



## Navigating the insider-outsider hyphen: A qualitative exploration of the acculturation challenges of Aboriginal athletes pursuing sport in Euro-Canadian contexts



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this project was to explore the acculturation challenges of Aboriginal athletes (14–26 years) from Canada as they moved off reserves to pursue sport within non-Aboriginal (Euro-Canadian) communities. The project was also aimed at contributing to the acculturation literature in sport psychology through an Indigenous decolonizing methodology.

**Design:** University academics partnered with Aboriginal community researchers from one reserve to facilitate an Indigenous decolonizing methodology rooted in practices from the local culture. The project was articulated as a form of cultural sport psychology.

**Methods:** Mandala drawings were used to facilitate conversational interviews with 21 Aboriginal athletes about their experiences relocating off reserves and the acculturation challenges they faced as they attempted to pursue sport within Euro-Canadian contexts. A local Indigenous version of an inductive thematic analysis was then conducted.

**Results:** The acculturation challenges of Aboriginal athletes coalesced into two major themes: (a) culture shock (which occurred in relation to the host culture), and (b) becoming disconnected from home (which occurred in relation to the home culture). These themes illustrated how the athletes' sense of identity and place were challenged and changed, as they (re)negotiated meaningful positions for themselves in and between two cultural realities.

**Conclusion:** This project centralized a culturally resonant mode of knowledge production embracing local Aboriginal ways of knowing. This approach facilitated deeper insights into athletes' acculturation challenges, which contextualized the complexity and fluidity of the acculturation process.

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### Introduction

Given the increasing globalization and mobility of society, it is not surprising that there is a growing trend of athletes migrating across and within national borders in pursuit of increased sport opportunities (Schinke & McGannon, 2014). As a result of these

movements, many athletes are encountering and negotiating cultural contexts that are unfamiliar from the ones they have been socialized within, thus initiating a process of acculturation or second-culture learning (Rudmin, 2009). How acculturation is experienced by athletes who relocate into new contexts where their identities are outside of the “dominant” culture is a pertinent and under-explored question, through which sport psychology researchers can glean deeper understandings of a diverse range of participants. As indicated by a small body of scholars who have considered the acculturation of immigrant and migratory athletes (e.g., Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Kontos & Arguello, 2005; Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti, & Benstead, 2012; Schinke et al., 2006; Schinke &

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McGannon, 2014; Schinke, McGannon, Battochio, & Wells, 2013; Stambulova, 2013), such research has the potential to facilitate more inclusive sport contexts that embrace (rather than marginalize) the cultural identities of diverse participants. However, Schinke and McGannon (2014) noted that much of the writing relating to this topic has been limited by an overly simplified and reductionist view of acculturation as a linear process of culture change, wherein individuals are assumed to statically adopt the practices of the culture around them and move away from their home culture. This conception has not fully captured the complexity and dynamicity of acculturation as it is experienced (Schinke et al., 2013). Underscoring the foregoing point, scholars outside of sport psychology have advocated for more inductive research that generates deep descriptions of individuals' acculturation experiences and explores the dynamics of negotiating multiple cultural realities (e.g., Chirkov, 2009; Cresswell, 2009).

The purpose of the current project was to address the need for acculturation scholarship that aligns more closely with lived experiences, via an exploration of the challenges encountered by Aboriginal athletes from [region of Canada] as they relocated away from their reserves to pursue sport within Euro-Canadian<sup>1</sup> communities. There is a notable lack of sport psychology research that inquires from a critical lens about the experiences of Indigenous athletes and explicitly considers the ways in which their cultural identities and sport participation are shaped/misshaped by the Euro-Canadian culture (Forsyth & Giles, 2013). The current project was thus developed around the following research question: What acculturation challenges do Aboriginal athletes face as they relocate into Euro-Canadian cultural contexts, and how are these challenges experienced by the athletes?<sup>2</sup> An understanding of acculturation that would account for the psychological and sociocultural complexity and dynamicity of its processes was necessitated by this question, in order to meaningfully embrace the lived experiences of the Aboriginal athletes. Herein, drawing on the critical acculturation writing of Chirkov (2009) and furthering the work of Schinke et al., (2013) in sport psychology, we advance the conception that acculturation is not a process that simply or universally *happens* to individuals, but rather, is *executed* by individuals upon entering a cultural community that is different from the one they were socialized within. Acculturation involves a deliberate, reflective, and comparative cognitive activity of understanding the norms, rules, and worldviews which exist in one's home cultural community and which one discovers in a new (host) cultural community (Chirkov). In short, acculturation is an active and ongoing process of second-culture learning (Rudmin, 2009).

The above definition supports the supposition that acculturation is a fluid rather than a linear movement towards fixed outcomes (Bhatia, 2002; Chirkov, 2009; Rudmin, 2009). Accordingly, athletes who relocate outside of their home cultures to pursue sport may vacillate in and between two cultural worldviews (home and host) in their daily living, rather than move towards a complete

adoption or rejection of the host culture's practices (Schinke et al., 2013; Stambulova, 2013). It is also recognized that acculturation is (re)negotiated in everyday interactional settings. Rather than being explicitly driven by the thoughts and actions of the individual, acculturation is denoted as a shared process that is influenced by the people in the host culture (Bowskill, Lyons, & Coyle, 2007; Rudmin, 2009; Schinke et al., 2013) as well as the social structure and cultural norms of the host context (Bowskill et al., 2007).

#### *Acculturation and Aboriginal athletes*

It is well documented that Aboriginal peoples frequently experience racism, discrimination, and alienation when they move outside of their home cultural communities and attempt to enter "mainstream" contexts, challenging their sense of identity (Berry, 1999; Goodwill & McCormick, 2012). As a participant in Berry's (1999) research explained: "When you live off the Reserve, you know what it is to be an Indian. That's when I really had an identity crisis. On the Reserve I was protected. Once I left, it was a slap in the face" (p. 18). Aboriginal athletes who relocate away from their reserves to pursue sport opportunities are at risk of experiencing similar forms of marginalization and challenges to their identity, which will affect the way they engage in (or disengage from) their new sport contexts. In research examining the adaptation strategies of elite Aboriginal athletes, Schinke et al. (2006) illustrated this very point when numerous athletes explained why they returned to their reserves following a period of sport relocation in order to be closer to family and community support. These athletes' identities, culture, and sense of belonging were challenged in the "mainstream" sport contexts, and consequently, they returned to their home contexts in order to re-gain substantiation and cultural connectedness. Similarly, Campbell and Sonn (2009) identified challenges of culture shock and racism being experienced by Aborigine footballers relocated away from their cultural communities in Australia, emphasizing the need for cultural social support to buffer against adverse experiences. Both projects provided initial insights into the acculturation experiences of Aboriginal athletes, demonstrating how these individuals are challenged by a lack of social and cultural resources and also a lack of structural support within host sport contexts. Beyond these initial insights, however, there remains a dearth of knowledge about the acculturation changes and challenges that are encountered by relocated Aboriginal athletes. In particular, no scholarship has explicitly addressed the dynamic nature of the acculturation process as outlined earlier, exploring how Aboriginal athletes move fluidly in and between their dual cultural realities and continually re-construct their identities rather than opting linearly towards one culture and away from the other.

The limited scholarship on Aboriginal athletes' acculturation experiences is symptomatic of a more general lack of sport psychology research that explores the ways in which the identities of cultural minority or marginalized athletes intersect with, and are shaped by, their sport contexts. While the lack of inclusion of culture and/or cultural identities in sport psychology has been challenged for many years (e.g., Butryn, 2002; Duda & Allison, 1990; Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003; Ram, Starek, & Johnson, 2004) cultural diversity has long been marginalized within sport psychology, subverted under "mainstream" (white, Euro-American, heterosexual, male) norms and traditions. More recently, cultural work within sport psychology has continued to grow under the collective genre of *cultural sport psychology* (CSP). Extending previous calls for cultural work within the discipline, scholars who position their work within the CSP genre explicitly challenge the dominant cultural norms of the domain with the goal of facilitating more culturally inclusive research (see Ryba, Schinke, & Tennenbaum,

<sup>1</sup> Euro-Canadian refers to the dominant national culture of white Canadians who are of European ancestry. The culture of Aboriginal peoples is also considered a Canadian culture, though a markedly different one, which has historically been marginalized and denigrated through the colonizing efforts of Euro-Canadians. Thus, when Aboriginal people relocate off reserves in Canada, they are moving outside of the Aboriginal Canadian culture and into Euro-Canadian contexts, where the Aboriginal element is largely absent or subverted.

<sup>2</sup> We focused on the athletes' sociocultural location between two different contexts distinguished by race and ethnicity (i.e., the Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian contexts). We did not flesh out other aspects of the athletes' sociocultural locations (such as their location within an elite sport context, a socioeconomic status, an educational context, a sexual orientation, etc.), though we recognize that these, too, are intersected in the athletes' identities and acculturation experiences (McGannon, Schinke, & Busanich, 2014).

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