



Indigenous Framework

1

Running Head: ASSESSING SPORT WITH INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORK

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Assessing the Impact of Sport Using an Indigenous Research Framework

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Abstract

The importance of sport and recreation is recognized worldwide reflected in policy, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). Largely due to competition for limited resources, subsidized sports programs in lower income communities have to demonstrate evidence of their success. This has led to increased research exploring the impacts of sport, particularly related to social and personal development. The outcomes of success have focused on improving problematic behaviours such as criminal activity or the development of strengths within ‘at-risk’ communities (Coakley, 2002). With both approaches there still remains a lack of understanding of what is it about sport that impacts social and personal development (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 1994; Coakley, 2002; Halas, 2001; Hartmann, 2003). Researchers suggest that a new approach is needed. Responding to the need for a new approach, this research conceptualized the topic through an indigenous research framework and employed two indigenous methods, sharing circles and piloting of a new technique, Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection (ASBR). The impact of a martial art program for participants at an urban Aboriginal cultural centre were explored using these two methods. Some of the salient themes that emerged are discussed in this paper. The Canadian sport system will benefit from this research with increase in knowledge regarding the personal and social impacts of sport while providing a different lens and methods from which to explore this topic.



Introduction

The importance and benefits of sport, recreation and play, particularly in lower income or marginalized communities has long been recognized in a variety of disciplines. From 1860 – 1920 child’s play organizations and recreation clubs increased in London, England followed by a proliferation of recreation clubs in North America (Cranwell, 2001). It was believed that having recreation for children away from the schools could ‘ameliorate some of the effects of poverty, extend the influence of education in the community and provide respite to the family’ (pg. 39). In North America, Indigenous people also saw the benefit of sport. The following quote demonstrates how sport through games was a tradition that carried personal and social values.

‘Thousands of years before European contact, Aboriginal¹ people held games throughout the continent of North America. Historical records dictate that many modern team sports were derived from traditional Indigenous games. What is not well known is that these games taught personal and social values, which were a curriculum for their way of life. These practices taught each generation values and personal qualities that are reflective throughout Indigenous lifestyles and cultures to the present day. Qualities such as honesty, courage, respect, personal excellence, and gratitude for the guidance of parents, elders, and communities, prepared children and youth for the responsibility of adulthood’ (North American Indigenous Games, 2002).

Today, the importance of sport and recreation programs is recognized worldwide. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to engage in play and recreation activities (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). As well, the Canadian Sport Policy emphasizes the importance of sport for ‘marginalized and under-represented groups and individuals’, stating that sport develops self-esteem and helps one overcome personal and social challenges (Sport Canada, 2002). The

¹ The use of the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used when describing the indigenous people of Canada. In Canada, this term includes three distinct groups, the “Métis, Inuit and First Nations, regardless of where they live in Canada and regardless of whether they are ‘registered’ under the Indian Act of Canada” (Archibald, 2006).



Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples' also identifies the importance of sport and recreation, particularly for Canadian urban Aboriginal youth (Chalifoux & Johnson, Oct. 2003).

Although there is historical recognition of the value of sport and world wide policies related to the importance of sport and play, funding for programs particularly in lower income communities is limited. Largely due to competition for limited resources, sports programs have had to demonstrate evidence of their worth. This has lead to research exploring the impacts of sport, particularly focused upon social and personal development.

Research that has explored the impact of sport in marginalized communities has tended to focus on improving problematic behaviour. Coakley (2002) terms this negative approach as a 'social control' or a 'deficit-reduction model'. For instance, Maloney and Stattin (2000) discussed sport programs as preventing antisocial behaviour and/or antisocial personality disorder. Other research has explored the impact of sport on truancy, teen pregnancy, substance use, and criminal activity (Mahoney, Stattin, & Magnusson, 2001). However, some researchers have taken a strengths based approach focusing on developing life skills through sport (Danish & Nellen, 1997; Delgado, 1999). Coakley (2002) identified this strength-based approach as focusing more on 'social opportunity and privilege promotion.'

Research that has explored the impact of sport has focused on a multitude of factors. Even with the multitude of factors that have been explored, there remains a lack of understanding of what is it about sport that impacts social and personal development (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 1994; Coakley, 2002; Halas, 2001; Hartmann, 2003). Researchers suggest that a new approach is needed while others recognize the need for a different methodological approach (Coakley, 2005). Ellis, Braff and Hutchinson (2001) recognized the



need for qualitative research that focuses on the meaning participants attach to programs and observable changes in participants over the course of a program.

Indigenous Research Framework

Responding to this need for a new approach, this research conceptualizes the topic through an indigenous research framework while implementing indigenous methods. An indigenous research framework positions the rationale for the research within indigenous knowledge (Lavallee, 2007). For instance, rather than starting with a deficits approach or focusing on skill development, this research began with a holistic understanding of health, specifically the indigenous teaching of the medicine wheel. While past research has used a different ‘measuring stick’ to explore the impacts of sport, recreation and/or physical activity in marginalized communities, specifically a deficits or strengths approach, this approach does not start with an assumption that the outcomes related to sport would be different between higher or lower income people and marginalized or privileged people. This approach starts with a holistic understanding of health.

The medicine wheel² teaching of health is based on the interconnection and balance of these dimensions of well-being; physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Attempting to achieve a balance between physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of self is important to the overall health of an individual (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005). This indigenous research framework begins with an epistemological approach that acknowledges the interrelationship of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

² Through my indigenous teachings, I understand the Medicine Wheel as a symbol used in many indigenous communities that has vast meaning well beyond the scope of this paper. For the Ojibwe, it is visually depicted as a circle with four quadrants – white, red, black and yellow. The four quadrants can represent a number of things in life, like the four seasons, the four races, and in this example, the balance between the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical aspects of oneself. For further information about the medicine wheel and other teachings please see www.fourdirections.com and other readings in this bibliography.



Guided by this fundamental principle of health, the research question began with the physical dimension, exploring the impact of physical activity on mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. Specifically, the experiences of seventeen adult participants (10 males and 7 females) of an Aboriginal martial arts program at an Aboriginal cultural centre in a major Canadian city were captured. Many of the participants of the research had competed provincial at the Ontario Sport Circle Games and internationally at the North American Indigenous Games and in South Korea at the World Martial Arts festival where they demonstrated Oki Chi Taw, an Indigenous martial art system.

Indigenous Research Methods

The participants' experiences with the martial arts program were captured through the use of sharing circles and a method that used sacred symbols to describe the meaning of the physical activity. This method, named by the participants of this study, was called Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection.

As a research method, sharing circles are similar to focus groups used in qualitative research where researchers gather information on a particular topic through group discussion. The use of sharing circles in indigenous research has been described as circle methodology, a method that can be familiar and comforting for indigenous research participants because the circle has a long tradition in some indigenous cultures (Restoule, 2006). Healing, learning or sharing circles are used in some indigenous cultures as part of ceremony and as a way of healing (Stevenson, 1999) and in these contemporary times are increasingly being used by indigenous researchers (Baskin, 2006; Restoule, 2006). In a research setting, while both the focus group and sharing circle are concerned with gaining knowledge through discussion, the principles behind a sharing circle are quite different. Focus groups extract data while circles are acts of sharing with



permission given to the facilitator to report on the discussions in the sharing circle (Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, & MacKay, 1999). In addition, a sharing circle for research will follow appropriate cultural protocols of that particular group. For instance, in this research the participants were predominantly from the Ojibwe and Cree Nations so the custom of smudging and presenting of a tobacco bundle were incorporated into the circle³.

Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection is a novel participatory action method piloted in this research. Symbols, the making of symbols, and art that displays symbols have significant cultural and spiritual meaning among many Aboriginal people. When an Aboriginal artist makes something, such as a painting, jewellery, a medicine wheel or dream catcher, their energy is said to be placed into that object and each piece will have a different energy. Also, the making of symbols and art is often very spiritual and unique for each person (Wheatley, 2004). Symbols are often considered sacred because of this spiritual significance. For these reasons, symbol-based reflection as a method for this research is an ideal approach that truly reflects an indigenous method for these participants. The term, Anishnaabe is a term used primarily by Aboriginal people who identify as Ojibwe, Algonquin, Oji-Cree and Odawa (Eigenbrod, Kakegamic, & Fiddler, 2003). Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection is so named because of the participants of this research. The sharing circle and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection are further described in Lavallee (2007).

There were five sharing circles held to accommodate the participants' schedules. Each circle had 2-4 participants. The sharing circles focused on finding out participants' stories regarding their decision to participate in the program and what impact, if any, the program had

³ I have been taught by my Elders and traditional people that smudging is a purification custom that involves the burning of sage or other medicines. The smoke is swept over a room or person. In research, tobacco bundles are given as gifts to show respect for the knowledge that someone will be providing you and so things will be done in a good way. When someone accepts the bundle they are accepting the responsibility to help you with what you are asking. If the receiver feels he/she cannot help he/she do not accept the bundle.



on their lives. The questions asked included probes on how the program impacted their lives, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. However, these probes were not always needed, particularly with respect to emotional and spiritual well-being.

At the end of each sharing circle participants were asked if they wanted to participate in the second aspect of the project. Eleven of the seventeen elected to participate in the Anishnaabe Symbol Based Reflection. These 11 participants were asked to think about a symbol that captured the meaning of the martial arts program in their lives. Participants were given approximately 6 weeks to develop their symbols.

Participants' Stories and Symbols

The stories and symbols shared by the participants clearly demonstrates that they felt physical activity is linked to their emotional, spiritual, mental and physical well-being. There was an abundance of information which far exceeds what can be shared in this paper. Therefore, only a selected number of themes that emerged from the stories and two symbols that best depict these themes will be shared. The remaining themes and symbols are described in Lavallee (2007). Rather than try to select quotes from all the participants, I have elected to take lengthy quotes from some of the participants so their stories would remain more intact. The themes that will be discussed are 'addressing the past', healing in the present, challenges with Aboriginal identity, and physical activity linked to spiritual growth.

Addressing the past.

When participants were asked what led them to their involvement in the martial arts program, the stories of their past emerged. Common stories relating to where people have come from described experiences such as child, family, and relationship abuse, family dysfunction, foster care, violence, alcoholism, substance abuse, suicide attempts, isolation, low self-esteem



and feeling undeserving, internal negative stereotypes of self and other Aboriginal people, single parenthood, sub-poverty, unstable living conditions, gang and criminal activity.

Bruce, a 25 year old Ojibwe male detailed some of these circumstances through his story.

“We lived in sub-poverty, like, conditions ranging from houses with no walls inside, to, like, little shacks and trailers that she (Bruce’s mother) was able to provide for us. She ended up with a lot of frustration that ended up in child abuse - even outrageous at times... Most of my friends were victims of child abuse as well. They were slapped and beaten by their parents, so we ended up forming a little group of gangs that did drugs and alcohol for stress release.”

Several participants identified the reason for their current distress was a result of intergenerational grief and/or historic trauma. Historic trauma of indigenous people refers to the trauma that exists in people today as a result of colonization. With respect to the Americas, it includes early arrival of Europeans, the intentional spreading of diseases such as small pox, the many ‘Indian’ wars that literally wiped out entire indigenous communities, the loss of culture and spirituality through imposed Christianity, banning of traditional ceremonies, and the residential school legacy (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Today, the trauma continues where, in Canada we see an increased rate of children being removed from their homes by Children’s Aid Societies, primarily due to neglect which is a direct result of poverty (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004) and the land claim issues throughout North America (most recently the Caledonia Reclamation in Ontario, Canada). This historic trauma is passed on through generations so the term intergenerational trauma has also been used. Phillips (1999) describes this generational effect:

“If we do not deal with our trauma, we inadvertently hand it down to the next generation. We often take out our pain and hurt on those we love the most – which is ourselves, and those closest to us – our family and friends. So, intergenerational trauma is trauma that is passed down behaviourally to the next generation: if we’re angry and act angry all the time to others, our kids will think that is normal and do the same. If we ignore each other and deprive each other of



love and affection in our relationships, our kids see and feel that deprivation of love and might think it's normal" (Cited in Menzies, 2006, p. 82).

Eagle, a 43 year old Cree male spoke about how this trauma plays out:

"I have a very good understanding of multigenerational grief and trauma, not only through my life but through my work and being involved in the community for so long... We have been effected by... the whole residential school legacy, colonization, the reservation systems, the separation of culture and of ceremony..."

Healing in the present.

Connected to their stories of trauma were those of healing, because many of the participants saw the martial arts program and their involvement at the cultural centre as a way of healing. This healing encompassed predominantly the emotional and spiritual dimensions, but also impacted them physically and mentally. Their stories and symbols articulated the interconnection of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Four of the eleven people who participated in the Anishnaabe Symbol Based Reflection made medicine wheels to visually articulate the connection of the martial arts program to their healing journey. Turtle, a 42 year old Ojibwe female made an elaborate symbol which she called, 'Threads of Connection' to describe the elaborate connection of her life to the martial arts program.

<insert picture 1 about here>

Turtle wrote three pages to describe the symbols of a medicine shield, dream catcher and medicine wheel. The following is an excerpt of her story.

"This (program) has been an ongoing journey of self discovery that touches on so many areas of my life. It has been my personal experience that the process of allowing martial arts into my life has provided a doorway of opportunity to many other areas of my being, fulfilling many dreams and aspirations. I titled my project 'threads of connection' because it seems the most appropriate way to express my experience here and the importance of the program to me. The format was completely natural to me because it is a direct expression of my identity and the interconnectedness of tae kwon do itself in my life.



The three rings represent the mind, body and spirit principles of martial arts. Each ring is wrapped in black to signify the concept of the great unknown that we all hear (our instructor) refer to. It is also currently where I stand as a black belt in the program. Circles have no beginning and no end and that's how I have come to view my experience here. It has no real beginning and no end. I will always be a part of this program in some way.

The 1st ring - This is a medicine shield and I chose this to represent me... The background represents the place of new beginnings or birth. It is the place I started the program at, as a white belt. The silver centre is a representation of the energy that we are all born with. It denotes a vibrational energy that emits quickness and eagerness. I remember how I felt when I first began tae kwon do. I wanted everything in a hurry. Quick, Quick, Quick! I was eager for knowledge and skill. As I have matured in the program I have mellowed into a golden energy that has the vibrational energy of refinement and patience...

The 2nd Ring - This is a dream catcher and I chose this to represent the teachings we receive to let the bad experiences go and hang onto all the good ones. Inside the dream catcher I have placed the various belt colours on various levels from black outside to white and yellow in the middle. I did it this way deliberately to demonstrate the levels of learning and how it expands as you progress and develop. In the beginning my knowledge was limited but as I grew through each belt level my knowledge grew as well. The interconnectedness of knowledge and experience is perfectly demonstrated through the webbing of the dream catcher. As a beginning student in this program I could not have grown without the help of everyone in the program itself to some degree. Each person contributed to my personal growth in a very profound and interconnected manner.

The 3rd Ring - This is a medicine wheel which is a profound teaching tool in aboriginal culture. It takes a lifetime of learning to scratch the surface of knowledge and teachings encoded in this traditional learning tool. I see my involvement with tae kwon do in the same manner. It will take a lifetime of learning to just scratch the surface of knowledge encoded in martial arts as a whole. I chose to make this ring the smallest ring to represent the idea that big things come in small packages. Getting involved in the program initially seemed like a small thing to do but in retrospect it was a huge step that has resulted in never ending gifts of knowledge, healing, self preservation, respect, commitment and opportunity that I have never experienced in any other activity I have tried.

Challenges with Aboriginal identity.

Several participants shared stories related to their identities as an Aboriginal person and the challenges they face, particularly in an urban environment. Their participation in the martial arts program allowed them to learn more about their identities because the program included



indigenous teachings and was housed in an Aboriginal cultural centre. The stories about identity focused on emotional and spiritual development and well-being.

Hawk, a 39 year old Métis (Cree and French) woman detailed here story about her identity.

“Once I walked through the door I saw people who looked like me. It’s one place I come and I fit in. I didn’t know that would happen when I came here. I looked in people’s eyes and my identity became a lot more clear as a result of me participating in the martial arts program, and different cultural programs as a result of being involved in martial arts. I started going to ceremony, full moon ceremony and sweats and got to know our Elders. I just started to meet people - and even met family members -people who I know I’m related to down the road, down the line. It’s really impacting to see other women who have gone through the same things as me. We are kind of in the same state right now. I’ve never met people like that before. I’ve never told my story because sometimes it’s too shocking for people, but here, I can talk about anything and not feel uncomfortable, not feel threatened in any way. So I think it’s definitely linked to the identity, the sense of belonging that I have, the sense of community, the sense of family that has given me strength in other areas of my life.”

Many of the participants who were parents had children who were also taking part in the martial arts program. Bimadiziwin, a 33 year old Ojibwe female, described why she felt it was important for her son to be involved.

“I was just thinking about the positive male role model and I needed that too, for my son, a positive male role model. I’m a single mother too, and I wanted him to see positive First Nations men. My family members that are positive men, they don’t live here in the city, so he doesn’t get to see them too often. That was big. That was one of the reasons I wanted him to come here. He always gets the female part of it from me, but when he comes here he also sees positive First Nations men and he doesn’t get that at home.”

Physical activity linked to spiritual growth.

Several participants spoke about the spiritual growth they attained through their involvement in the martial arts program. Nimky Nene, a 26 year old Ojibwe male, created a beautiful soap stone carving to demonstrate the connection of physical activity to spiritual growth. Nimky Nene spoke of how he felt his spirit was dying and not



“shining as bright” because of his moving to the city. He participated in spiritual ceremonies but he felt he needed something more. It took time but he thought about what was missing from his life. He thought about the medicine wheel and the fact that he was no longer as physical as he used to be. He stated:

“As a younger man, as a kid, I was always active and I was doing stuff physically, riding a bike, hockey, baseball and so on. Once high school was done and I started college and moved to the city all those things stopped. A series of events happened and my spirit - the light, wasn't shining as bright. I felt I was getting sicker and sicker the longer I stayed here, but I had responsibilities and I needed to stay here so I looked at my past and tried to figure out how I could bring back my spirit. I went to circles and ceremonies and talked to people and tried different things but I didn't try physical exercise.”

Nimky Nene's symbol visually depicts his spirit with the soap stone carving of an Aboriginal man with one long braid wearing a martial arts uniform. The spiritual energy he felt he received from being physical active in martial arts is represented as a ball held between his hands.

<insert picture 2 about here>

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research provides the field of sport development with a unique conceptual framework - an indigenous research framework - to explore the social and personal impact of sport. This research begins with an indigenous understanding of health and well-being and includes appropriate indigenous methods, sharing circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection.

This paper highlights a small fraction of the rich stories about how physical activity impacted the participants emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Each individual, coming with their unique histories, seemed to work through different 'voids' and different healing processes. Therefore, because of these individual differences, it is recommended that future research



determine the success of a program with outcomes that are of importance to the individual.

Rather than selecting a common variable, such as self-esteem, some type of assessment that leaves room for the individual to define what is important to them should be utilized.

The stories demonstrate the interconnection of physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being. In research, we tend to compartmentalize things in an attempt to make sense and bring order to our thoughts. However, in doing so, achieving a holistic understanding is challenged. This research took a holistic approach and obtained stories from participants that articulated how physical activity was linked to other aspects of their lives. Using the medicine wheel and its principle of interconnection between the four dimensions sets the stage for a discussion about how the physical impacts emotional, spiritual and mental well-being.



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Indigenous Framework

17

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Medicine shield, dream catcher and medicine wheel

Figure 2. Soap stone carving reflecting spiritual growth



Indigenous Framework 18





Indigenous Framework 19

