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The (Re)Making of the Hobbema Community Cadet Corps Program

Project Summary

In 2005, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) helped launch a unique afterschool program among the four Cree Nations of Maskwacis (formerly Hobbema), Alberta. The program, known as the Hobbema Community Cadet Corps Program (HCCCP), was widely celebrated among politicians, segments of the community, and especially in the mainstream media as an effective tool for ‘gang prevention’; however, a closer look also revealed a more complex set of negotiations occurring at the local level. This multiyear, ethnographic case study drew from a series of open-ended interviews with Maskwacis parents, youths, sports administrators, band councillors, and other agents in the community to critically examine the stories behind the making of the HCCCP. The study’s key objectives were twofold - to interrogate:

- The dominant (media-endorsed) stories surrounding Maskwacis, its youths, and the HCCCP.
- The range of experiences that accompanied the community’s *(re)making* of the HCCCP.

Guided by Pierre Bourdieu’s relational sociology, the study argued that, beyond a mere gang intervention program, the HCCCP also provided Maskwacis residents and other stakeholders with an important site, and discourse, through which to conceive, negotiate, and, at times, contest a variety of internally diverse and complicated agendas related to community, Cree identity, and the role(s) of sport in the *making* thereof.

Consequently, my conclusions suggest that researchers, sport programmers, funding agencies, and other stakeholder groups, would be well advised to engage this complexity in the earliest stages of their programming so as to minimize potential conflict as the program evolves. In addition, the study also found that the failure of funding agencies (government or other) to accommodate Maskwacis’s complexity by providing a more robust, flexible, and long-term funding model proved detrimental to the HCCCP’s development. Future models would, thus, benefit from adopting a more community-specific approach to sport financing. Paramount is that such an approach remains flexible, longer termed, and require far less paperwork so as to maximize the amount of time frontline workers (e.g., coaches) are able to spend with youths. This, in turn, will help sport to emulate the cohesive properties of Aboriginal culture that are so central to the functioning of our communities.

Research Methods

In total, the study combined six years of ethnographic fieldwork with 30 open-ended, semi-structured interviews with Maskwacis residents and other community stakeholders, including: youths, parents, the RCMP, community workers, teachers, and band councillors. This study was also framed in collaboration with the Samson Cree Nation’s band council and residents among the four Cree Nation of Maskwacis, Alberta.

Cultural theory informed my interpretations of interview and other empirical data. Specifically, Pierre Bourdieu’s main theoretical concepts - habitus, field, and capital – were used to interpret the broad, and more localized, sets of experiences that constituted the HCCCP as a genre of Maskwacis’s physical culture. The

research also attempted to harmonize aspects of Bourdieu's framework with emergent trends in Indigenous Methodologies literature.

Research Results

The study discovered that, since its inception, the HCCCP has borne the freight of an assortment of different, sometimes competing, meanings and social agendas. Many residents, for example, criticized the mainstream media's stake in the HCCCP and accused Edmonton-based journalists of foregrounding Maskwacis deviance at the expense of alternative social programming in the community. Other residents viewed the HCCCP as a re-inscription of colonial power, and alleged that the RCMP were taking advantage of their traditional 'warrior ethic' in order to promote a culturally foreign and statist agenda. Conversely, however, there were several parents that actively embraced the HCCCP as a celebration of Maskwacis's warrior spirit and as an extension of the community's proud military history. Beyond strategies for social change, therefore, or mere countermeasures to youth gang violence, the study found that the HCCCP also provided local residents, including youths, with a powerful vehicle through which to conceive, negotiate, and, at times, contest their ideas about what it means (and doesn't mean) to be Maskwacis in the new millennium. Consequently, my conclusions suggest that researchers, sport programmers, funding agencies, and other stakeholder groups, would be well advised to engage this complexity in the earliest stages of their programming so as to minimize potential conflict as the program evolves. The study further suggests that modest, long-term funding (as opposed to a major injection of limited-term financial support) would better support local stakeholders in this task, and also send a powerful message to the community's youths that their investment in sports and recreation is a worthwhile endeavour that won't be hamstrung by a lack of finances or fluctuating personnel.

The main limitations to this study included: race, class, gender, and cultural biases. The strategies that were employed to help mitigate these biases included my sustained investment in the community, my regular participation in Cree ceremonies, sports programs, and other social gatherings, and the partial grounding of this research within Indigenous Methodologies literature; however, such limitations inevitably remained within the study's framework.

Policy Implications

The study has several policy implications that are relevant to enhancing sport participation in Canada: First, and most obviously, non-Aboriginal sport practitioners must directly engage the complex colonial histories in which we interact. This entails both: 1) learning the history upon which our privilege is based, and 2) actively engaging and listening to community members discuss how our identities refract within specific local contexts.

Second, policy makers should be cautious about how sports are publicly portrayed in (or about) Aboriginal communities. For example, representing sport as 'gang intervention' risks perpetuating stereotypes that indirectly hinder the development of alternative social programs in the community (e.g., only programs that embrace the stereotype of Aboriginal gang violence receive funding) and also undermines the range of alternative meanings and agendas ensconced upon that sport or physical activity.

Finally, the study found that one-size fits all funding models are potentially detrimental to the development of sport within marginalized communities. More specifically, my research has demonstrated the significance of building *sustainable* social relations within our (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) communities. Indeed, if

we begin with the assumption that *all* youths desire a measure of stability (especially those grappling with a complex colonial legacy in which family units, cultural traditions, and social cohesion were assaulted by government-led policy), we see how current (e.g., short term) funding models that are subject to the whims of policy makers and an increasingly-volatile Canadian economy disables peoples' ability to grow and sustain productive human relations. For example, frontline workers (e.g., coaches, administrators, parent volunteers) spend much of their time seeking out new pockets of funding and cycling through positions with only limited financial support. This effectively perpetuates the cycles of exploitation to which Aboriginal peoples have been disproportionately exposed over time and, thus, nourishes a sense of apathy and frustration among youths. Future models would benefit from adopting a more community-specific approach to sport financing. Paramount is that such an approach remains flexible, long-termed, and require far less paperwork so as to maximize the amount of time frontline workers are able to spend with youths.

Next Steps

My future plans for this research involve transforming its contents into an academic book.

My fieldwork encountered several small adjustments that could be made to current funding models that would help sport (and crime prevention) agencies to better support local programming. These adjustments will be identified and more fully unpacked in future analyses involving First Nations communities and other populations in Alberta.

My other future research plans involve seeking out projects and opportunities that help to enrich relations between the academy, other institutions (e.g., sport and recreation), and places/populations disproportionately strained by various socio-historic and economic-political processes.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

- 1) Government and other agencies; e.g., Sport Canada, the National Crime Prevention Center, KidSport.
- 2) Coaches and community support workers.
- 3) Sport studies researchers.
- 4) The RCMP.

These groups would benefit from the stories that are described and unpacked in this research, especially the study's emphasis upon devoting long-term and sustainable funding and human capital to support local programs. Moreover, one of the study's most unique contributions is its offering of a reflexive analytic account of the embodied qualitative research process as mediated through a specific First Nations context. Using Bourdieu's 'reflexive' sociological tools, the researcher (a non-Aboriginal man) examined the multiple biases (e.g., personal, academic, and intellectual) that have informed this study's conduct. The strategies that were employed to help mitigate these biases were also discussed, which included the researcher's sustained investment in the community, regular attendance and participation at Cree ceremonies and other less formal social gatherings, and the partial grounding of this research within Indigenous Methodologies literature. Other researchers and sport practitioners would benefit from further engaging in such practices, and from continually reflecting upon the unique biases, limitations, and privileges that shape our research, sports programs, and community relationships.