

Sport, physical education and country towns: diverse enough?

Michael Gard, Human Movement Studies Unit, Charles Sturt University

Is it possible for culture to be anything other than diverse? As with 'hybridity', a term so much in vogue in contemporary social science, 'cultural diversity' seems mildly tautological. Applied either to communities of people or individual identities, 'hybridity' assumes a pre-existing purity which, certainly in western countries, seems fanciful. Likewise, 'cultural diversity' gestures towards or, perhaps more accurately, away from communities of people which, presumably, are culturally monolithic. But could such a group of people ever exist? Of course, it all depends on how you define 'culture' and, as commentators such as Williams (1958 & 1981) and Eagleton (2000) have shown, this is far from a straightforward matter, particularly in a historical moment where 'culture' can mean a way of life (as in 'café culture'), a work of art (as in 'high culture') or an episode of *The Simpsons* (as in 'popular culture'). Perhaps one way of bringing these various meanings together is to think in terms of the things people *do*. That is, culture is a matter of social *practice*. In the case of *The Simpsons*, then, we might say that its cultural significance derives from the socially located ways in which the program is made, watched, advertised, consumed, and talked about. In this sense, it is hard to imagine any community of people (as opposed to robots!) not 'doing' their lives in diverse ways. Indeed, are we not told from the moment of our births that we are each 'special' 'individuals', and that it is this particularity which makes us human?

However, in order to *talk* about culture (as a way of life), some of the things that people do must be erased. Culture involves a necessary reduction since to talk meaningfully, for example, of 'Australian culture' would be impossible if it meant everything that every Australian does. But erasure is never a politically neutral business and, therefore, the term 'Australian culture', if it is to have any meaning at all, requires that the speaker include certain practices and exclude others. In other words, to talk of 'cultural diversity' is already to limit diversity. Thus, while I began this paper by suggesting that the term 'cultural diversity' is tautological (how could culture be anything other than diverse?), it is also something of a contradiction in terms, since 'culture' and 'diversity' can be seen as pulling in opposite directions.

In taking up the theme of 'cultural diversity in the bush' in this paper, I want to employ the double-sidedness of 'culture' (its inclusiveness and exclusiveness) to focus on a particular aspect of Australian country life with a view to addressing, as opposed to definitively answering, two questions. First, are country communities 'culturally diverse'? Second, in what ways do the cultures of country schools help to limit the 'cultural diversity' of the communities in which they exist. Specifically, I am interested in sport, often romanticised as a quintessential cultural practice of country towns, and physical education, sport's closest relative inside official school curricula. That is, what does sport, as a set of social practices, mean in country towns and country schools? Is it a symbol of the cultural strength and viability of these communities or is it merely a rhetorical device deployed to limit the ways in which we can imagine the culture of the 'country'?

Defining the cultural fabric of the country

What actually happens in the country? Given that the vast majority of the Australian population live in coastal cities it is hard to know how all but a few of us could suggest an answer. And yet there seems to be no shortage of opinions. The regional University at which I work often has considerable difficulty attracting staff to fill its academic vacancies because of what is perceived to be its barren cultural life. 'Why would I want to live in Bathurst?' one regularly hears. At the same time, social commentators tell us that the success of television programs like *Sea Change* and *Something in the Air* reveal a romantic connection or yearning which many city dwelling Australians feel for the alleged simplicity and social connectedness of small towns. Still further, we hear that country Australia, often referred to as 'the bush', is in deep economic and social decline and that the very social fabric of country towns is in peril.

How are these various representations simultaneously sustainable? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the kinds of social practices that have come to signify life in the country. For example, country towns are often described as 'sport mad', while sporting clubs are held up as gauges of the health of country communities.

These claims seem odd. Although some sports historians paint Australia as some kind of sports lover's 'paradise' (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Cashman, 1995), it is far from clear that regular participation in organised sport has ever been a particularly popular pastime among adult Australians and, at present, far less than 50% do so. There is no compelling reason to imagine why these levels should be any different in the country. It is

also noticeable that the alleged demise of sport in country towns is, in fact, code for declining numbers of males playing the various football codes, particularly rugby league and Australian Rules. That is, we are being asked to accept that the number of men playing football tells us something meaningful about the social 'fabric' of country towns. Why, for example, isn't the apparent decline of regular church going amongst country Australians also seen as symptomatic of terminal economic demise? Or the dwindling membership of the Country Women's Association? Is it possible that fewer footballers indicates nothing more than declining interest in football rather than communities in their death throes?

I would argue that there are some useful historical reference points which help to explain this conflation of male sport and the viability of country communities. Put simply, both eastern and western societies have regularly belied a certain preoccupation with the male body and idealised images of masculinity have often served as the archetypal embodiment of a society's citizenry. Thus at the level of cultural imagery, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries athletic male bodies have been used to signify such things as racial purity (Mangan, 2000), national pride (Andrews, 1996) and health (Kimmel, 1990). Perhaps even more tellingly, industrialising western societies seem to have been (and, I would argue, remain) haunted by the fear that modern urban living produces physical and mental 'softness' amongst its people in general, and its men in particular (Burt, 1995; McLaren, 1997). Indeed, as authors such as Adair *et al.* (1998), Crosset (1990) and Crotty (1998) show, many of the organised and codified sports now played in western countries (soccer, rugby, baseball, cricket) were originally developed as antidotes to perceived 'effeminacy' and weakness amongst ruling class boys and men. An important part of this 'sport for manliness' discourse was the belief that the country was an inherently healthy place for people to live and, consequently, that in order to remain as physically and mentally robust as their provincial brothers, city males needed the 'rough and tumble' that sport provided.

An almost identical discourse was at play around the turn of the 20th century when the men who made up the sporting teams in England's colonies, notably South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, first began to beat the 'mother country' at 'her' own games (Adair *et al.*, 1998; Nauright, 1996; Phillips, 1984, 1996). Defeat came as such a shock to the English that many commentators concluded that rugged, outdoor, frontier life had bred men of exuberant athleticism and superior strength. They contrasted this with industrialising England where, it was argued, middle class men had grown weak on the comforts and confinement of overly-civilised urban living. From our historical vantage point, this seems a remarkable conclusion given the countless other reasons which may have explained these results. And yet its logic retains a level of credibility. As Hitchcock *et al.* (1986) show, the idea that country living produces taller, stronger and healthier children survived within Australia's medical community well into the second half of the 20th century.

In general terms, the development of 'sport for manliness' exemplifies an ongoing ambivalence contained within western notions of 'progress'. Most of us have been, and remain, simultaneously committed to the benefits of industrialisation and global capitalism (despite the proliferation of anti-globalisation rhetoric, who amongst us is planning to return to a life of subsistence farming?), while at the same time worried about what it is doing to our bodies and our minds. But 'sport for manliness' also signifies much more than this.

First, it is a reminder of the ways in which images of the body, particularly the male body, acquire cultural meaning and are subsequently recycled in order to say something about the culture from which they were/are taken. On this point I suggested the example of Australia's early male footballers and cricketers, but a similar thing could be said about the World War One 'digger' or the Australian 'bushman', both of which have been deployed to symbolise qualities such as toughness and resourcefulness; qualities we are often told are indicative of Australians in general. It is surely not a coincidence that all three of these areas of endeavour, sport, war and farm labour, are associated with men and physical struggle, be it with an opponent, the 'enemy' or the land.

Second, the emergence and apparent durability of 'sport for manliness' discourses help us to see how particular cultural practices, such as sport, come to represent whole ways of life. Of course, it is true that life in the country is signified through a variety of practices; certainly jam making and animal husbandry seem to figure prominently in events such as Sydney's annual Royal Easter Show where 'the bush comes to town'. Moreover, my argument here is not that sport and the country are synonymous with each other. Rather, it is to point out that sport, masculinity and country life are concepts which come together easily; they resonate with each other and in our imaginations in ways which, for example, country living and fine French cuisine or rave parties do not.

A powerful example of these resonances appeared on the back page of a country town newspaper I saw recently. The page featured the headline 'Historic Quest' and a large colour photograph of a local private boys school's first fifteen rugby union team who were to play another school team in state wide knockout final. The photo is the classic school-photo kind; the boys in neat rows, some sitting, some standing, all in full rugby uniform. The simple headline and the picture seem intended to create an atmosphere of great significance. The words 'historic' and 'quest' evoke a gravity that is almost biblical, suggesting that a great and memorable battle is about happen. Meanwhile, the boys in the photograph stare coolly and calmly into the distance, striking a quasi-heroic pose which not only reinforces the sense that this is a thoroughly serious matter, but also communicating their steely preparedness for what lies ahead.

The simple two word headline and the photograph 'work' (in the sense that we, as readers, know how to make sense of them) because, together, they tap into meanings that we are already familiar with. By way of contrast, it is difficult to imagine the same techniques being used to refer to a group of primary school netballers or elderly lawn bowlers. Indeed, had the photo been of either of these, the effect might easily have been confusing or even mildly amusing.

But we also might wonder about the effect had the words and image appeared in a metropolitan newspaper. In this case, probably only a photo of a high-profile, national or state level sporting team (almost certainly male) could have rendered the whole thing meaningful to the reader. And it is in this point that another dimension of the headline and photo emerges: the sense that these footballers *represent* someone. Indeed, the apparent seriousness of the headline and the fact that the name of the team is not even mentioned, seems to indicate that the reader knows who they are and that, in some sense, that their (the boys') quest is our quest as well. Why would the game be 'historic' (that is, important) if it meant nothing to the readers?

However, it is precisely because, at least for some people, these boys represent 'us' and that the sport they are playing *is* serious that the whole thing does *not* seem ridiculous. One assumes that readers are meant to feel 'pride' at the sight of this 'fine' group of young men and to barely notice that the word 'historic' seems, if not hyperbolic, then decidedly out of place. And while, for me, it is difficult to think of the event as 'historic', the photo does *represent* a form of country town 'high culture'. Attending rugby union matches *is* what moneyed interests sometimes do on a Sunday afternoon – watching their sons take on neighbouring private schools as parents mingle and exchange news and views.

And why a team photo rather than, say, an action shot of them playing rugby? Together, their short hair neatly combed, uniforms clean, they are vision of what some say is the intrinsic value of games like rugby union: respect for the rules, camaraderie, self sacrifice for the sake of the team and self discipline. The photograph seems to confirm the idea that rugby union produces 'fine' young men, and that this group in particular is the cream of the current crop. Indeed, I would argue that it is these connotations which give the photo its intelligibility. Without them it is just a photograph of a group of school children and, as such, would simply be out of place in this, the second most prominent part of the newspaper.

What is most puzzling about this is that so few people actually play or, for that matter, watch rugby union in country New South Wales. As a cultural practice it is not indicative of what most of us do and yet there are apparently those who feel safe to assume that many of us identify with it. This puzzlement brings us back to the question with which I began this section: what actually happens in the country? The 'historic quest' is interesting because it is *a* representation of what happens in the country. Of course, it is just one representation amongst many. Should one care to look, a scan of the same newspaper would no doubt reveal country people engaged in any number of cultural practices. But it is the mode of representation, its prominence, its apparent seriousness and importance, its assumed cultural meanings, which remind us that all cultural representations bare the fingerprints of social and economic power and, furthermore, that culture is rarely politically neutral. Indeed, as Eagleton (2000) suggests, one possible definition of the word 'culture' is precisely the values through which people justify their power.

Perhaps some readers will wonder whether or not I am trying to make too much of this point. In responding to this charge, I now want to turn the focus of this paper to the position of sport in schools.

'Sport for all'

As the coordinator of a tertiary teacher education course in secondary physical education, it is my job to read the course applications of potential undergraduates. Over the years I have read these applications, one phrase

has been ever-present: 'love of sport'. Of course, it is difficult to know whether applicants are speaking the 'truth' or whether they are simply assuming that a 'love of sport' is a generally accepted prerequisite for becoming a secondary physical education teacher and that claiming to 'love sport' will increase their chances of admission. Either way it is a sign that physical education has a culture of its own or, at least, it is a cultural practice which carries with it a set of widely known and quite well understood cultural meanings. While it is certainly not a straightforward matter to capture these meanings in a few glib sentences, my point here is simply to assert that physical education is made up of particular kinds of social practices and that sport occupies an important, if not dominant, position within these practices.

The widely understood dominance of sport within physical education is not a trivial point. Official physical education syllabus documents in most parts of Australia advocate a 'balanced' approach to physical activity in schools. In my state of New South Wales, there is absolutely no indication in either of the K-6 or 7-10 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PD/H/PE) syllabi that any particular form of physical activity should be predominant. The integration of 'physical education' into 'personal development' and 'health' to form the discreet learning area known as PD/H/PE can be read as an explicit attempt to articulate a 'holistic' and 'child centred' approach to total 'wellbeing', and both the K-6 and 7-10 documents make a clear commitment to catering for the needs and movement aspirations of all children.

But perhaps even more than in other curriculum areas, the practice of physical education in Australian schools often bears little relation to official syllabus documents (Hickey, 1992; Kirk, 1994; Tinning, Kirk & Evans, 1993). Indeed, what teachers do with their students during physical education time seems to have at least as much to do with the kinds of people physical education teachers are, as it does with the words contained within syllabus documents (George & Kirk, 1988; Green, 1998 & 2000; Kirk, 1994; 1988; Skelton, 1993). In other words, we end up with a situation in which physical education in Australia has come to be dominated (almost synonymous with) sport, not because there is any clear curricula driven reason to do so, but because of physical education teachers' 'love of sport'. At the same time, it is clear that other forms of physical activity such as dance and gymnastics, both of which are usually given equal space in Australian physical education syllabi, are often taught in a cursory fashion or not at all (Hickey, 1992; Swan, 1997).

Kirk (1999) has made the point that, in many ways, this puts physical education, as a form of culture, out of step with the emerging movement cultures into which children have moved in recent times. In simple terms, this means that a focus on sport, particularly competitive team sport, has rendered physical education less and less relevant to more and more children. In Great Britain, this 'crisis' of physical education has precipitated a move to make physical education more recreational (that is, less explicitly competitive) in its focus (Alderson, 1997; Murdoch, 1997) and there are some signs that Australian physical education teachers are moving in a similar direction. However, even here, the move towards 'recreation' seems to indicate nothing more than the inclusion of 'recreational sport'.

It is also worth pointing out that the brute fact of the dominance of sport within physical education sits uncomfortably within the stated aspirations of some physical educators. For example, as Green's research (1998, 2000) and work with my own students suggest, physical educators often claim to be at ease with the notion of diverse forms of physical activity. However, it soon becomes obvious that 'diversity' is understood here to mean a variety of sports. What 'diversity' means here seems to be a willingness to accept that all children will not be interested in the same sports and that physical educators need to provide children with a diverse range of sporting experiences. That this is a view held by many within the wider physical education community is made plain by the emergence nationally funded programs like *Aussie Sports* and *SportIt*, in which there is an unmistakable sport-for-all thrust; sport-for-all being the idea that all children like sport, and that if, at present, they are not doing one that they like, then the job of physical educators is to find them one. Disturbingly, when I point out the apparent sport-bias in this approach to my own undergraduate students, some reply by claiming that we should not dilute the sport content of physical education because it would disadvantage those children who do not enjoy the more 'academic' subjects. Here the argument seems to be that since we can never hope to please everyone, we should not get bogged down trying to cater for less athletically inclined students, but rather focus on those who 'want to be there'.

Thus, while many physical educators agree that an important part of their job is to expand the 'movement horizons' of children so that they might have more ways to be active as they grow older (a highly problematic notion in itself), they seem decidedly less willing to embrace the wide variety of movement traditions (Wright, 1996 & 2000) which exist outside the realm of sport.

Diversity and 'sport ideology'

Notwithstanding my earlier comments about the term 'cultural diversity', there seems a robust argument to be made about a chronic lack of diversity within physical education. And although to this point I have directed most of my comments towards schools, it must also be acknowledged that a similar situation presents itself in many Australian university physical education programs.¹¹ The degree to which this is the case is actually camouflaged by the very fact that many people have come to accept sport's centrality in physical education. Indeed, the remarkable lack of diversity amongst the cultural practices which add up to physical education is only exposed when we force ourselves to think of the other things which it might contain. For example, it is clear that some New South Wales high schools satisfy the PD/H/PE syllabus requirement to teach some dance by running a short unit of familiar folk and social dances and then repeating them each year. But, of course, there are a myriad of other creative and artistic dance possibilities which teachers might choose to do.¹² Many of my undergraduate students admit to enjoying creative dance lessons at university but at the same time say that they simply could not imagine doing it with high school students.

But there is more to this question of 'diversity' in physical education than catering for the movement preferences of all, rather than just some, school students. As authors drawing from a range of research traditions point out, sport and physical education as cultural institutions and sets of cultural practices are also closely associated with sexist, homophobic, racist and elitist beliefs (Clarke, 1998; Crosset, 1999; Fleming, 1997; Flintoff, 1994; Griffin, 1992; Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Harry, 1995). This is not to say that sport and physical education are by their very nature sexist, homophobic, racist and elitist; there are many examples of both operating as vehicles to promote the aspirations of marginalised groups. But it is to acknowledge that the sporting and physical education experience of many females, gays, lesbians, non-white, poor and disabled people has been one of exclusion, harassment and abuse. It is also to acknowledge that sport and physical education, particularly in Australia, are not simply reflections of the values held by the wider community (although, to some extent, they certainly are that). It is much more accurate to say that they reflect the attitudes and values of particular groups of Australians. What some authors have called the 'ideology of sport' rests very strongly on such notions as group solidarity, physical and psychological aggression, rejection of weakness and hostility to those dissimilar to ourselves. Furthermore, these values seem to be most stridently held by males, as opposed to females, who are involved in sport and physical education (Crosset, 1999; Harry, 1995).

This presents us with an interesting and troubling situation. In New South Wales, the 7-10 PD/H/PE syllabus brings together an extremely wide range of subject matter including issues related to sexism, racism and homophobia. Indeed, PD/H/PE is the one key learning area in New South Wales which has clearly stated and assessable student outcomes which relate to questions of discrimination, tolerance and diversity in all its forms. But it is clear that many school and university physical educators have a great deal of difficulty in coming to terms with these issues on a personal basis (Flintoff, 1991 & 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996) and this has clear implications for the ways in which they might be dealt with (or not dealt with) in the classroom.

Diversity, physical education and country schools

Are the issues raised in this paper particularly pertinent to non-metropolitan schools? In a previous publication (Gard & Meyenn, 2000), Robert Meyenn and I reported the findings of a study in which we interviewed boys from two country schools about the kinds of physical movement they preferred. Despite coming from schools which were traditionally very successful at boys rugby, some of the boys we interviewed expressed misgivings about playing rough contact sport. A small number even confessed to being interested in trying some dance in physical education but doubted whether their peers would allow this to happen. However, what was particularly evident was the way in which sexist and homophobic language was used to denigrate activities like dancing and gymnastics and boys who did not like rugby. None of the boys could recall actually doing dance in physical education and only a few could recall doing any gymnastics.

It was clear from this study that all the boys possessed sophisticated cultural knowledge about the *meaning* of being good at rugby or being interested in dance. That is, they understood that rugby and dance are not simply alternative forms of physical activity, but rather cultural practices that serve to classify people. In effect, the boys' words can be thought of as proof of the survival of 'sport for manliness' discourses. However, while there is some disagreement amongst scholars about whether 19th century 'sport for manliness' discourses disguised an explicitly homophobic agenda or simply articulated a general suspicion of male 'effeminacy', these boys were making clear discursive links between particular forms of physical activity and notions of sexual orientation.

I would argue that these kinds of discursive and, therefore, cultural links are in play in the 'historic quest' headline and photograph. That is, what made the headline possible was the understanding (although we cannot be sure how true this understanding is) that these boys were 'real men' in the making; not weak, effeminate or gay, but the kind of boys 'we can be proud of'.

At around about the same as I read about the looming 'historic quest', there was a story in the same paper regarding a boy who had become the first person ('historic?') from this region of New South Wales to be accepted into the highly selective Australian Ballet School. The school takes in only 20 students per year and is well known amongst dance people for its gruelling training program. The photograph which accompanied the story showed the boy standing in a kitchen, holding a fry pan and gesturing in mock confusion, suggesting that he had no idea how to use the utensil, a reference to the fact that he had to leave home in order to join the school and, it would seem, cook for himself. How would the ballet-boy have looked on the back page, seated, looking calmly and determinedly ahead? Could *any* headline have made *this* image 'work'?

The point of this analysis has not been to criticise the journalists of a small country newspaper or school boys who play rugby union. It is suggest some of the ways in which the cultural life of country towns is represented and how these representations are inevitably enmeshed in cultural politics, in this case class, gender and sexual politics. The story concerning the ballet dancer is a small reminder that culturally diverse things *do* happen in country towns. And while the story does mention that he is the first from this area to achieve what he has achieved, there is little sense that he represents 'us' or that we should feel 'pride' in his success. While dancing is something that clearly goes on here, and thus is a 'cultural practice' ('culture' in the inclusive sense) in the area, it is difficult to think of it as indicative of the area's 'culture' ('culture' in the exclusive sense).

As a set of cultural practices, physical education is implicated in the same field of cultural politics. It, too, has included and excluded certain cultural activities and, in the process, left little doubt about where it stands on questions of cultural diversity. Despite what physical education syllabi might say, by wedding itself so completely to the 'ideology of sport', physical education has left itself with very little scope to advocate for cultural diversity. Physical education in New South Wales now finds itself within a curriculum area (PD/H/PE) which is designed to explicitly foster cultural diversity, and yet physical education has no language with which to do this. Instead of being able to make useful pedagogical connections between, say, homophobia and sport, PD/H/PE, a curriculum area which was designed to be taught in an integrated fashion, must *disintegrate* itself, such that issues related to homophobia are considered (if they are considered at all) only as part of Personal Development and Health, not Physical Education. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that many New South Wales high school PD/H/PE programs are taught and experienced as, in fact, two separate subjects; PD/H which happens inside the classroom, and PE which happens outside the classroom. To acknowledge that sport is one of the primary arenas for the enactment of sexist and homophobic abuse would be to undermine the claims that are typically made on behalf of sport as an educationally important experience; that it develops positive interpersonal skills and promotes social cohesion. And while I have some misgivings about the ease with which country communities are often assumed to be more reactionary than urban communities, the issues I have raised in this paper *are* particularly important to country schools precisely because of the pervasive belief, both within and without, that the country *is* monocultural.

By maintaining that sport is universally popular amongst all children, physical education silences other ways in which children might find pleasure through their own bodies and, in a sense, subtly restricts cultural diversity (culture as social practice). But it also actively and explicitly attacks cultural diversity (culture as a set of values) by embodying a stereotypical vision of the 'healthy' and 'active' subject. Many physical educators will reject this assertion by arguing that physical education is about promoting regular physical activity and that it does not endorse any particular way of life. That is, they will argue that being 'active' is a value neutral proposition. However, it is this very guise of neutrality that renders physical education so fiercely political. As I have suggested, children know that physical activity is a thoroughly political business, with questions of class, gender and sexual orientation never far away. And by ignoring the cultural politics of sport, the practice of physical education in schools will continue to rest uncomfortably alongside its strange new curriculum bed-fellow in the shape of 'cultural diversity'.

Endnotes

¹ Here I use the term 'country' to include both regional and rural communities.

¹ It is clear that these kinds of discourses survive. A recent English newspaper column suggested that the Australian cricket team's extended period of dominance over England during the late 1980s and 1990s might be the result of Australian men being more 'macho' than English men.

¹ Here I acknowledge that the term 'physical education' has largely disappeared from the names of Australian university courses and departments, to be replaced by terms such as 'human movement'. I employ 'physical education' here because of my personal allegiances to the term and to indicate that I am not referring directly to the many disciplines within human movement studies which have little to do with teacher education.

¹ It is interesting to note that, like the New South Wales 7-10 PD/H/PE syllabus, many Australian physical education syllabi require that children not only develop movement skills, but that they also plan, create and perform movement sequences of their own. However, it appears to be these skills, the ones which are least easily incorporated into sport lessons, which teachers are least inclined to teach and/or find most difficult to assess.

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