“It’s a long way to the Super League:” The Lived Experiences of Southern Hemisphere Professional Rugby League Migrants in the United Kingdom.

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Presentation Outline

• Background: Sports labour migration
  – Globalisation, Identity and sport labour migration,
  – The lived experiences of sports migrants

• Study Methods

• Results and Discussion
  – The Quest for Opportunity, Bargaining, Life in England,
    Reactions to Migration

• Conclusions
Presentation Aims

• To provide insight into the barriers and motivations for professional sports migrants on the pathway from Oceania to England in Rugby League

• To describe their lived experiences

• To gain an understanding of the impact upon their identities as professional athletes
Globalisation and identity

• Globalising world:
  – Flows of people, technology, capital and ideology in increasing intensity

• No longer simple core-periphery relationships (Maguire 2001)

• Global flows - resisted, reinterpreted and redirected: Not only controlled by the established groups:
  – Unintended consequences.

• These interconnections have been studied in sport
Sport Labour Migration

• Labour migration has been increasingly studied in sport as a symptom of globalising processes
• A host of sports
• 2 methods of analysis have been taken:
  – *Mapping power balances* and how they contour the direction and intensity of migrant pathways (e.g. Falcous and Maguire 2005, Chiba 2004, Maguire and Possamai 2005)
  – *The lived experiences of migrants* themselves: What it means to be a labour migrant, motivations, barriers and narratives (e.g. Stead and Maguire 1998, Maguire 2004)
Rugby League Globalisation

Super League

NRL

Europe

North America

Asia

Africa

Latin America

Oceania
Study Methods

• Participants:
  – **40 Elite rugby league players** in the European Super league XI. **26 Australian / New Zealand** nationals with ‘European’ heritage, **14 players with ‘indigenous’ Oceanian heritage** (including Papuan, Maori, Aborigine and Pacific Island ancestry) – 36% of total workforce

• **Semi-structured interviews** (14 participants), 45-75 mins

• **Questionnaires** (26 participants) with the same schedule

• **Themes covered:** migrant motivations and objectives, living as an overseas sportsman in the UK, the British rugby league experience, attitudes to migrants ‘back home,’ other overseas experience and migration as part of a career.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The quest for opportunity

• The Quest for Opportunity
  – More career opportunities
  – Also ancillary goals: Travel, experience another culture.
• National identities, national habitus’
• Opportunity played a part for the Islanders and Papuans, but motivations were often different:
  – “My motivation to come here to play rugby league was to wear the national colour. But to come and be paid to do what I love doing was a real shock for me. The word professional didn’t even appear in my mind. I still think to this day I am dreaming everything now.” Epi, PNG international
Informed migrants?

• Finance was an incentive; particularly for international players.
• Personal contacts were key – inside and outside the sport: Established internationals had a network, others did not.
• Preparation varied from years to 2 days
• A personal experience: The majority negotiated their own contracts at an advantage – but not always as planned
Fickle conditions of employment

• “When I got on the plane, I’d signed to go to [another club]; by the time I got off the plane the deal had fallen through. My agent quickly whisked around, got me set up with [a club], but couldn’t contact me in the air...so I turned up looking for someone and someone else was there to pick me up, who I walked past about 10 times thinking ‘I know this bloke!’” Scott, Australian
Informed migrants?  
The Pacific Islanders

- Negotiations were from a position of greater weakness: Forced out of contracts in NRL
- Financial exploitation
- Information was harder to come by, and the cultural differences more pronounced – particularly for those who had not played in Australia and New Zealand beforehand
- The way of life, including money was unfamiliar to some, mainly Papuans
‘From the first step to the 10th floor’

- “What’s in your head is like, what it’s going to be like, till you come over and it’s real, it’s scary. I come from right up in the mountains where you hardly see 10 cars a day, and to come here and saw the traffic lights, lot of buildings, a lot of cars and people, walking too fast, a real shock! I would have gone home the next day, I felt that homesick. But to come over to live here, it’s something you wouldn’t express.” Seru, PNG international
Life in England:
Australians and New Zealanders

• Australians and New Zealanders with European ancestry tended to be more solitary and to socialise with British

• The reception had also been mixed, and linked to performance levels:

• “In the first season I had a bad injury, and copped a lot of ribbing from fellow players, a bit of joking type stuff but I’m sure a few of them meant it, saying you’re on holiday, getting the big money and you break down.” Stuart, Australian international
Life in England: Pacific Islanders

• For Pacific islanders and Papians, personal networks tended to be limited to other players with a similar cultural background.
• “How to talk to the locals, how to cook, how to be independent.”
• Loneliness was endemic
• “I am lonely and starting to think at night when I am asleep and I think what am I doing here?...or in the afternoons after we’ve done stuff we come home and maybe half an hour we just stay there and we just talk. You know there’s no family, there’s no friends.”

Seru, PNG international
Reactions to migration: Identity

- **Australian *Nationality***:
  - Corks, Convicts and Crocodile Dundee
- **PNG and Islander *Race***:
  - “You will never shake hands with those white boys” (Seru, Papuan International)
  - Cannibals and the ‘3rd World’
- **Playing stereotypes**:
  - “Australians win at all costs”
  - Islander ‘physicality’
Reactions to migration: Identity

• Resistance: Increasing awareness of national identities
  – “There’s no way we’re anything other than Australians”
    Brian, Australian

• Notably, several New Zealanders went on to play for England
Concluding thoughts: Multiple interdependencies, multiple identities

- The threat of ‘False Universalism’ (Fleming 1994)
- Numerous identities, numerous cultures in this figuration of labour migration.
- Australian and New Zealand-European ‘established groups’ and Indigenous Oceanian ‘outsider’ groups
- A multiplicity of identities: E.g. Samoan/New Zealand internationals. ‘Welsh’ Australians? Ancestry...
- Migrant typology; May be specific elements in specific sports:
  - E.g. Papuans: Pioneers, Mercenaries, Settlers
Take Home Message

• Migrant support cannot be generalised

• Career trajectories/experiences were key

• Cultural specificity contoured experiences and motivations
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