Ethnography Paper: Fighting Racism with Sports

Noah Holt

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Author Note

“Playing the Enemy” How Nelson Mandela used the sport of Rugby to unite South Africa

Abstract

The years of Apartheid in South Africa saw the worst racism of the modern era, leading to some of the most inhumane treatment of other human beings. During the mid to late nineteen-hundreds, Nelson Mandela began his journey to presidency by joining the African National Congress (ANC) with the goal of ending racism and uniting his country. After his election as the first democratic president of South Africa, there was much resistance and tension between the two groups he sought to lead (the previously ruling whites who feared repercussions for what Apartheid had done, and previously oppressed black group). The uniting factor that brought Nelson Mandela’s dream of a united South Africa was the hosting and triumph of the nineteen-ninety-five Rugby World Cup. In the book, *Playing the Enemy*, John Carlin has constructed a narrative from many interview sources to give his readers the events leading to this unification, starting from Mandela’s time incarcerated to the period after the World Cup and how things had changed.

Keywords: Adaptive Resources: Different coping mechanisms noticed, Cultural Traditions: emphasizing the difference between the black and white cultures, De-Humanize: making a person or group seem less than human, Social Location: Political globally and internally, Racism: not racist versus anti-racist

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The ending of the Apartheid leadership in 1994 was not the end to the racism and bitterness in South Africa, though it was a start. Nelson Mandela faced many hardships and challenges along the path to ending racism in South Africa. With the world behind him to get him into his presidency, and the stress of near endless conflict during the ten-year period prior leaving most of South Africa longing for an end to it, the fight was nearly won. Racism is still in South Africa in the same ways it is still here in the United States, but with the use of sport and defining what makes up culture, progress can be made in both countries to get rid of it entirely.

# Racism

At the start of the book, the story is still of an Apartheid South Africa near the end of Mandela’s 27-year sentence in prison.

## Social Location

Under the Apartheid regime, separation laws keeping blacks out of white communities and in their own “townships,” which was a smaller, less well of town designated for the black populations to live kept a mile or more outside of the white towns. As it was in this South Africa, “the townships were the black shadows of the towns” (Carlin, 37). Blacks were not allowed in said towns, especially in the further leaning Apartheid South Africa, expect on official business (Carlin). Similar situations are often used for segregation and to help solidify racism in communities. These situations are still visible in the United States today having had red zones areas that divided cities into lower income (minority) areas that receive less funding for community growth and planning since they are seen as less advantageous investments. Keeping separation between communities, or in the case of South Africa entire towns, that those who were simply benefiting from the misfortune of their black counterparts were oblivious to that fact, and unless they went out of their way to explore the townships, would remain oblivious.

White South Africa had also been the ruling class for a long time, and the threat of a new type of government and a new ruling class was a threat to their normal lives and many “feared they would lose their jobs” (Carlin, 93). Some not realizing that that comfort was built on the backs of the lesser off black communities. Others understanding that perfectly and wanting to keep the less than human blacks (kaffir being the word they used as a de-humanizing term similar to the N word in American English, coming from the old Israeli word cafri meaning non-believer) in their place so that the whites could continue to do as they pleased.

## Historical and Political Economy

Just as the union of the United States was against slave ownership and racism and segregation afterwards by the south, so to, was the world against the Apartheid rulership of South Africa and their treatment of black South Africa. The ANC (the government party rising to take South Africa from Apartheid) knew if they were going to take control they would need help, so they reached out to countries around the globe. After a short time, the United Nations (UN) was behind them and their fight for human rights and even stating that, “Apartheid belonged, like communism, to another age” (Carlin, 55). During the rugby teams tour of New Zealand, they saw much backlash as well since, “New Zealand was split dangerously down the middle by the tour, such was the strength of feeling between the half of the country that shared the Afrikaaners’ blind devotion to the game and the half that abhorred South Africa’s great ‘crime against humanity’” (Carlin, 65). That devotion to the game, as well as the blind eye of segregation was what lead the captain of the South African rugby team, the Springboks, to the conclusion that, “the enemy, as far as the rugby-playing Francois was concerned, were ‘the Englishmen’” (Carlin, 64).

For as much racism as there was in South Africa at the time, there was infighting between peoples of the same race as well. For white South Africa, there was the Dutch Reform Church which was Apartheid and the true ruling class, and the Englishmen, who though they were still white, were not a part of the true South Africa in the eyes of their government. And for the blacks, as in much of the continent of Africa, were still tribal in their identities, and so had fights and disagreements between tribal nations at times and were still split into these tribal areas.

## Cultural Traditions

“It is essential to understand sport as an institution and element of culture,” and this is what Mandela understood and why he used rugby as a key factor in his unification campaign (Bogopa, 85). For South Africa as it was, the cultures were split. Black South Africa had their culture and white South Africa had theirs.

Black South Africa had their soccer, which was their sport. They also had tribal traditions that had come down to them through the generations. These traditions give many a sense of community and belonging as they will always have a group to go back to. These tribal traditions also give a sense of unity among the black population of South Africa even across tribes, as even though the people may not belong to the same tribe, they all have a respect for each other and their claimed group, though they did on occasion fight or have rivalries between them. These tribes were also a further dividing point from their white neighbors, who sometimes struggled to see differences or tell the different dialects of their languages.

Were the blacks had their tribes, White South Africa had their ancestral country which were primarily the Netherlands and England. Each of these had their own sense of pride and unity that went along with it. Like the black tribes, these two groups lead to several division lines between them as well. White South Africa also had their rugby, and “rugby was his escape valve” (Carlin, 12).

The United States relates well to this concept of escaping in sport as they have their American Football, which is a close relative of rugby. They have their home teams that insight a bit of rivalries and aggression towards others as seen in the infighting of the whites and blacks of South Africa (though not to the same scale). Were the United States lacks, is in its people having shared senses of community. There are minority groups that band together, but for the most, many Americans have lost that sense of community with others and so see health disadvantages do to loneliness and not belonging.

## Health Behaviors

As discussed in class, stress also has a high impact on a person’s health, without the adaptive resource outlets, like rugby for white South Africa, those stresses pile up declining health even further.

South Africa during this time period was a mess of stress inducing resources. For the whole country, civil war was looming around every corner. The threat of war and the removal of a person’s safety at home is one of the highest stresses a person can be under. That is how black South Africa had been feeling for a long time as well.

For black South Africa, it was not just the fear of civil war looming but also as the oppressed group under a corrupt government. They were not safe in their own townships where police would roam and abuse random people. They were poorer and so did not have access to as much as the white population. And they lived with a corrupt justice system, that could sentence them to jail or even death for having been near a crime committed not having been involved.

## Group Dynamics

The two groups did not like each other and harbored dark feelings for one another even after the end of Apartheid and into Nelson Mandela’s first presidency. Mandela had most of the black population behind him, they were happy to see he had talked his way into office, and they were happy to see someone who they had voted for there as well.

Seeing rugby as a point that the whites could connect on, and the part the ANC had taken from them in their efforts to end Apartheid, Mandela thought “we must use sport for the purpose of nation-building and promoting all the ideas which we (the ANC) think will lead to peace and stability in the country” (Carlin, 113). For this to work, both groups needed their minds changed, both needed to dissociate rugby from the old Apartheid ways and see it as the symbol of new South Africa and embrace the phrase “One team, one country” (Carlin).

## Advocate and Activism

Nobody was under the notion that things would change overnight. As Moonley stated, “it would be surprising indeed if the nonracial democratic constitution would also alter overnight the conditioned consciousness of black and white” (55). Progress was all Mandela was looking for in his fight against Apartheid, “but there is no better feeling than really making progress on working to build a better world” (Deggans).

For the South Africa of today, and some of the rest of the world as well, there is still much to be done about racism and other prejudices as well. Some “research demonstrates the integrative role of sport clubs at community level where membership facilitates a sense of belonging, social capital and fostering of collective identity development across diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (Burnett, 13). Meaning sport has the power to expand people’s horizons and groups and be inclusive to all. For this reason, among others, Bogopa explains how “government must take the initiative to rid sports of racism in the country” (94). With the support of government, bigger chances can roll out and help with the unification of people of every race. Bogopa continues on to conclude that “it is imperative that we look at solution and strategies that can be implemented to uplift the standard of sports in South Africa,” so really emphasizes the importance of sport and its power to change how people see the world (93).

To help in the global fight against racism, Deggans lays out a beautiful roadmap to aim at in the fight against racism. Deggans urges readers to not just be not racist, but to have the goal of anti-racism, meaning to not just ignore or not participate, but to also stand against and speak out when you hear or see racism around you to show it is not okay and will no longer be tolerated in the modern world.

# Closing Thoughts

It was a long ten years that Nelson Mandela spent trying to change the leadership in South Africa. Then, a longer time still to change the views and opinions of the people to have them loosely get along and even unite them in some ways over what to some may appear to be a simple game. That simple game played a key role in the unification of South Africa, and now has a longer way still to end racism there and in the rest of the world as well.

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