



**TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S SPORTING ACTIVITIES AS RACIAL FATHERING PRACTICES**

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**RESEARCH NOTE:****TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S SPORTING ACTIVITIES AS RACIAL FATHERING PRACTICES****Abstract**

This research note puts forward a conceptual framework for leisure research seeking to bring sport, fathering, and race and ethnicity together. It draws on theoretical ideas of practices and racial projects to develop the notion of racial fathering practices. The potential of racial fathering practices as an analytic approach is indicated through three vignettes of fathers' involvement in their children's sporting activities drawn from in-depth interview studies of fathers' understandings of bringing up their mixed-race children in Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Keywords:**

Father involvement; practices; racial fathering practices; racial projects; sport

**Word count:**

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**Introduction**

A decade ago, in the conclusion to her milestone edited collection on the relationships between fatherhood, sport and leisure, Tess Kay (2009) called for a widening out of research in the field. One of the areas in need of development that she identified was 'cultural contexts', remarking:

The chapters in this book are from countries which are multicultural societies and several of the empirical studies reported here have included participants of various ethnicities.

Nonetheless, none of the studies here has focused solely on, or foregrounded, issues surrounding ethnicity and fathering (p. 216).

Kay locates the importance of leisure studies reaching out in this way in arguments that cultural traditions of family life and ethnic group cultural capital can be important to ethnic minority groups who seek to preserve and negotiate a distinct identity within multicultural societies. To that can be added that members of majority ethnic families may also be involved in preserving and negotiating particular racial and ethnic identities. In spite of Kay's effort to 'start the ball rolling' on the topic, as she terms it, little research seems to have appeared since that focuses primarily on how race and

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3 ethnicity may be a pivotal aspect of fathers' sport and leisure activities with their children. There are  
4 considerations of sport and masculinity, of sport and race, and of fathering and masculinity and  
5 sport, but little in the way of pulling them all together. Attention to how racial and ethnic identity and  
6 culture may be passed on to their children by fathers through their involvement in sport and leisure is  
7 thin on the ground. But how might researchers investigate and understand this constellation?  
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13 In this research note, I put forward a conceptual framework for leisure research seeking to bring  
14 sport, fathering, and race and ethnicity together, through the notion of racial fathering practices, and  
15 indicate its potential through three indicative vignettes of fathers' involvement in their children's  
16 sporting activities drawn from in-depth interview studies of fathers' understandings of bringing up  
17 their mixed-race children in Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand. As Kay notes, examining culture,  
18 ethnicity and race as contexts for fathering requires an in-depth approach, so the vignettes point  
19 towards such a methodology as well.  
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### 27 **Fathers and sport – the focus**

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30 Kay's commentary and the contributions to her volume (2009) brought together bodies of sport and  
31 leisure research and of fatherhood research to show how central sport and leisure can be to the  
32 fathering process. Like much of the literature then and since, the contributions drew out the  
33 relationship between sport and masculinity in father's leisure practices with their children, situated  
34 within the context of the prevalent norm of 'involved' fathering, with increased expectations that  
35 fathers should engage with their children practically, emotionally and discursively (see also e.g.  
36 Croakley, 2006; Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). Fathering through sport is  
37 linked to masculinity in most discussions (e.g. Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Jeanes & Magee,  
38 2011; Kay, 2007). As a setting where fathers can negotiate and display forms of masculinity,  
39 informal and formal sporting activities is a common way in which fathers are involved in their  
40 children's everyday lives and can feel relatively comfortable and competent. Sport provides them  
41 with a site to enact 'good fathering', spending time with their children, bonding and sharing an  
42 interest (e.g. Harrington, 2006; Kay, 2007; Park & Kwon, 2019). Studies also show that such  
43 activities provide fathers with the opportunity to instil what they consider to be positive knowledge  
44 and values in their children, with sport linked to notions of moral and social development such as  
45 discipline, tenacity, character, team working, competitiveness, and self-confidence, preparing  
46 children for a successful adult life (e.g. Coakley, 2006; Harrington, 2006; Kay, 2007; Kremer-Sadlik &  
47 Kim, 2007; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Starcher, 2015). There has been some consideration of how this  
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3 involvement and socialisation into values may also be linked into class values (e.g. Kremer-Sadlik &  
4 Gutiérrez, 2013). There has, however, been little discussion of how fathers' involvement in sport  
5 keys into passing on knowledge and socialising their children into values linked to race and ethnicity.  
6  
7 Despite a vibrant body of literature on sport and race (e.g. Adair & Rowe, 2010; Fletcher, 2015;  
8 Nauright & Wiggins, 2017), how race and ethnicity may be a pivotal aspect of fathers' sport and  
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10 leisure activities with their children remains under-explored. Anna Gavanas (2004) offers a partial  
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12 exception in her consideration of fatherhood and politics, when she notes the relationship between  
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14 fathering, sport and racialised masculinities. She gives the example of athletes as an ambivalent  
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16 symbol of empowerment for African American men. But her focus is on the 'fatherhood responsibility  
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18 movement' in the USA, not on linking through from broader social processes to fathers' own  
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20 understandings of their practices.  
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### 23 24 **A racial fathering practices approach to understanding the relationships between fathering,** 25 **sport and race/ethnicity** 26 27

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29 Broadly the conceptual notion of practices draws attention to the creation and reproduction of social  
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31 cultures, identities and resources through people's everyday taken-for-granted strategies, activities  
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33 and thought processes in the social world. Most notably, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) theorised a logic of  
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35 practice, whereby mechanisms of social domination and reproduction developed over historical time  
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37 become internalised and taken-for-granted as part of peoples' everyday reasoning in context, their  
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39 values and modes of behaviour within the material and cultural conditions of their upbringing and  
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41 across their lives. In turn, these everyday dispositions produce and maintain the mechanisms of  
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43 wider inequality and power that they are located in and which they reproduce. Bourdieu has applied  
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45 his ideas to institutional and familial realisation of 'family' (Bourdieu, 1996). With some resonance  
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47 with Bourdieu, David Morgan (1996; 2011) has developed the more specific analytical tool of 'family  
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49 practices' in an effort to draw attention to the 'doing' of family as an activity, constantly produced  
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51 rather than a static category or structure. This idea covers the mundane activities of family  
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53 members, accounts or evaluations of them by others, administrative aggregations and policies, and  
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55 broader societal systems of meaning, providing a connection between self and society. Morgan's  
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57 ideas have been applied to fathering practices in families, such as classed practices in Norway (e.g.  
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59 Brandth & Kvande, 2016).  
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62 Both Bourdieu and Morgan regard practices as fluid, negotiated and cross-cut with other practices  
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64 (social class practices, racial and ethnic practices, etc.), and highlight the societal and historical  
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3 dimensions of lived practices. This has resonance with Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2015)  
4 critical theorisation of racial formations and concept of racial projects. Racial formation theory  
5 addresses the complex relationship between historically situated political, social and economic  
6 forces in the creation, inhabiting, transformation and destruction of racialised hierarchies, categories  
7 and identities, and how these forces shape racial projects. Racial projects, as part of the institutional  
8 and individual enactment of racial formations, refers to the negotiation, conflict and understanding of  
9 'race' in everyday life that form, reform and transform the content and influence of racial meanings.  
10 Omi and Winant's ideas have been applied to racial projects occurring in and through sport, such as  
11 Black and Asian players exclusion from administration and management (Hylton, 2010).  
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20 Bourdieu, Morgan, and Omi and Winant argue that, respectively, practices, family practices and  
21 racial projects are embedded in national institutions, social structures, policies, social norms and  
22 evaluations, and in people's understandings of identities, values, activities and (inter)actions, and  
23 negotiation of their constitution and possibilities. Where they differ is that while neither Bourdieu nor  
24 Morgan separate out the two, regarding institutional and individual practices as integral, Omi and  
25 Winant take a more ecological approach that distinguishes between macro and micro layers.  
26 Nonetheless, I argue that it may well be fruitful to bring them together in order to foreground how  
27 fathers may attempt to pass on and instil racial and ethnic identity and cultural knowledge and values  
28 to their children through their involvement in sport. That is, to bring sport, fathering, and race and  
29 ethnicity together, through the notion that fathers' racial projects for their children can be enacted as  
30 racial fathering practices through sporting activities, placed in biographical, national and  
31 transnational socio-historical context.  
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43 To indicate the potential of a racial fathering practices approach to understanding the relationships  
44 between fathering, sport and race/ethnicity, I will use some vignettes of fathers' involvement in their  
45 children's sporting activities drawn from in-depth interview studies of fathers' understandings of  
46 bringing up their mixed-race children in Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand (Edwards 2017). The  
47 primary research was not about fathering through sport, having a broad focus on the negotiation of  
48 difference and belonging in bringing up children and fathers' considerations about whether, what and  
49 how to pass on aspects of a heritage to their children. The interviews yielded details about what was  
50 important to the fathers for their children to have a sense of identity and belonging, their everyday  
51 activities with them, and what helped or hindered them, and involvement in sporting activities was  
52 raised and discussed by fathers along the way. Not all the fathers in the primary research made  
53 reference to sporting activities with their children, and not all of those who did made discernible  
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3 reference to it as a racial fathering practice and this was not an issue that was followed up with  
4 fathers in the interviews. The point here is to illustrate the potential of the approach for studies that  
5 do focus on the links between fathering, sport and race/ethnicity.  
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### 10 **Racial fathering practices vignettes**

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13 The physical participation in sport as activities that fathers in both Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand  
14 could stress as beneficial for their children and for their relationship with them, might easily be  
15 analysed simply as an aspect of being fathers of children given the consistent finding of this in the  
16 fathering literature. But while involvement in sport is bound up with masculinity in both countries and  
17 with fatherhood roles, it was also part of fathers' racial projects for their children, enacted through  
18 racial fathering practices, that key into historical and contemporary national racial projects.  
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25 Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand provide the context for the lived experience of racial fathering  
26 practices through involvement in children's sporting activities in the empirical vignettes presented  
27 here. Part of an understanding of fathers' involvement as racial practices is as a form of negotiation  
28 of their own racial projects for their children with nation-state racial projects. In Britain this nation  
29 state racial project constitutes an ambivalently multicultural society with a colonial history, with  
30 contemporary claims that multiculturalism has fragmented British society alongside adaptive  
31 multicultural settlements as actual public policy practice (Meer & Modood, 2014). In Aotearoa New  
32 Zealand, there is a society experiencing tensions between institutionalized biculturalism and  
33 empirical multiculturalism, with a history of settler colonisation. A national narrative of Māori and  
34 Pākehā (New Zealanders of predominantly European descent) as equal partners in the nation state  
35 endeavour co-exists uneasily with an increasing racially and ethnically diverse population, raising  
36 concerns about cultural dissipation (Spoonley, 2014). Sporting activities have played their part in  
37 both these, and other, nation state racial projects (e.g. Porter, 2017).  
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### 49 ***Rafi: respectful acceptance through involvement in sport***

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53 For fathers whose families had settled in Britain, colonial histories as part of national racial projects  
54 could be revealed in their accounts of racial fathering practices through sporting activities with their  
55 children, underpinned by the fathers' own attempts at racial projects.  
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3 Rafi and some of his family migrated from India to live in the UK when he was in his mid-20s. He  
4 lived with his White British partner and two sons on the outskirts of a regional British city. It was a  
5 neighbourhood with an overwhelmingly White population. Rafi came from a religious and educated  
6 family, and sporting activities were an important element in his upbringing:  
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10 My boys asked me, 'Daddy, did you have a teddy?' I said, 'No I had a hockey stick which I  
11 used to put next to my bed'.  
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15 It was very important to Rafi that his sons were brought up to know their Muslim religion and its  
16 strong moral values, and the respect in which his family was held in his country of origin. He was  
17 carrying out his own racial project for his sons in the context of a wider multi-cultural society but a  
18 local mono-cultural one, and so he framed his project through ideas of gaining respect as a means of  
19 fitting in:  
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23 I take them for cricket and hockey and badminton and tennis ... Because this is my priority  
24 ... The children are very good cricketers, they win cups ... [My oldest son] got the best  
25 cricketer award from the club, you know cricketer of the year, and he's a very good cricketer  
26 and a very good hockey player ... I've been playing cricket for donkey's years and when I go  
27 there nobody asks me, 'would you like a pint of beer?' or, 'would you like a sherry?' 'Rafi,  
28 orange juice, pineapple juice?' ... I think they have a lot of respect that the way the children  
29 are being brought up and the way they are ... people respect you if you have a certain  
30 principle.  
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39 Rafi had developed his own cricketing talents in India, rooted in an historical national racial project  
40 where the sport was bound up with colonialism and the inculcation of British values under the British  
41 Raj (Perkin, 1989). Living in Britain, participating in cricket became a racial fathering practice  
42 through which to enact his individual racial project, as a means for Rafi and his sons to find  
43 acceptance for themselves and their religious practices through the local cricket club.  
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### 49 ***Bob: Christian settler values and sporting activities***

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53 Similarly, Britain and Aotearoa New Zealand are linked through the position of sport and the  
54 outdoors as part of a New Zealand national identity that is rooted in colonialism and British settler  
55 history (Kane & Tucker, 2007; King, 2007). In a context where Whiteness as an historically specific  
56 set of colonial power relations propelled the emergence of a New Zealand nation-state and a 'New  
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3 Zealander' identity, it remains the basis for an inherent and unspoken ordering of social relations  
4 (Consedine & Consedine., 2005).  
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8 Bob was a New Zealand European father with a Pacific Island partner; both were committed  
9 Christians. They lived in a city on the South Island with their four children: three girls and a boy.  
10 Bob came from a White British Protestant Settler farming background that stressed prudence and  
11 self-sufficiency. Even with his different ethnicity and quite different cultural upbringing from his wife,  
12 he felt that their shared religious values underpinned their childrearing aims and keyed into the  
13 values of wider New Zealand society. Bob's was an unspoken racial project shaped by a colonising  
14 Whiteness:  
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20 I think if you went through all of our values and saw where they came from you'd find that  
21 most of them are biblical. And I think that would be for most western societies and a lot of  
22 especially Pacific cultures ... I don't know, hard work, integrity, honesty, all those things are  
23 very foundational in the Christian faith. I don't know, joy, love, peace, all those things.  
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29 Bob talked about the importance of him as a father being involved with his children individually and  
30 separately as well as through joint family activities. Sport and outdoor leisure featured centrally in  
31 the time spent with his children that Bob appreciated. His assertion of the value of ensuring that his  
32 daughters and son were active and outdoors contains echoes of migration stories of physical labour  
33 and survival within small rural (Pākehā) communities:  
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37 So we'll just go out for something to eat or go to mini-golf, go to the park or go for a bike  
38 ride, that kind of stuff. I'm a big believer in getting kids active and outdoors. I love camping  
39 and hunting and fishing and all those kind of things ... whether it's just our independent sort  
40 of pioneering spirit that's carried on? ... For me, I'm refreshed by being on my own out in the  
41 bush or riding my bike or out hunting.  
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48 Bob's involvement with his mixed-race children in this particular aspect of their lives invoked a  
49 national story in an historically-referenced racial project that conjured up his family origins in British  
50 settlement in New Zealand two generations previously; a mono-cultural racial fathering practice that  
51 did not touch upon his children's Pacific Island side.  
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56 ***Rewiti: bicultural from a Māori core***  
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3 Other fathers' racial projects could lock into another, post-colonial, version of Aotearoa New Zealand,  
4 since the 1980s, as a bicultural national racial project built on equal rights, status and partnership of  
5 Māori with non- Māori.  
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10 Rewiti was a Māori father with a New Zealand European partner, living on the South Island with their  
11 three sons. His over-arching racial project for his sons was for them to know that they were Māori  
12 but also to acknowledge their other heritages as well – a fit with the national racial project but one  
13 that was grounded in a Māori core:  
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16 So they do kapa haka<sup>1</sup>, speak Māori, we do a lot of Māori things ... I guess when we ask  
17 them what they are they say Māori, most of the time they'll say Māori, and then other times  
18 they'll say Māori and Pākehā ... I think it's kind of, not difficult, it's just an unusual situation  
19 when you have to say to them you're Māori and this is your identity, but you know you can't  
20 say this is your only identity. And I think that some Māori just see themselves as Māori, but  
21 you know we've got a lot of English ancestors and Irish and Scottish and Welsh and German  
22 and everything else.  
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30 Rugby is a sport that has been central to the sense of national identity of former British 'white  
31 dominion' colonies such as New Zealand (in contrast to cricket), and to masculine identity (Collins,  
32 2015). Success as a Māori in sports such as rugby acts as an emblem of achievement in a  
33 supposedly egalitarian state (Hokowhitu, 2014). Rugby was an important passion for Rewiti, and his  
34 involvement in the sport with his sons was one of his racial fathering practices. The linking through  
35 of this team sport, Rewiti's bi-cultural racial project and bi-cultural racial fathering practice, and  
36 Aotearoa New Zealand's bi-cultural racial project, was evident in his enthusiastic account of involving  
37 his sons in rugby, including as part of the boys team that he coaches:  
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44 *And I coach rugby as well ... [the youngest one], he thinks he's going to be an All Black ...*  
45 *the oldest one, he wants to be an All Black ... he's pretty good ... Because when you think*  
46 *what are those symbols that New Zealanders take out to the world when they go out there*  
47 *... the haka is an expectation [before a national team rugby match] ... I think that sometimes*  
48 *Kiwis forget that New Zealand identity is tied up with, has really strong elements of*  
49 *Māoriness in it.*  
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<sup>1</sup> Māori performing arts.

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3 For Rewiti then, when it came to rugby at least, identification with the sporting activity through racial  
4 fathering practice was, or at least should be, identification with the Māori-centred bi-cultural project  
5 that was his family and children, and with the bi-cultural national project.  
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## 10 **Conclusion**

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14 Clearly this research note has not provided a comprehensive substantive analysis of the ways that  
15 fathers' involvement in their children's sporting activities are racial fathering practices; and it has not  
16 sought to do so. Rather, it is a conceptual response to Kay's long-waiting call to 'get the ball rolling'  
17 in leisure studies, towards an understanding of how race and ethnicity may be a pivotal aspect of  
18 fathers' sport and leisure activities with their children.  
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28 I hope to have demonstrated the illuminative potential of the conceptual framework of racial fathering  
29 practices for informing research on sport and leisure. The empirical vignettes have indicated its value  
30 in interpreting the ways that father's involvement in their children's sport and leisure activities may be  
31 an important part of inculcating and negotiating a positive sense of ethnic and racial identity and  
32 values. Using racial fathering practices we can identify and analyse the articulation of historically  
33 referenced nation state racial projects, wider and local social contexts and values, and both minority  
34 and majority ethnic fathers' own racial projects for their children enacted through racial fathering  
35 practices involving sport and leisure.  
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## 51 **Declaration of interest:**

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55 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.  
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