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# Spectator racism in three professional men's football codes in Australia: Observations from White spectators

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## Abstract

This article explores spectator racism across three high-profile professional men's football codes in Australia (Australian Football League, National Rugby League and the A-League). To pursue this goal, the study conducted an online survey from April 2021 to June 2021, securing 2047 responses. Our focus in this article centres on those participants who self-identified as White to gather their insights on racism as they witnessed and understood it being expressed in the context of attending a professional men's football code match in Australia. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to theorise why some White spectators overtly express racist language and behaviour, our findings indicated the resilience of Whiteness as a source of power and domination, with many White participants reporting they had witnessed racial bigotry in recent years. Concurrently, many demonstrated anti-racist sensibilities, expressing frustration that change has been limited, if at all. Some participants suggested racism is an individual failing rather than

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being subject to institutions and community norms. From that perspective, racism is viewed as a personal choice rather than a failure of society.

**Keywords**
agency, Australia, fans, habitus, racism, sports governance, whiteness, Bourdieu

## Introduction

In keeping with the British imperial ethos of the conquest of People of Colour (PoC) in various continents, an ideology of White supremacy was a hallmark of the Europeanisation of Australia (Broome, 1996). British colonists occupied Aboriginal lands from the late-18th century and, as elsewhere in the British Empire, established a cultural identity based on Anglo-Celtic ethnicity and their own idea of White racial 'superiority' (Rigney, 2003). This sense of empowerment over Other[1] racial groups was evident in 1901 when the White Australia policy (a policy restricting migration into Australia to preserve a society dominated by Whites) was introduced by the Commonwealth Government, the purpose of which was to curtail migrants of non-European ethnic origins.

By the 1960s there was an erosion of rules or laws that allowed White supremacy to flourish. First, voting rights for Indigenous[2] Australians were extended in 1962, and a national referendum in 1967 endorsed a proposal that the Commonwealth be empowered to assume primary responsibility for the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Second, in 1973 the White Australia Policy was abandoned, at which time Australia began to embark on a goal of ethno-racial pluralism under the banner of 'multiculturalism'. In this new paradigm, all PoC – Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Australians and migrants from Asia, the Pacific Islands or other global majority nations – were, officially at least, no longer *persona non grata*. But the die had long been cast, with longstanding racism against First Australians (Broome, 1996) and a White Australia policy intended to exclude non-Europeans, all of which 'provided a powerful expression of racialized nationalism and template of societal development' (Walsh, 2014: 283).

This process of White dominance also played out in sport, where athletes and spectators openly expressed their 'Australianness' – a construct Kearney (2014) describes as typically associated with White, masculine, Anglo-Celtic ideals. By way of illustration, Australia's best-supported sport, Australian Rules football, has often been a site for reflecting racial differences (Cleland et al., 2019). Despite a long history of involvement from Indigenous Australians in Australian Rules football, prior to the 1970s, Perry (2014) illustrates that one of the reasons behind the low number of Indigenous players was the adoption of an unofficial sporting code of exclusion on the grounds of 'race',[3] where they were not actively sought, and when they did seek to play were often made unwelcome. Today, by contrast, male Indigenous professional footballers comprise around 12% in the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL), which is a significant statistical over-representation given that Australia's Indigenous population is just under 3% (Atkinson and Lawson, 2020; Pengilly, 2022). The outlier is association

football, the other football code in Australia, where Indigenous athletes have a negligible presence in the A-League, perhaps because it does not have a big following in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities compared to the almost religious appetite for Australian Rules and rugby league football (Syson, 2019).

In Australia, the term 'barracking' has long been ascribed to sport spectators who are demonstrably passionate – animated by way of voice and gesture (Klugman, 2009). Barracking has typically featured verbal abuse, which varies from comical and benign through to vilifying and malignant (Nicholson and Hoye, 2005). Importantly, from the perspective of the present study, the abuse spectrum has certainly featured racist sensibilities. This ranges from what might be described as 'casual' or incidental bigotry in which the speaker may scarcely be aware, or even unaware, that their language is racially pejorative (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023), through to hard core racists who use the opportunity of relative anonymity in a crowd to vocalise hatred towards those they despise for simply being PoC.

The presence of overt displays of spectator racism in sport is often blamed on 'ignorant' individuals, which not only forces different sports to respond with policy changes that seek to address incidents of racist behaviour (Farquharson et al., 2019; Long and Spracklen, 2011), but it also contributes towards a denial that there is a more substantive underlying problem in wider society. Of course, this is not unique to Australia as spectator racism occurs across the world including, more recently, via online social media platforms (see e.g. Black et al., 2023; Cleland, 2014; Cleland and Cashmore, 2016; Hylton and Lawrence, 2015; Sanderson et al., 2016).

For many years, Indigenous and PoC athletes in Australia faced racial abuse from opponents on the field and spectators off it. As Philpott (2017) outlines, these players tolerated racism as the 'price' for playing a game run by Whites in the interest of Whites. In terms of spectator behaviour in the AFL, changes began after a tectonic moment of protest when, in 1993, Indigenous St Kilda player, Nicky Winmar, confronted Collingwood spectators who were racially abusing him by raising his shirt and pointing at his body, emphasising the colour of his skin. Two years later, Essendon player, Michael Long, objected to being racially vilified by an opponent; a moment that catalysed the creation of the Racial and Religious Vilification Policy in 1995 (known as Rule 30), which aimed to challenge bigotry on the field (Frost et al., 2021). However, it did not solve the problem as in 2007 the Australian Human Rights Commission highlighted the continuation of on-field as well as spectator racism. By then, leagues like the AFL and NRL had codes of conduct around spectators, including racial vilification. However, there were no blanket penalties, but rather warnings should circumstances dictate the need for them.

Despite these further interventions, spectator racism continues to be an unwelcome feature of Australian men's sports. In the AFL, Indigenous players such as Adam Goodes, Lance Franklin, and Eddie Betts have been racially abused by spectators (Cleland et al., 2019). In the case of Goodes, after publicly calling out the racism he received from a 13-year-old girl in a match for Sydney Swans against Collingwood in 2013, the response by future crowds was to boo him whenever he touched the ball. The AFL failed to intervene, taking the view that the booing was a routine part of being a spectator, and that the barracking was not overtly racist. Only years later did

the AFL concede its approach was manifestly wrong. There have also been significant experiences of racism in rugby league, most commonly towards Indigenous players but occasionally those of Pasifika ancestry (Lakisa et al., 2019). The overarching point is that although spectator racism has been recognised as a problem, Australian sport governing bodies have long struggled to address it, tending to be reactive rather than proactive, or sometimes simply ignoring its presence. What, then, might we learn from people at the heart of this issue, spectators themselves?

To address this, in this article we undertake the first large-scale study surrounding the extent of spectator racism at three professional men's football codes in Australia (AFL, NRL and the A-League) and, if observed, their thoughts about its causes. In addition to having well-supported leagues, all three sports have strong links to notions of Australianness and are, therefore, apposite sites for study. In the case of rugby league and Australian Rules football, both have been identified with this concept; Australian Rules football, in particular, was linked to the White Australia policy we referenced earlier (Hallinan and Judd, 2009). Association football has a more complex relationship with Australianness (Hallinan and Hughson, 2009), but whilst it is popular with the sizeable proportion of White Australians with European heritage it has also frequently witnessed racist incidents (Harper et al., 2021).

The focus of this article was influenced by Cleland and Cashmore's (2016) consolidated analysis of 2500 association football fans' views towards the presence of spectator racism at matches in the United Kingdom (UK). Whilst White dominated, their study also included participants who self-identified as other than White. As we explain below, the differentiation between that article and our contribution is that we focus solely on those participants who self-declared as White, the purpose being to garner deeper insights into attitudes and behaviours within White sports fandom in Australia. A further point of difference is that whereas Cleland and Cashmore focused singularly on association football, in this article we focus on three different football codes – which was necessary given the distinctiveness of high-profile Indigenous and Pasifika athletes (at least in the AFL and NRL), for which there is no comparison in the UK.

Our exploration was prompted by two research questions:

RQ1. What is the extent of spectator racism at the three respective sports?
RQ2. In the event of observing racism, how do they account for that conduct?

In explaining the results, we foreground the responses by those fans who self-identified as White as we wanted to examine the extent to which they 'represent the dominant position in sport that tends to privilege Whiteness and subjugate Black culture' (Schmittel and Sanderson, 2015: 336). Whilst recognising other important theoretical perspectives addressing racism in sport, such as Critical Race Theory (see Hylton, 2009), in this article we adopt Bourdieu's concept of habitus to illustrate how the racial dispositions learnt by some White fans in the context of Australian cultural identity are reflected in the thought processes and practices that culminate in them publicly expressing racist language or behaviour at AFL, NRL or A-League matches. As Sallaz (2010: 296) notes, 'research grounded in Bourdieu's concept of the habitus can help us clarify how paradigms, practices, and identities travel across racial formations'.

Similar to the findings of Cleland and Cashmore (2016), we will highlight how the cultural hegemony of Whiteness that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century through the White Australia policy remains a determinant of social power and privilege that some White sports fans continue to use in their cultural practice to marginalise and discriminate against PoC when attending a professional men's football code match in Australia.

## Theoretical framework

Applebaum (2010) emphasises that 'race' is not a scientific concept, but rather a social construction that, over time, has created a system of privilege and oppression. Applebaum asserts that the very idea of 'race' provides a foundation for racist mentalities, which typically operate on three mutually supporting levels: (a) *individual* (the personal attitudes and behaviours of people that reproduce racial difference and discrimination); (b) *cultural* (the beliefs, symbols, and (in the context of the West), ideas that construct the concepts of Whiteness and PoC); and (c) *institutional* (the networks of structures and policies benefitting Whites whilst disadvantaging ethnically different Others, notably PoC).

Again, in a Western context, Hylton and Lawrence (2015: 766) refer to '[W]hite people as a social category and [W]hiteness as a racialized process' that affords a certain level of power and privileges only available to people perceived as White. Similarly, King (2005: 399) describes Whiteness as 'a complex, often contradictory, construction: ubiquitous, yet invisible; normalized and normative; universal, but always localized; unmarked, yet privileged'. In the same vein, Frankenburg (1993: 237) asserts that '[W]hiteness' signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage'. Whiteness may, of course, be consciously expressed or an unconscious element of one's lived experience which can reflect racial dominance or supremacy.

Either way, Whiteness underpins the customs, norms, and laws that have long characterised 'race' and racism in Australia (Tascón, 2008). As Whiteness became dominant in Australia, so too did attitudes towards Indigenous people who were expected to adapt to the values and attitudes of the White colonial society (Litchfield et al., 2022). For example, Tatz (1995) illustrates how this was present as far back as the mid-19th century when White Australians used cricket to educate Indigenous people into the habits of conducting a 'civilised life'.

Given this racialised history, the theoretical approach by Pierre Bourdieu regarding the process of habitus can be applied in this cultural context. Bourdieu (1984) describes habitus as an embodied series of internalised dispositions – rules, tastes, habits, perceptions, values and expressions – that are learnt through the process of socialisation and subsequently reflected in the everyday thought processes and practice of individuals. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 133) assert that habitus is 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure'. According to Mennesson (2010: 6), 'the more long-lasting, the stronger, and the more concerned by emotional relations a socialization process is, the stronger the constructed dispositions will be'.

Although Bourdieu stated that individuals are rarely conscious of their internalised dispositions, Claringbould et al. (2015: 320) illustrate that an individual's understanding of the world 'contains conscious and unconscious ideological and normative assumptions' that are 'inextricably bound to a person's history and informs future dispositions'. Based on 'mutual acculturation', Bourdieu (1984: 243) argues that an individual's habitus is matched with others through 'the immediate affinities which orient social encounters, discouraging socially discordant relationships, encouraging well-matched relationships, without these operations ever having to be formulated other than in the socially innocent language of likes and dislikes'. A consequence is that influential social conditions, such as their social group, family, and community, help inform an individual's personal taste, relations, and practice. Indeed, as we outline later when presenting our findings, there are clear connotations with spectating at a professional men's football code match in Australia. For example, as Bourdieu (1984: 211) states, 'it would be naïve to suppose that all practitioners of the same sport (or even any other practice) confer the same meaning on their practice or even, strictly speaking, that they are practicing the same practice'.

Whilst the origin of Bourdieu's conceptual focus on habitus centred on social class, it has been directly adapted to help understand other social conditions. For example, Perry (2012: 90) contends that it can explain 'the structural and cultural conditions associated with an actor's location within the racialized social system'. He describes how this has led to an emerging focus on the racial habitus, which he defines as 'a matrix of tastes, perceptions, and cognitive frameworks that are often unconscious (particularly for [W]hites), and that regulate the racial practices of actors such that they tend to reproduce the very racial distinctions and inequalities that produced them' (p. 90). Consequently, 'race' is predominantly conceptualised in a way that logically dichotomises individuals, classifying them into a racial group, privileging one group (White), and legitimising itself (through its internalised state) by way of PoC in the process.

Taking the adoption of a racial habitus further, Bonilla-Silva (2003: 104) illustrates the presence of a White habitus that emerges from a 'racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates [W]hites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters'. He also explains how geographical and psychological separation from PoC is evidence of a White habitus, as it conditions and promotes racial dominance and solidarity amongst Whites. In doing so, it reinforces the practice of emphasising White privilege (in the case of its relevance to this article, such as through the existence of the White Australia policy from 1901 to 1973 that was also reflected across different sports). In circumstances like this, Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006: 232) argue that it 'becomes a set of deliberate practices used to coordinate and advance the interests and positions of [W]hites', which is continuously recycled and legitimated in a discourse of prejudice towards ethnically different Others. Likewise, Feagin (2013: 15) states how 'the concept of the White racial frame is an 'ideal type', a composite whole with a large array of elements that in everyday practice are drawn on selectively by White individuals acting to impose or maintain their sense of racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in recurring interactions'.

In the context of this study, habitus is explored through the social field of sports fandom – specifically through fans who identify as White. As has been established,

'race' plays a large part in the culture and history of men's sport in Australia, which creates an obvious link with White habitus. Being raised in a society that would label one as White already predisposes one to the cultural pressures that would place them in that specific habitus. Thus, their tastes, values, perceptions, etc. have been moulded and adhere to a particular understanding of the world as having a racial hierarchy, one that specifically places White people as 'natural' and ascendant. Levy (2009) has written specifically about 'fanship habitus' in the context of sports in the United States and found that many fit within a social demographic that is White, middle-class, and male. This discussion lends credence to the idea that within a sport spectator context, Whiteness is a lived experience for most Australian sports fans, and that their habitus lends itself to customs underpinning a White racial identity. For some, this means the potential for – or indeed likelihood of – racist behaviours against PoC when attending a professional men's football code match in Australia.

## Method

To address the two research questions, a range of fan message boards related to the three sports were contacted by the lead author, seeking permission from moderators to use their platform to conduct academic research – of which, the vast majority agreed to support the study. Data was collected via an online survey, a method that is becoming increasingly prominent in addressing a range of social issues in sports across the world, given the speed and flexibility with which data can be collected via the internet (see Cleland et al., 2020). Braun et al. (2021) have argued that online surveys not only allow for ease of access to participants that are geographically spread, but they can also capture rich and thoughtful data, similar to interviews, through the collection of open-ended responses. As we outline below, these qualitative comments, in their totality, then become the text that is analysed for deeper insights into the topic area.

Thus, the survey comprised a range of closed-ended and open-ended questions, with the closed-ended questions focusing on the participants' gender and ethnicity, as well as whether they had experienced or witnessed racism whilst attending matches, and if so, how recently. Although there are more and less serious offences around racism in both society and sport, we were interested only with the appearance of racist language or actions, rather than their nature or degree. This is obviously a limitation, but the data still provides guidance about the presence of racism – as observed by fans – in the three professional men's football codes in Australia. The survey also asked whether they were aware of the phone-text hotline available inside most stadia to report on any unruly behaviour of their fellow spectators and, if so, whether they had used it to report any incidents of racist language or behaviour. The open-ended questions asked them to comment on the reasons behind the presence of racism (if they had observed it) and what the authorities could do about preventing it from occurring in the future.

Before any data collection took place, ethical approval was sought and granted by one of the author's institutions. Throughout the research process, we closely adhered to the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning privacy, harm, informed consent, and deception. Our initial post on each message board provided appropriate background detail about the study, including a direct link

to the survey. For those participants interested enough to click on the link, they were taken directly to the participant information sheet that provided them with a more detailed overview, including the aims of the study, their role and rights as a participant, the level of anonymity and confidentiality afforded to them, how their data would be stored in line with university processes, and the contact details of the lead researcher and the university ethics committee that had approved the study. At no point were participants under any obligation to complete the survey as they could just ignore the initial post on the message board or decline to proceed with addressing the survey questions after reading the participant information sheet. For those who volunteered to take part, they were reminded that they would be providing their consent to participate in the study when clicking on the submit button to register their responses.

The data was collected between April 2021 and June 2021, capturing 2047 responses (A-League $n = 404$; NRL $n = 825$; AFL $n = 818$). The gender data was starkly male-centred, which may reflect the fact that men's football codes were our focus: 90% self-identified as male, 6% as female, 1% as non-binary, and 3% preferred to not disclose this information. Although gender was not directly used in this study's analysis, it provides some context to the results that are being presented and how masculinity can play a role in expressions of White habitus. Despite collecting a large number of responses, one obvious limitation is that only those fans who engaged with the message boards identified to be part of this study were aware of the survey, thus precluding those fans who do not engage with these specific platforms. We also recognise the non-probability sampling limitation of online surveys like ours as it is based on the self-selection choice of participants about whether to participate in the study (Bethlehem, 2010); however, as stated above, the goal of this study was to explore the quantitative and qualitative views of a large selection of White fans from the three respective sports and the number of responses we collated proved there was genuine interest in the topic area (Braun et al., 2021).

Our strategy for the data analysis followed Bryman (2016), who explained how the combination of methodological practices and techniques can enhance the depth, richness and rigour of research findings. In demonstrating this, the closed-ended responses were analysed via descriptive statistics, presented in the results below as percentages. The open-ended qualitative responses acted as a text being analysed, similar to that of interview transcripts, and were inductively analysed by each author using a manual, iterative, reading and noting process (Braun et al., 2021). This began with a period of open coding that sought to establish first and second-order themes, before further phases of data reduction took place to begin categorising patterns, commonalities and differences in the responses across the three sports (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun et al. (2021) outline that the analysis of open-ended responses can be approached from a wide array of theoretical and methodological applications, and thematic analysis is a commonly used framework. Once each author had completed their individual analysis of the data, all the authors then worked collaboratively to interpret and verify the qualitative findings. That process led to us eventually identifying three dominant, recurring themes that we expand on below: (a) White habitus; (b) casual racism; and (c) getting away with it.

## Results

In addressing RQ1, 27% of A-League fans stated they had witnessed racist behaviour or language at matches compared to 36% of NRL fans and 50% of AFL fans. When these participants were then asked a follow-up question about the timeframe of these incidents, fans of all three sports expressed how this had occurred at a higher percentage within the last two years (2020–2021) compared to over five years ago. For example, 49% of A-League fans had witnessed racism within the last two years compared to 31% who had witnessed it within the last five years, 16% within the last ten years, and 4% over ten years ago. Likewise, 39% of NRL fans had witnessed racism within the last two years compared to 31% within the last five years, 18% within the last ten years, and 12% over ten years ago. Finally, 31% of AFL fans had witnessed racism within the last two years compared to 28% within the last five years, 22% within the last ten years, and 19% over ten years ago.

Taken together, the collective findings across all three sports point to a worsening, not improving, situation given the proximity to the present day with which racism amongst fellow spectators is being witnessed. Some reasons for this worsening situation may include more salient expressions of White habitus and increasing levels of racial tension, particularly on social media where racist actions can become normalised. It should also be noted that there is greater awareness of what may constitute racist barracking because of larger media attention and the work the three professional leagues have done to address this type of behaviour (i.e. anonymous reporting hotlines, publicised lifetime bans, etc.). However, these findings are also consistent with the wider Australian population as it was found that one-third of all Australians have experienced racism in the workplace (Amnesty International, 2021).

To address RQ2, we evaluated the qualitative responses of participants who self-identified as White (89% in the AFL, 86% in the A-League and 81% in the NRL), exploring what they observed, and how they accounted for the presence of racism (if they had witnessed it).[4] The remainder of the results section now presents this in more thematic detail, aggregating responses across the three sports we analysed for this study.

### *White habitus*

In previous research on spectator racism in association football in the UK, Cleland and Cashmore (2016: 40) referred to the presence of a White habitus, which they argued 'normalizes [W]hiteness by giving power and specific social and cultural profits to [W]hite supporters through their participation in the game'. With regards to our study, different cultural conclusions can be drawn across the three football codes in the context of Australian sports fandom. For example, following Rigney (2003) and Walsh (2014), a significant number of participants referred to the historic culture of Whiteness in Australia and how this is reflected in the practice of expressing racist language and behaviour for some White fans at men's sports events. By way of illustration was this response by a male AFL fan: 'Australian culture is fundamentally racist in a lot of areas. Our history is based on the massacre of Indigenous people and stealing their land', whilst another male AFL fan added: 'Australia has a long tradition of white supremacy which

continues. Why would it be any different at the football?' These positions align with that of Mowatt (2009: 511) who asserts that White supremacy can be understood as an ideology that 'places into motion a set of policies, practices, and beliefs that ensures the dominance of White identity and advantage over all other identities'.

In explaining the continued presence of racism, the process of socialisation in terms of learned behaviour was a recurring and important explanatory factor. As one male AFL fan explained: 'Some of it would be "hereditary" racism, from parents, family and friends that is subsequently seen as an accepted behaviour', whilst a male NRL fan stated:

> Using race as a means of showing disregard usually for an opposition player has been going on for generations, for many people were raised under the White Australian policy [1901–1973] and old stereotypes are hard to cast off.

Responses like this concur with the view of Sallaz (2010: 296) who argues that 'individuals who came of age in one racial formation will tend to generate practices that simultaneously preserve entrenched racial schemata'. For some White fans, racist dispositions are ingrained and thus normative. This means a predisposition to bigoted thought processes and behaviours in society, which can then surface in public and performative settings. In the case of sports stadia, they can provide spaces where some White spectators can be vocal and largely anonymous (particularly before the era of smart phones).

Whilst there were critiques of racist conduct from White participants, a small number of others divulged their own racist sensibilities. As a word of warning, the sentiments and language are hurtful and derogatory, but are shared here to remain authentic to the data. So, by way of illustration was this response by a male AFL fan: 'Nobody likes a darkie trying to piggyback on White Australian culture or living on White Australian land', whilst another male AFL fan argued that there were 'Too many niggers playing'. As exemplified by these two examples (and others we could have used), there remain some White sports fans in Australia that continue to promulgate the idea that sport is, by its very essence, an activity for Whites, and that PoC ought to be discriminated or excluded because of that racial view.

So, why are there such bigoted racial dispositions present in some White fans? According to a male A-League fan: 'It's built into some of these people's nature. They either do not realise or do not care they are being discriminatory'. As argued by Claringbould et al. (2015), whether people are conscious or unconscious about their bigotry, some White sports fans continue to act and speak in ways that reinforce racial inequality and promote their prejudicial views. Other participants, however, emphasised that although they are aware they could be discriminatory, their process of socialisation (including education and life experiences) is reflected in their everyday thought processes and practice. This was best illustrated by a male AFL fan:

> Racism stems from ignorance and from our tribal nature. Humans are wired to single out others over any points of difference. Red hair, glasses, obesity, different skin colour…It's part of our DNA that we are all racist to some degree, whether we care to admit it or not. Good people overcome this handicap through education and positive experience – the more they are exposed to

> different cultures, different ethnicities and different races, the broader their outlook and the more tolerant they become. Unfortunately, some people choose ignorance. They surround themselves with like-minded bad influences and they fully embrace their racist attitudes. They resist any attempt from others to modify their racist behaviour.

Interestingly, whilst this fan argued that there is agency for some White fans to behave in racist ways, he also paradoxically argued that it is an integral part of being human by stating 'it's part of our DNA'. Bourdieu would most likely argue that it is through habitus that we take for granted the social as natural, a phenomenon he calls 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). For Bourdieu, doxa is not only tautological, but it also removes agency from the equation. So, where the idea of racism being natural can falter is it leaves open excuses for the presence of racist language and behaviour (e.g. racism should be excused as it is a natural part of being human). However, this misattributes the racist structure of society by framing White supremacy, and racial supremacy as a whole, as a natural outcome to human societies, and not rooted in larger geopolitical and imperial structures like colonialism or colonisation and is something that is reinforced through White habitus (Long and Spracklen, 2011).

Whilst some research points to racism being a long and embedded aspect of human behaviour via evolutionary processes (see Brooks, 2012), this does not remove the powerful and dominant socially constructed conceptions of 'race', racial superiority, and imperialism that capitalise on in-group and/or out-group biases. As we illustrate in the next section, some of our White participants legitimise the presence of racist language and behaviour as 'simply' casual that they perceive to lack deliberate racial intent. Thus, within a context of White habitus, problematic norms of Othering – which are foundational to racist thinking and action – are shrugged aside as unproblematic.

## *Casual racism*

As explained by Teun van Dijk (2004: 351), racist discourse is 'a form of discriminatory social practice that manifests itself in text, talk and communication. Together with other (non-verbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or 'racial' domination'. For Van Dijk, this takes two particular forms: (a) it is directed *at* ethnically different Others; and (b) it is *about* ethnically different Others. Most of the collated evidence was that racist discourse was directed *at* ethnically different Others, but for some participants, despite recognising its presence, they felt it lacked racial intent. As one male AFL fan highlighted: 'Racist comments are sometimes made on the spur of the moment by excitable and involved spectators. The people making the comments may not be RACISTS outside of "the moment"'. Another male AFL fan concurred: 'I honestly don't think people actually mean to be racist at football games. Most spectators yell out in the heat of the moment and don't engage their brain before their mouth'. Responses like this reflect Hylton's (2009: 6) analysis that racial inequality in sports is 'often seen as exceptional and irregular rather than routinely ubiquitous and deeply ingrained'. Indeed, other AFL fans argued that watching live sport brings out irregular emotions in spectators, as highlighted by this male fan:

> Spectating feels like a time where you have lower inhibitions because emotional outbursts (no matter how reasonable or otherwise) feel justified and even encouraged. So, the bar from 'you shouldn't say that' to racism feels easier to jump over.

Another male AFL fan outlined:

> Overall, Australians are very welcoming and multiculturalism is what makes Australia one of the best countries in the world. But we are a racist bunch, even if not acting maliciously. We're a group that likes to have a laugh, sometimes at someone else's expense and we as people have glossed over the bad as a joke and it's become ingrained in our psyche.

Although this was a prominent feature amongst the responses of AFL fans, the other two codes also contained similar examples where participants felt any language referring to 'race' lacked racial intent. This was best illustrated by a male NRL fan:

> I think usually it's not malicious, at least not as a part of that person's true core beliefs and values, it's just a rash snap-to insult as they see a different race/skin tone, etc. and it's the simplest identifier.

Responses like those above were often referred to as a form of 'casual' racism, where people believe such language is evidence of unintentional social ignorance rather than 'real' racism towards ethnically different Others. As the dominant racial group across spectators at all three sports, the social identity of Whiteness provides a favourable sense of in-group membership based on sharing similar characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours that differentiate from any out-group(s) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). When there is deemed to be a challenge or threat to the in-group, Branscombe et al. (1999) outline how some members can suffer from a sense of vulnerability and act in ways that seeks to defend their identity (i.e. in the case of this article, by emphasising Whiteness). In the context where racist language and behaviour is present, Perry (2014: 41) outlines how it 'has long manifested in places where racists are able to openly express their narrow-minded views when gathered in their mobs'.

Although some fans like those above did not see racial intent in the presence of fan language, others felt differently, however. As one male NRL fan stated: 'Some guise it under "tribalism" but it's just hate', whilst another male NRL fan concurred:

> It is an inherent generational racial intolerance that's always simmering just under the surface, a mixture of being among a large mass of likeminded people and the view that a sporting event is largely consequence-free for bad behaviour gives these types of people an imagined freedom for spouting this rubbish.

Other participants, including this male AFL fan, located the debate within the tribal nature of men's sport in Australia:

> Sport is an environment in which general standards of decency are overwhelmed by tribal 'passionate support' and the absence of self-control amongst some allows that excitement to

> transition into verbal violence against an easy target, usually an outsider and often a person from a cultural background that is not Anglo-Saxon.

Another male AFL fan shared similar thoughts:

> Minorities are more likely to attract harassment because of racism, and that harassment is more likely to be racist in nature because it's an easy and lazy way to be hurtful.

These responses point to the idea of racism as a form of casual 'aberration' (Lentin, 2017); something that arises in an out of the ordinary context, such as a men's sport event, where the usual norms of behavioural constraint are missing. This ambivalence about the 'degree' to which racism is both offensive *and* an offence has its corollary in sport, where leagues and clubs offer spectator conduct guidelines, attempt to deter bigotry, and determine what penalties to apply (a point we draw on in the next section).

## *Getting away with it*

Our third key theme relates to opportunities to 'be' racist and whether there are adequate mechanisms to penalise such infractions. Several participants felt frustrated that racist behaviour continues because, historically, it has not been taken seriously enough. Yet, they conceded, the same could be said for Australian society. Complicating all this, they concluded, was that too often those who expressed racist sentiments at sport had been able to 'get away with it'. A male AFL fan had a strong message: 'Society has a long way to go when it comes to racial equality and those that preach racism no longer exists except in "small pockets" are delusional', whilst a female AFL fan commented: 'Because racism as a whole is normalised within our society, and the classic "casual racism" isn't seen as pure racism (i.e. it's "just" a harmless stereotype) there is a lack of meaningful action taken to eradicate it'. For this male A-League fan, the very anonymity afforded by the collective mass of a sports crowd means, 'They can get away with it since no action is taken against them in the white noise of the crowd'. In the same vein, a male NRL fan reported:

> From my experience, racism is endemic of wider issues related to this broad underlying problem in Australian society. Without trying to be stereotypical, the reason I think it publicly manifests itself at larger gatherings like NRL matches is because they generally get away with it, which may give them some sense of receiving non-verbal support by not being called out.

In reference to 'not being called out', as part of the survey, we asked participants whether they were aware of the phone-text hotline available within most stadia across the country to confidentially report spectator misconduct to stadium authorities. In response, 76% of AFL fans, 62% of A-League fans and 42% of NRL fans said they were. When participants were then asked whether they had used it to report incidents of racist abuse by other spectators, just 3% of AFL fans, 2% of NRL fans, and 1% of A-League fans had done so. Given that 27% of A-League fans, 36% of NRL fans and 50% of AFL fans had witnessed racist behaviour or language at matches, there is a significant discrepancy

between observing and reporting. Indeed, these findings are consistent with research on the broader phenomenon of bystander racism in Australian society (Neto and Pedersen, 2013).

One of the arguments often levelled at Australian sports governing bodies surrounding the presence of spectator racism is that for too long it has not been taken seriously. In recognising the need for a more proactive approach to challenge it, in April 2021 the Australian Human Rights Commission published a resource titled 'Guidelines for Addressing Spectator Racism in Sports' that was subsequently endorsed by over 20 Australian sports organisations, including the AFL and NRL.[5] The aim was to adopt best practice consistently across Australian sports, with recommended actions to prevent racism from occurring through to approaches to deal with proven incidents of spectator racism.

Despite this, inconsistencies remain across the three football codes when it comes to punishing offending spectators. In the NRL, for example, Pryde (2023) reported how a proven incident of spectator racism towards South Sydney Rabbitohs player, Latrell Mitchell, would not result in a life ban, but the offender would need to undertake training and provide a direct apology to be considered for re-entry to future matches. On the other hand, Montverde (2022) outlines Football Australia's zero-tolerance approach to disrespectful and offensive behaviour in action as they issued a life ban to a spectator found guilty of a fascist salute at the 2022 Australia Cup final. Likewise, ABC News (2023) explained how the AFL's zero tolerance approach to racial abuse (previously, the penalty had been a three-year suspension), had seen life bans given to nine spectators who had been reported by fellow spectators directly to the police, stadium staff, security staff, or through the phone-text hotline.

Whilst all three football codes highlighted punishments associated with breaking their codes of conduct, all of them relied upon witness or victim intervention to be able to enact their policies and procedures. This approach has been criticised as formalising and bureaucratising anti-racism initiatives, which can dampen the impact and uptake amongst fans (Penfold and Cleland, 2022). Other issues associated with complaint and grievance procedures are that it is 'a form of symbolic anti-racism and ineffective in reducing and preventing racial abuse' (Farquharson et al., 2019: 167). One major issue involves providing proof that racism occurred and could be a reason behind why so few incidents are reported to the police, staff, or security personnel inside stadia, as well as through the phone-text hotline.

## Conclusion

This article drew upon Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, reframing it for our purposes as White habitus, given we were interested in whether White participants had observed racism across the three football codes and, if so, how they accounted for that behaviour. In addressing our two research questions, we found that discriminatory racial dispositions remain a feature of the cultural practice of some White fans, as expressed via the continued presence of racist sensibilities when watching a professional men's football code match in Australia.

As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) assert, habitus tends to be reproduced from one generation to the next, but this is not a deterministic framework given there can be disruptions to habitus as society undergoes change (for better or worse). For example, across our data was evidence of a questioning mindset, with many participants expressing frustration at the presence of racial bigotry, along with a realisation of how it permeates wider society, recognising that it is not possible to separate discussions on racism in sport from wider societal challenges with racism. Despite this, very few of these more 'progressive' White observers had transitioned from silent critic to steadfast opponent, as only a tiny fraction of participants had actually reported the presence of racism to authorities. Until the transition occurs more widely it is unlikely that the presence of racism in Australian men's sport will be eradicated.

A case in point was the perception amongst some White participants that racism is primarily a moral failing by individuals who either casually or deliberately give voice to their underlying prejudices. Indeed, much is often made of individual agency – that these are 'bad apples', and so are (or ought to be) isolated exceptions. An inordinate focus on 'bad apple' incidents of racist behaviour in sport (Farquharson et al., 2019; Long and Spracklen, 2011) may contribute – inadvertently or otherwise – to a lack of awareness, and indeed an absence of reckoning, about substantive underlying racial problems in both sport and society. Angst towards individual racists, whilst understandable, may have the consequence (intended or otherwise) of avoiding difficult conversations about how racism is manifest in wider society and, in our case, the Australian men's football codes. In other words, individual agency does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by societal structures, values and norms – that is the White habitus. Thus, racism can be observed institutionally as a function of systems of power, and it can also be observed within civil society as a practice amongst individuals (Cunneen, 2019).

In some ways, it is impossible to stop people from thinking negatively about 'race'. Although most White fans regulate their everyday thought processes and practices, the challenge is to stop the minority who hold negative views from overtly expressing racist behaviours, discourse, or actions in public spaces such as within sports stadia. For those White fans who hold racist views and are willing to express them publicly, there needs to be more robust action enforced where behaviour change is affected through stringent measures and punishments. Even though there is recent evidence suggesting a change of approach amongst some Australian sports governing bodies, if such actions are not consistently challenged, this can reinforce and enhance an individual's position and make it more likely to continue, a point borne out by the continued number of incidents witnessed or experienced by fans of all three men's football codes in Australia.

For social change to occur, Hylton (2021) contends it requires a strategic, proactive, and radical approach that involves collaborative and sustained action and support from key stakeholders. Too often in sports across the world, when a racist incident occurs, there is what Hylton (2010) refers to as 'interest convergence' – where the response from the relevant governing body is often 'reactive' in highlighting issues of racial equality, yet ultimately produce little evidence of long-lasting behaviour change amongst those spectators who publicly express racist thoughts. On this point, Lawrence (2017) outlines how sports governing bodies need to recognise the different ways in which racism is

expressed and only when they do can they devise measure that brings about sustainable social and behavioural change. However, Cleland and Cashmore (2016) have previously argued that it can often be a forlorn task to put in place mechanisms that challenge those White spectators whose internalised dispositions are so ingrained that they are content to publicly express racist thoughts irrespective of how they are received by fellow spectators or punished by the relevant authorities. Given the findings outlined in this article, this remains a challenge that seems no closer to being overcome, particularly given the perceived supremacy with which Whiteness is presented by some White spectators towards PoC when watching a professional men's football code match in Australia.

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## Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, 'Other' is defined as viewing or treating a person or group that is distinct or opposite from oneself on the grounds of 'race'.
2. In this article we use the term Indigenous to refer specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as distinct from those who would be classed as People of Colour.
3. We place 'race' in quotation marks throughout this article to reflect how it remains a contested concept that has no objective reality, but one that can motivate discriminatory verbal and non-verbal thoughts and behaviour in people based on the perception that there are natural biological differences between certain groups.
4. In a future article, we will reflect on those participants who did not self-identify as White and how they accounted for the presence of racism (should they have witnessed it). This will allow for a comparative analysis of two different forms of habitus but with a common goal of identifying spectator racism and accounting for it.
5. See: https://apo.org.au/node/315195

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