



“Sport is community:” An exploration of urban Aboriginal peoples' meanings of community within the context of sport



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to better understand the meanings of community, particularly as it is understood within the context of sport, for urban Aboriginal youth and adults in Edmonton, Alberta.

Design: A community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was used to guide this research.

Method: One-on-one interviews were conducted with 18 Aboriginal youth and adults. Data was analyzed using Elo and Kyngäs' (2008) process of content analysis. The integrated indigenous-ecological model was used as a framework for data analysis and the interpretation of findings.

Results: Findings are represented by five themes that are supported by direct quotes from participants. Participants described community as: (1) belonging, (2) family and friends, (3) supportive interactions, (4) sport, and (5) where you live and come from.

Conclusions: Findings from this research suggest that urban Aboriginal youth identify with a number of different communities, and their complex meanings of communities are comprised of various inter-personal level factors. The knowledge shared by participants provides necessary insights into meanings of community, which are necessary for ensuring that community-driven and community-based sport programs are relevant to Aboriginal youth.

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Introduction

There is a growing body of research that highlights the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits of sport participation for Aboriginal¹ youth (e.g., Findlay & Kohen, 2007; Hanna, 2009). Within the extensive sport literature, there are relatively few studies that have focused specifically on the benefits of sport participation for Aboriginal youth. However, consistent with the positive benefits that are typically associated with mainstream sport programs (Coalter, 2010), researchers have suggested that sport has 'healing potential' and can serve as a 'powerful medicine' that can contribute to the various dimensions of wholistic health for Aboriginal youth (Hanna, 2009; Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013).

Aboriginal youth have also described how sport can have wholistic and positive benefits, including an increase in self-confidence and improved physical fitness (McHugh, Coppola, & Sinclair, 2013). Despite the many potential benefits of sport participation, the various constraints that limit participation for urban Aboriginal youth (e.g., cultural, institutional) have also been documented (e.g., Mason & Koehli, 2012). Financial barriers and time constraints limit sport opportunities for many Aboriginal youth (Forsyth & Heine, 2008), and Aboriginal youth have described how they are “treated a little bit different” when participating in sports in urban centers (McHugh, Kingsley, & Coppola, 2013, p. 299). Schinke et al. (2010) also documented the racism and discrimination that some Aboriginal youth experience when participating in mainstream sport contexts.

To address the various challenges that limit sport participation for Aboriginal peoples, Giles (2007) argued that sport programming should be “driven by locally defined needs and practices” (p. 4). The success and sustainability of sport programs can be enhanced when they originate, and are guided, by community needs and wants (Giles & Lynch, 2012). The need for community-driven or

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¹ Aboriginal peoples is an encompassing term that includes those individuals who identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2006).

community-based sport programs is well established (Blodgett et al., 2008; Giles & Lynch, 2012; McHugh, 2011), but it is challenging for sport programs to be derived from community when there is little published or documented knowledge regarding what actually constitutes 'community' for Aboriginal peoples. Therefore, in this study we focused on better understanding urban Aboriginal peoples' meanings of community, in an effort to provide a starting point for those seeking to develop locally or community defined sport programs.

Urban Aboriginal youth have voiced the need for Aboriginal community support, specifically the support of Aboriginal peoples and organizations, to enhance their sport participation (McHugh, 2011, p. 18). Athletes in Blodgett et al.'s (2008) research also argued that sport programming should be refined at the community level. Although community level programming and community support may be essential to enhancing sport participation, there seems to be little understanding of what community actually means to Aboriginal youth. Research with Aboriginal peoples in Australia described how the complex meanings that Aboriginal peoples tie to their community should be taken into account if sport programs are to be effective (Thompson, Gifford, & Thorpe, 2000). Community has been identified as a key component to successful sport programs for Aboriginal youth, yet sport research is missing a complex understanding of what community actually means for urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Evans et al. (2012) provided a detailed critique of the way in which community is typically defined within Aboriginal policy contexts in Canada. They explained how community is usually defined as specific "reserve bands" or "First Nations communities", which subsequently conflate community with place and "does little justice to the complexity" of community for Aboriginal peoples (Evans et al., 2012, p. 58). Given how many Aboriginal peoples move back and forth between urban and reserve settings, conflating reserve with community becomes particularly fraught (Evans et al., 2012). The challenge of trying to define community has been noted in previous research with urban Aboriginal youth (i.e., McHugh & Kowalski, 2009). Many of the participants identified with their home communities or First Nations communities, but they also identified with various urban communities, including their school (McHugh & Kowalski, 2009). The identification of multiple, intersecting community contexts highlights the challenge that is faced by those who seek to develop community-defined and community-driven sport opportunities with urban Aboriginal youth. Likewise, defining the meanings – and boundaries – of community through the voices of those who live in them can potentially produce more democratic and thus more useful policy. Community-based participatory research (CBPR), which centralizes the voices and knowledge of research participants, can support Aboriginal peoples in sharing and producing meanings of community.

Described as a philosophy and method, CBPR is an approach to research that engages people and communities in all research phases, from the conceptualization and development of research questions to the sharing of research findings (Fletcher, 2003). Although such research is scarce when situated within the extensive sport research literature, sport researchers who have worked with Aboriginal peoples and communities have documented the numerous advantages of this collaborative approach to research. For instance, in our ongoing program of sport research with Aboriginal youth (e.g., McHugh, Coppola, et al., 2013; McHugh, Kingsley et al., 2013) we have argued that CBPR approaches that include participants as equal research partners is necessary for this emerging field of research. We suggest that by involving Aboriginal peoples throughout the various phases of research, it may be possible to avoid contributing to Eurocentric discourses that have tended to dominate sport literature. Blodgett et al. (2008, 2010) and

Schinke et al. (2010) have also documented their ongoing programs of collaborative research with the Wikwemikong First Nation. They have argued that collective efforts between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream researchers to develop relationships and built trust, is essential for moving forward with sport-focused projects in Aboriginal communities. As well, findings documented in Blodgett et al.'s (2008) collaborative research suggest that it is necessary to include other important community members (e.g., parents, extended family, coaches) when engaging in sport research with Aboriginal youth. They explained how parents and extended family, for example, play critical roles in the activity of youth (e.g., providing transportation and financial aid, guiding youth into programming). The collectivist nature of Aboriginal cultures, which has been described in sport research with Aboriginal youth (e.g., Blodgett et al., 2008; McHugh, Coppola, et al., 2013) highlight the importance of engaging Aboriginal community members in sport research focused on Aboriginal youth.

In addition to the emergence of CBPR as a necessary approach to sport research, social ecological models are also more commonly being used to frame and interpret findings that have explored the sport (Findlay & Kohen, 2007) and physical activity (e.g., DyckFehderau, Holt, Ball, Alexander First Nation Community, & Willows, 2013; Kirby, Levesque, & Wabano, 2007) participation of Aboriginal youth in Canada. Social ecological models, many of which have been adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1977), are typically used to study the influence of environments on sport and physical activity participation (e.g., Carroll-Scott et al., 2013; Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011). Results from such studies generally show that an individual's sport and physical activity participation is influenced by various 'social ecological' contexts, ranging from the more proximal (e.g., interpersonal) to the more distal (e.g., community) contexts. For instance, proximal factors that facilitate physical activity participation include the presence of supportive family members, whereas more distal factors include living in safe neighborhoods (Holt et al., 2009). Social ecological models support researchers in moving beyond the focus on the individual, to a more inclusive focus on the numerous social ecological contexts (e.g., community) that influence a participant's sport participation.

Although social ecological models provide useful insights into the various contexts that influence sport participation, such models were not created specifically for research with Aboriginal youth and therefore may not be encompassing of Aboriginal cultural perspectives. The integrated indigenous-ecological model, as described by Lavallée and Lévesque (2013), is a contextually and culturally relevant model that provides an encompassing foundation for this study focused on community. This model that was adapted from a 2006 paper presented by Lavallée (as cited in Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013), reflects the strengths of Indigenous and Western conceptualizations of health and related human behaviors by demonstrating how each ecological leverage point (i.e., intra-personal, interpersonal, organizational, community, policy, mother earth, and all of creation) serves to strengthen each of the four realms that make up the whole person (i.e., emotional, spiritual, mental, physical). The integrated indigenous-ecological model is unique in comparison to other social ecological models in that it has been described specifically for sport, recreation, and physical activity promotion in Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, it adds to social ecological models by incorporating teachings of the medicine wheel, such as the acknowledgment of additional ecological leverage points (i.e., mother earth, all of creation) and the four realms of the whole person (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013). By bringing together Indigenous and Western perspectives, the integrated indigenous-ecological model acknowledges the notion of relatedness, importance of environments, as well as the reciprocal influence of people and settings. We are unaware of any

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