



Reimagining Sport for Peace and Development: A Decolonising Arts-Based Research Approach in Postcolonial Fiji

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Abstract

This Working paper examines the potential of arts-based research methods as a decolonising approach within Sport for Development and Peace (SfDP) initiatives in postcolonial contexts of the Global South. Drawing on my doctoral ethnographic study in Fiji, it focuses on young Indo-Fijian women—descendants of Indian indentured labourers—and their (lack of) participation in sport and Fijian physical culture. Physical culture is defined by the socially constructed beliefs, values, practices, and norms surrounding the body and physical activity; these are shaped by Indigenous traditions, Indo-Fijian cultural practices, colonial legacies, and global influences. This paper addresses the enduring legacy of colonial “divide and rule” strategies, particularly the racial divisions between Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. The study highlights how creative multi-modal, non-traditional research methods can generate culturally grounded insights into the lived experiences of marginalised communities, offering spaces for identity negotiation and self-representation. By using the Fijian case study, this paper argues that arts-based methodologies can serve as both effective research tools and platforms for social dialogue, inclusion, and racial healing. It reimagines the role of SfDP in challenging structural inequalities and fostering intercultural understanding among migrant and diasporic communities across colonised nations in Oceania.

Introduction

During the period of indenture, around 60,965 Indian labourers were brought to Fiji by British colonisers, representing diverse classes, regions, castes, languages, and occupations, though with an unequal gender ratio (Lal, 2011). Colonial powers created divisions between Indians and Indigenous Fijians, resulting in an ethnic divide that continued after colonial rule, with Indo-Fijians positioned as socio-cultural-political subordinates (Ali, 2004; Lal, 2000; Sugden et al., 2020). The four Fijian military coups between 1987 and 2006 intensified Indo-Fijian fears, with some facing violence and farming land lease losses, leading to evictions and urban migration (Trnka, 2008; Besnier et al., 2018). Since 1987, Indo-Fijians have been the largest group emigrating from Fiji, primarily to Australia, Canada, the US, and New Zealand (Gani, 2019).

Over the past decade, arts-based research methods (ABRMs) have gained recognition across multiple disciplines—including health, aged and disability care, and sports—with vulnerable populations such as migrants, Indigenous communities, marginalised groups of women and the elderly (Balram, 2025; Blaisdell et al., 2019; Miller & Zelenko, 2022; Yuen, 2016). ABRMs are particularly effective in amplifying the voices of marginalised communities by enabling them to share their lived experiences through creative forms. These approaches bring forward perspectives often underrepresented in development discourse and practice, offering deeper insights than conventional qualitative methods (Ward & Shortt, 2020). Sport for Development and Peace (SfDP) uses sport as a vehicle to promote human rights, social justice, and community development locally and globally (Giulianotti et al., 2016).

While ABRMs are increasingly used across disciplines, their application in SfDP remains limited, particularly in the Global South. Drawing on my doctoral ethnographic study with 12 young Indo-Fijian women in Fiji aged 15–24, I illustrate how ABRMs reveal the intersections of sport, identity, power, and resistance in postcolonial contexts shaped by displacement, marginalisation and cultural erasure (Balram, 2022). Through this Fijian case study, I demonstrate how ABRMs can be integrated across the entire research process—data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation—to uncover complex socio-cultural, historical and political dynamics and promote more inclusive knowledge production. ABRMs can raise awareness and foster meaningful inclusion of marginalised communities in Oceania sports, particularly where dominant narratives around sport, gender, and race prevail. They also provide a way to rethink physical culture as a tool for advancing peace and development in postcolonial multiracial communities.

This paper uses a Fijian case study to reflect on researcher positionality and the sensitivity needed when conducting research in development contexts within

postcolonial communities in the Global South. I argue that ongoing researcher reflexivity and cultural sensitivity, combined with ABRMs, serve as powerful tools for fostering social dialogue, racial healing, and inclusive sport development policies and practices. By centring the voices and creative expressions of marginalised communities in settler colonial and diasporic contexts, ABRMs reframe SfDP as a platform for equity, peacebuilding, and decolonial solidarity across Oceania and beyond.

Case Study: A Reflexive Multi-Method Ethnography of Physical Culture in Young Indo-Fijian Women

Sport is rarely discussed among Indo-Fijian girls and women, and those who do participate often struggle to find others who share their passion (Balram, 2019; Kanemasu, 2023). This case study shows how combining visual methods, arts-based research methods (ABRMs), and reflexive ethnography during fieldwork can reveal perspectives that young Indo-Fijian women often find difficult to express verbally.

Twelve Indo-Fijian women from Suva, Fiji's capital, and its surrounding areas were recruited using purposive and convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants included five high school students, two tertiary students, two stay-at-home women, and three full-time workers. While sharing ethnicity and gender, they differed in religion, socio-economic status, caste/class, education, and life stage—offering a diverse range of perspectives. Differences in educational background (rural vs. urban, religious vs. secular schools) also shaped their sporting experiences.

Figure 1 illustrates a multi-method fieldwork approach centred on observing participants engaged in sports activities and the Fijian physical culture in two phases, supported by five interconnected stages: participant photography, photo-elicitation interviews, poetry workshops, poem/free verse writing, and interviews based on participants' poems/ free verses.

In the next section, I describe the multi-method fieldwork approach and explain each element of data collection. I then outline how the data were analysed and thematically presented through nonfiction creative pieces.

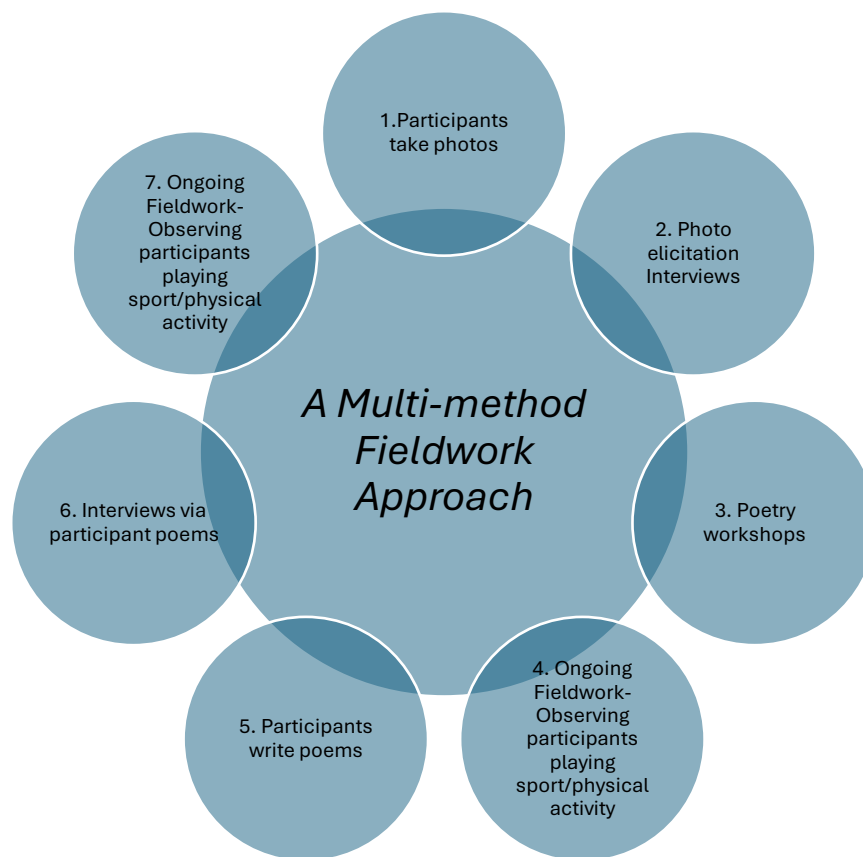


Figure 1. A multi-method fieldwork approach.

Participant Generated Photos and Photo Elicitation Interviews

Once research participants were recruited for the study, they were asked to take 5-8 photos from their environment or bring existing photos from childhood to explain what sports, athleticism, physical culture and participation meant to them. The photos produced by the young Indo-Fijian women (YI-FW) were used to guide conversations through a semi-structured interview around sport, gender, race, and sociocultural norms. These images evoked emotions and memories, enabling participants to lead the discussion and reduce my input. Photo Elicitation Interviews (PEIs) uncovered key themes such as gender stereotypes, patriarchy and matriarchy, mother worship, racism, body image concerns, family expectations, religious norms, rugby fandom, physical education (PE) experiences, and culturally appropriate approaches for creating inclusive PE and physical culture. Individual transcripts were emailed to the participants for review, allowing them to verify accuracy, clarify statements, and make amendments before final analysis (Simpson & Quigley, 2016).

Poetry Workshops, Participant Generated Poems, and Poem-Based Interviews

One month after the PEI, a poetry workshop was conducted to introduce participants to poetry and free verse writing. During the workshop, the YI-FW created short pieces—both individually and collaboratively—in response to a case study about an Indian girl playing soccer in India. Following this session, the participants were given two weeks to write about their own experiences with sport, physical activity, and physical education (PE). Participants' PEI transcripts were returned to them so they could use any earlier discussions to write poems or free verses if they wished to. Participants composed poems and/or free verses in places where they felt comfortable and inspired to express themselves freely, such as their bedrooms, parks, or cafés.

Participant written poetry/Free verse provided emotional flexibility and cultural relevance, connecting with Indo-Fijian oral traditions and the poetic lyrics found in Bollywood-influenced songs and dances (Emeneau, 1958; Gerety, 2017; Mishra, 2006). My previous experience as an English teacher in Fijian schools also confirmed that creative writing was a favoured form of expression among many Indo-Fijian girls. The diverse participant produced poetry, rich with symbolism, figures of speech, and rhetorical devices, invited multiple interpretations. These poems informed the second round of semi-structured interviews (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and helped reveal themes including sports participation, gender and racial dynamics, patriarchy, body image, catcalling, PE, belonging, identity formation, racial discrimination, and assimilation. Transcripts from the interviews based on the poems were also emailed to participants for review, enabling them to verify accuracy, clarify statements, and make amendments before final analysis (Simpson & Quigley, 2016).

Reflexive Field Observations

The next phase, field observations, focused on observing participants taking part in sports and physical activities within their social settings. Observations were also conducted during the poetry workshops to examine how these young women communicated and behaved in social groups and around family. What I observed in the field helped me to confirm participants' interview statements, adding depth and richness and helping to triangulate the findings. For instance, in her interview, a participant claimed that she ignored objectifying gazes while playing hockey was confirmed when I observed the participant casually exposing their abdomen and undergarments while wiping sweat during a match (Balram, 2022).

Analysis and Presentation via Nonfiction Creative Pieces

Firstly, to protect privacy, participants and their produced work were de-identified; data was then thematically coded following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach; findings were presented through creative nonfiction pieces based on participants' narratives shared in the interviews, participant produced poems and field observations. In developing these stories, I carefully selected which elements to include, emphasise, or omit, guided by the research questions. To ensure accuracy and avoid biased interpretation, interview transcripts were returned to participants at different stages for accuracy checks, ensuring they were satisfied with how their words were reported and presented. Participants were actively engaged in the creative process and producing the data – by taking photos and writing poems individually and collectively (poetry workshop).

To provide context, culture, and atmosphere to the nonfiction pieces, I combined participants' words with unspoken cues and observations from the fieldwork, thereby triangulating the data. For example, one participant stated in her interview that she was the only Indo-Fijian girl on her hockey team, which was confirmed during my observation of her playing in a semi-final game. Additionally, I noticed that the team's mixed-race coach, who spoke the iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) language, chose to communicate with all the girls in English. This detail, not mentioned in the interviews, emerged through field observation.

Storytelling is a daily practice through which we make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Dowling et al., 2012). In this study, I acted as storyteller, weaving participants' words and themes into composite nonfiction creative pieces. This holistic approach to data representation in SfDP blended colloquial language and artistic expression to amplify the voices of marginalised migrant women, reveal their identity formation processes, and highlight urgent physical culture and sporting needs. Through school PE and sports policy recommendations, it raised awareness, built pathways for racial bridge-building, fostered cultural inclusion and equity, and positioned sport as a powerful vehicle for development and peace.

Navigating Research Positionality: Reflexivity in Global South Sport for Development Research

The insider–outsider dynamics of a researcher are complex and fluid, challenging any fixed distinctions between these roles (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This section presents my lived experience and researcher positionality. I was born and raised in Fiji until the age of 29. Fiji-Hindi is my mother tongue and widely spoken among Indo-Fijians. This shared language and cultural background position

me as an insider within the community, shaping my perspective and engagement in the research.

However, after migrating and acquiring Australian citizenship and undertaking a PhD from an Australian university, I also carried aspects of an outsider identity. This hybridity required ongoing reflexivity and a nuanced understanding of my role within the research (Pang, 2018). My Indo-Fijian-Australian identity is shaped by a complex personal history: I was raised in a Hindu household but converted to Christianity at the age of 24; I worked as a high school English teacher in Fiji for seven years; and I have been a sports enthusiast and community gym instructor in both Fiji and Australia. These overlapping experiences have given me access to multiple perspectives and enabled me to navigate the field with cultural and contextual sensitivity.

Being perceived as an insider helped establish trust and rapport, essential for understanding the lived realities of the YI-FW. Shared characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, skin tone, and ancestral ties to indentured labourers, along with the cultural value placed on education (reflected in my academic background), enhanced participants' openness. Yet, distinctions in geography and social experience—for instance, participants relocating from rural areas to Suva, while I was born and raised in Suva—also marked me as different.

This hybrid positionality enriched the research, allowing me to code-switch between being an insider and an outsider and critically engage with the diversity of experiences within the Indo-Fijian community. Drawing on my hybrid positionality and a combination of visual methods, ABRMs, and reflexive ethnography, I uncovered the complex intersections of gender, race, class, dominant sporting discourse, spatiality and cultural, economic and political factors that impacted YI-FW's bodily autonomy and human rights in the Fijian physical culture.

I used my Global South voice with participatory creative outputs from participants to share the lived experiences of young Indo-Fijian women through nonfiction creative works, amplifying their voices, needs, and interests. The participant-informed, researcher-woven thematic nonfiction creative outputs call for more equitable and contextually grounded SfDP programs for marginalised and minority women—particularly forced migrants—in diasporic colonial settler communities across Oceania.

Reimagining Ethical and Culturally Responsive Arts-Based Methods in Sport Research for Global South Peace and Development

Eales and Peers (2016:15) raise important methodological questions: “Where is the moving body in our written work? How can we express deeply moving, unspeakable moments? How do we honour knowledge from those who don’t use academic,

English, or any words at all? How might art help us answer—and rethink—these questions?” These interrogations are particularly relevant in the field of SfDP, where diverse global contexts, especially in the Global South, demand approaches that move beyond conventional research methods.

The Fijian case study highlights that the success of ABRMs depend on a deep understanding of local cultures, participants’ preferred artistic expressions, researcher positionality, available resources, community dynamics, and language. In this study, my insider status helped build trust and create space where participants felt open and safe to discuss sensitive topics such as menstruation management in sports, interfaith and interracial relationships, and young women secretly participating in sports due to cultural and familial restrictions. This positionality also enabled me to select culturally and gender-appropriate data collection methods in the Indo-Fijian context. However, being an insider also requires ongoing reflexivity to mitigate bias and maintain ethical boundaries.

The case study shows that when arts-based research methods are combined with participatory action research, they offer meaningful ways to reflect local cultures, identities, and ways of knowing in community sport contexts (Hoeber & Shaw, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). This approach also helps build trust, reduce power imbalances, and often yields deeper insights than traditional interviews (Balram, 2022). ABRMs help surface unspoken or difficult-to-articulate thoughts and emotions, helping to address the ongoing underrepresentation of diverse voices in SfDP leadership (Graeff et al., 2023). While traditional interviews remain a familiar method, ABRMs open space for new forms of engagement, broader participation, and more nuanced data—particularly when working with vulnerable groups, such as people with limited language skills or trauma histories, who are often excluded from mainstream research (Wang et al., 2017).

Moreover, the Fijian case study emphasises that research with culturally diverse and historically marginalised groups requires careful ethical consideration, cultural humility, and reflexivity. Researchers must understand and respect local customs, social norms, and power relations, while ensuring participants are fully informed about the study’s aims, risks, and benefits. Also, when the researcher takes on the role of storyteller and decides which elements to include or omit, it is essential to balance this influence and minimise bias through member checking. A participatory approach actively involves participants in data production and requires ongoing consultation throughout the research process. Protecting participants’ identities and words is also critical.

Ethical practice in development and peace research in Global South contexts requires balancing Western research standards with local cultural expectations. For example,

in the Fijian case study, many Indo-Fijian parents preferred home-based interviews over public venues due to safety concerns for their young daughters. Offering food or small gifts was a customary gesture rather than coercion, and including family members in the poetry workshop helped address caregiving responsibilities, ensured the young women's safety, and accommodated their specific transportation needs. Understanding and respecting these cultural nuances is essential for conducting ethical and effective Sport for Development and Peace research in these settings.

Conclusion

This Fijian case study demonstrates that arts-based research methods, when combined with participatory action research, can meaningfully capture local voices, cultures, identities, and ways of knowing in SfDP, particularly in the Global South. Success depends on cultural understanding, ethical sensitivity, and reflexivity, regardless of whether the researcher holds an insider, outsider or hybrid status. ABRMs create space for marginalised voices often excluded by traditional research approaches, fostering trust, reducing power imbalances, and generating deeper insights. ABRMs are not a one-size-fits-all solution, but they offer a powerful, culturally resonant approach to inquiry and engagement with underrepresented communities. Ethical practice requires balancing Western standards with local customs, adapting methods to participants' needs, and protecting their identities and narratives. Ultimately, culturally responsive, arts-based participatory research approaches position sport as a powerful medium for development, peace, and social inclusion.

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