants are, at least at the beginning of the interviews, shy and obliging, and politely wait for Yoko to initiate and lead the conversations. Following the interviews, we continue to exercise our power as researchers in data analysis and writing. We determine which quotes appear in our writings and how they are interpreted, with many of their words collapsed into our 'researcher voice.' The women's lived experiences are 'analysed' through our

theoretical lens and political and cultural values, and translated into an academic language that many of them would not find accessible or relevant. In short, we remain in control of the entire research process.

The immediate outcome of the research – research credit – also belongs to us. We have published the research (Kanemasu et al., 2018; Kanemasu and Johnson, 2018; Kanemasu and Molnar, 2013c, 2015b), which has considerably enhanced our professional profile, and gained insights into the women's life-world, which has deepened our understanding of the dynamics of power and resistance under Fiji's complex postcolonial conditions. In interrogating the distribution of research credit and benefits, we are compelled to 'question how much we are taking from the research and using the experiences of the women we are researching' (Watson and Scraton, 2001: 274).

Limits and potentials of transformative research

As part of this reflection, we must also ask: has our research achieved transformative outcomes? Aware that academic papers rarely have immediate societal impact, we have written an article, using the research as a basis, for Fiji's popular magazine Mai Life (Kanemasu and Molnar, 2015a) in consultation with women's rugby leaders. A draft of the article was shared with women's rugby pioneers and current leaders for their feedback, and a revised manuscript was submitted only after endorsement was received from all of them. While the article successfully drew public attention to the lack of institutional/public support for the sport, we faced dilemmas as we wrote it. Beside the fact that the players do not necessarily want the sport to be linked with questions of gender/sexuality, we intended to work

collaboratively with rugby bodies and institutional stakeholders to make the greatest possible impact. Consequently, in our writing, we carefully managed what might be regarded by the Fijian public as controversial or sensitive, and critiqued institutional stakeholders in a constructive, and, what we believed as, culturally appropriate manner. That is, our ethical, strategic and socio-cultural considerations influenced our discussions of the oppression of women players. Accordingly, our writing, in itself, has had limited immediate/direct effect.

What is the point of our research, then, if it achieves only indirect transformative outcomes and, in some ways, replicates the very relations of domination that we purport to challenge? Through our engagement with the women and the reflections it has triggered, we have come to appreciate what feminist and Pacific island researchers have maintained: transformative research is an ongoing process that continues long after data collection, analysis and writing, and expands well beyond academic exercises. As Talanoa methodologists Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012: 4) explain:

> If we want to understand our participants' hopes and struggles, we need to holistically contextualise the words they share with us as we move with them through the course of their daily lives… We hold our participants in our hearts and within our bodies for a long time after our fieldwork: we bear emotional and physical scars and share physically and emotionally in our participants' hopes, dreams, and moments of joy.

As noted, our research has evolved into ongoing involvement with the women. In addition to personal friendships, it has led to us offering advice and assistance, as

requested by them, for their initiatives for player recruitment, club developments, fundraising, etc. and Yoko's university providing meeting space and equipment (which is not readily available in Fiji) whenever they request it. We have also organised a highly-publicised rugby conference in Fiji, using it to ensure that women players' voices were heard by rugby officials and researchers. Yoko has organised rugby-themed seminars, which were attended by a large university student audience and dedicated a major part to celebrating women's rugby. It is only through these engagements beyond our research that we have come to develop a 'relationship' with the women, to which the research provided an entry point. It is the collectivity of these engagements, including our research and writings, which are in essence collaborations between us as researchers/supporters and the rugby women, that points towards transformative potential. While our research has limited immediate/direct impact, it and the relationships and collaborations it has engendered contribute to building a critical mass of transformative research and actions (i.e., praxis) that challenge oppression in epistemology and wider society.

How do the women themselves experience our research? While they undoubtedly do not hold a uniform view, women's rugby leaders appear to see it as a partnership with researchers who unexpectedly appeared in their often-lonely journey. According to a Fiji Women's Rugby Union (FWRU) official:

> Women's rugby in Fiji has been in existence since the late 1980s, however it did not garner as much attention as their male colleagues due to conflicting cultural ideologies that plagued its growth. It wasn't until [the authors'] research that began in 2010 that women's rugby issues were brought to light… [The authors'] research told our story … projected our plight, our issues and all our silent struggles… [The data

collection process] involved a lot of our club executives and elite players coming together to share their personal experiences in rugby – an activity never done before by FWRU. It was an experience that made each of us more appreciative of our presence and existence within the Union (letter dated 6 September 2016).

Notable here is that she finds the women's rugby community's engagement with the research itself, not just its findings or impact, as essentially transformative: the research has constituted a dialogic activity of sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences, and collective reflection on their struggles and aspirations, among the women, as well as between the women and the researchers. In this regard, our research has developed into what McClennen (2003: 33) describes as 'an educational process for the researchers and the participants via collective interaction, and using the results of the study for social change'.

As we continue with this process, we note that seeking to determine the most desirable methodology or epistemological standpoint runs the risk of essentialising Pacific island communities and knowledges, and masking their dynamic nature and heterogeneity. It is a risk Teaiwa (2006: 82) described as 'the reification of the indigenous' and what Durutalo (1992: 207–208) eschewed as 'traditionalism and exceptionalism'. The Pacific islands are not monolithic, but constituted by communities of differential values, worldviews, resources and powers. Not recognising this is to replicate an age-old binarism. Given that no researcher, regardless of their social location, possesses 'the' vantage point for transformative research, '[o]ur job, in both reading and writing, is precisely to refuse to be limited by a single text or by any existing definition of what should

count as the corpus, and to play the texts … off against one another in an endless process of coaxing up images of the real' (Ortner, 1995: 190). That is, no single representation, epistemology, or methodology can speak for the vast, vibrant and dynamic island communities.

Furthermore, as we reflect on our positions of power as researchers, we recognise that marginalised peoples:

> not only resist political domination; they resist, or anyway evade, textual domination as well. The notion that colonial or academic texts are able completely to distort or exclude the voices and perspectives of those being written about … endow[s] these texts with far greater power than they have (Ortner, 1995: 188).

Academic representations of islanders and their communities, such as our research, ultimately could never suppress their voices, even if they were intended to. Women rugby players assert themselves even within our articles where the 'researcher voice' reigns supreme. Rather than silenced by Western academic concepts like 'counter-hegemony,' their words, as well as their thoughts and actions emanating from them, indeed breathe life into such concepts. They powerfully show what 'counter-hegemony' might actually look and feel like when they tell us how they 'express our feelings out on the field… Anger [towards] all these comments from everybody calling us names. That's where we prove them wrong, out on the field. … I want to show I'm a lesbian and I can also play the sport.' They embody ambiguous academic terms like 'empowerment' when they explain: 'At first when I played in [front of] a crowd, I felt really nervous, because this is a man's game ... [But] when I make a try in [front of] this big crowd, it really

built something in me: "I can do this, we can do this. Even though people are laughing at us, we still can do this."' Moreover, with or without our research, the women have opposed patriarchal/heteronormative forces by relentlessly committing to the game and indeed made the public and rugby bodies acknowledge their success, especially their remarkable 2016 Olympics qualification. When Durutalo (1992) lamented that Pacific islanders were reduced to ethnographic commodities by Western academics, he may have overlooked their potent ability to resist marginalisation and to assert to be heard in and beyond texts.

Conclusion

In this article, we have reflected on our ongoing research relationship with Fijian women rugby players and its implication in multiple power matrices. Our research, informed by a Gramscian perspective on the nexus between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, has sought to capture the women's voices and lived experiences of marginalisation and resistance. The seven-year-long research has become a journey of learning from the women about their everyday, performative, and relentless acts of counter-hegemony against the masculinist and heteronormative logic of Fiji's hegemonic rugby discourse. At the same time, the journey has stimulated our ongoing uncertainties about, reflections on, and negotiations of the relations of power that we as dominant group researchers have been implicated in with the women. This article has presented some of our experience of working with such power differentials to contribute to the growing body of sport literature on the politics of research

practice, which we believe could benefit from insights derived from research in global South contexts.

We have examined the ways in which our gendered/sexual positionalities have presented dilemmas and uncertainties in the research process and how we have sought to negotiate them. We have also placed our research in the context of Pacific islanders' continuous effort for decolonisation of knowledge construction in/about the Pacific and reflected on the ways in which our research, however inadvertently, replicates the very power inequities we set out to challenge. Finally, we have explored the broader transformative potentials researchers may contribute to by consciously situating their work as a collective and dialogic project within and beyond academic exercises, between researchers, athletes, activists and peoples of both Pacific island and non-Pacific island origins. These discussions are intended to contribute to sustained and critical inquiry into the politics of research practice as a key dimension of transformative sport research.

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