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The Relocation Experiences of Aboriginal Athletes Pursuing Sport in Euro-Canadian Contexts (2015)

Project Summary

Researchers have documented the importance of sport in the lives of Aboriginal people, emphasizing how it can improve health and wellness. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the cultural issues that affect Aboriginal peoples' sport participation. This project explored the relocation experiences of Aboriginal athletes who had moved off reserves in northeastern Ontario to pursue sport opportunities within "mainstream" (Euro-Canadian) communities. The project was developed with Aboriginal community members from a local reserve. Qualitative data was collected from 21 Aboriginal athletes about: (1) the benefits of relocation, (2) the challenges of relocation, and (3) strategies for facilitating relocation. The results provide novel insights into how the sport experiences of relocated Aboriginal athletes are shaped by the dynamics of acculturation (i.e., second-culture learning).

Research methods

Utilizing a participatory action research (PAR) approach, three Aboriginal community members were engaged as co-researchers who guided the project forward in culturally meaningful ways.

Participants

Participants consisted of 21 Aboriginal athletes who had relocated off reserves in northeastern Ontario to pursue sport opportunities in Euro-Canadian contexts. Ten participants were male and 11 were female. They ranged in age from 14 to 26 years (mean age = 19.3 years) and came from seven different reserve communities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants created mandala drawings that reflected their experiences relocating for sport. Each drawing was then used to facilitate a conversational interview, aimed at eliciting richer narrative descriptions of their experiences. An Indigenous version of an inductive thematic analysis was performed on each participant's interview transcript to identify common patterns of meaning.

Research results

The Challenges of Relocation

The participants identified relocation challenges pertaining to experiencing culture shock, and becoming disconnected from home. In terms of culture shock, the participants described a sense of anxiety or discomfort resulting from being immersed in an unfamiliar cultural context with different rules and systems of meaning. The participants were jarred by the vast changes that the Euro-Canadian culture imposed upon

them, as well as their newfound status as cultural “outsiders” as they attempted to integrate with non-Aboriginal people. In addition, the participants were distressed by a growing sense of disconnection between themselves and their home cultural communities during their relocation. The physical distance separating the participants from their community and family networks triggered feelings of isolation. Their relocation outside of the Aboriginal community also stirred up negative reactions from their on-reserve peers, who saw the athletes as abandoning their home communities.

The Benefits of Relocation

First, the participants explained that by entering the Euro-Canadian context, they were opening themselves up to many new prospects and opportunities which they likely wouldn't have had on-reserve. They expressed much excitement related to this new beginning in the Euro-Canadian context, as they experienced what was “out there” beyond the reserve and also gained a pertinent sense of belonging in their new community. Second, the participants revealed how their relocation helped them to develop more meaningful visions for themselves as Aboriginal community members. As they worked through many of the acculturation challenges in the Euro-Canadian context they developed as people (more than just athletes) and gained a better understanding of who they are and what they are capable of achieving. In particular, they emphasized how they could contribute positively to their Aboriginal community through sharing their stories and successes as local role models.

Strategies for Facilitating Relocation & Acculturation

The participants emphasized the importance of nurturing their Aboriginal identity as a source of strength and substantiation during the relocation process. Their identities as Aboriginal community members helped them to connect their personal struggles and experiences to a more collective cultural story of survival and success, and enabled them to persist more meaningfully and resiliently as relocated athletes. The athletes also indicated that they frequently had to deal with feelings of insecurity, isolation, and marginalization within the Euro-Canadian context. As such, it was imperative that they had a network of social support around them, in both cultural contexts, that they could lean on during their relocation. The participants also identified the need to foster a strong and positive mindset, wherein they remained confident in their ability to achieve success in the “mainstream” community, despite being challenged by racist attitudes and stereotypes.

Policy implications

In keeping with the objectives of Sport Canada's Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport, this research provides implications for better supporting Aboriginal athletes in the Canadian sport system during their relocation and acculturation.

First, the Aboriginal participants indicated how their adjustment as relocated athletes could either be greatly hindered or facilitated by the people around them in the host culture, such as teammates, coaches, and billets. When these host members exhibited racism or were unwilling to make an effort to engage with the participants, the Aboriginal athletes experienced isolation and marginalization, and found it difficult to acculturate within the Euro-Canadian context. Alternatively, when host community members made an effort to get to know the athletes and showed them support, the Aboriginal athletes were able to acculturate more meaningfully with a sense of belonging and connectedness within the Euro-Canadian context. Sport

practitioners and service providers need to be more aware of this social dynamic when working with Aboriginal athletes who have relocated off reserves. These athletes need to be given meaningful opportunities to share aspects of their Aboriginal culture and identity within their sport environments and teams, and feel they are supported in being their true selves. If such opportunities are not provided, sport contexts are apt to be marginalizing for these athletes.

Second, there is a critical need for Aboriginal athletes to maintain their connectedness to the Aboriginal community and culture while immersing in the Euro-Canadian context. In particular, efforts should be made to provide opportunities for off-reserve athletes to participate in Aboriginal sport contexts, such as local pow-wow events or Aboriginal tournaments. These culturally resonant sport spaces and experiences can help to substantiate relocated athletes on a cultural level that enables them to persist in Euro-Canadian contexts with a strengthened sense of identity.

Another opportunity for facilitating Aboriginal athletes' relocation is by sharing educational and inspirational stories of Aboriginal people who are pursuing their sport goals and achieving success outside their reserves. These stories would help to foster a mindset for success for aspiring Aboriginal athletes who are fighting against negative stereotypes that suggest that Aboriginal people can't "make it" off-reserve. As an example, the participants' mandala drawings from the current project were printed on a community blanket and presented as a visual storytelling display at the local reserve's Youth Center. The athletes' drawings reflect a collective cultural narrative about young Aboriginal people who are pursuing their dreams and trying to make something of themselves. The drawings are thus being used by sport and recreation staff to educate youth about what it is like to relocate off-reserve, and inspire them to pursue their own dreams. As another possibility, local Elders or Aboriginal role models could be brought in to sports programs to share cultural teachings and personal insights for fostering resilience.

Next steps

The participant group in this project consisted of Aboriginal athletes from one region of Ontario who had maintained some degree of connectedness to their home communities during their relocation. There are athletes who have moved away from their home reserves without maintaining strong connections to those communities, or who come from different regions across Canada, whose voices are not accounted for in this research. Future researchers could focus on bringing these unheard voices forward, enabling more nuanced understandings to be generated around Aboriginal peoples' sport experiences.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Sport Canada
- National/provincial-territorial sport agencies
- Coaching Association of Canada
- Sport and Recreation Centers on reserves
- All people and organizations working with Aboriginal athletes who have moved off reserves