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Corporatizing Sport for Aboriginal Girls: Connecting Corporate Social Responsibility, the 'Girl Effect' and Aboriginal-focused Sport, Gender and Development Programs

Project Summary

This study explored how urban Aboriginal young women understand and experience their participation in a sport for development (SFD) program administered by the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Society Centre (VAFCS); and investigated how corporate funding and involvement in the VAFCS SFD program impacted targeted beneficiaries.

The three specific objectives of the research were:

1. To determine the factors that enable and inhibit urban Aboriginal girls' participation in SFD programs in Canada.
2. To incorporate Aboriginal girls' perspectives on corporate involvement in funding, developing and implementing urban Aboriginal SFD programming.
3. To establish what a decolonized SFD program for urban Aboriginal girls might look like.

To pursue these objectives, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with employees from corporate sponsors (n=1), the young Aboriginal women participating in VAFCS's programs (n=11), and the relevant VAFCS staff members (n=5). Photovoice activities were also carried out with seven of the eleven young women interviewed. Interviews, sharing circles and photovoice activities revealed the benefits and challenges of SFD programming.

Taken together, the main factors that facilitated the participation of Aboriginal young women included: accessing activities that enhanced confidence, leadership opportunities and community support; locating basic needs through the program; finding employment (training) opportunities and increasing engagement with female Aboriginal (sport) role models. The factors inhibiting Aboriginal girls' participation in SFD programs at VAFCS related to intersecting gender inequalities, (neo)colonialism, and poverty.

Research methods

Research Process: Interviews, Photovoice and Sharing Circles

Initially, the suitability of the proposed research questions and approaches were discussed with, and altered by, an advisory council comprised of VAFCS representatives (described in further detail below). Following ethical approval from the University of Ottawa and VAFCS, research agreements were then developed and signed by the relevant parties and the research process commenced, with fieldwork occurring in Vancouver in July and October 2012.

Throughout this research, the researcher attempted to adhere to the principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) to the best of her abilities (see Schnarch, 2004). For example, following ethical approval from the University of Ottawa, an advisory council was formed with community members that were

identified by VAFCS. This advisory council was crucial for periodically reviewing research processes (e.g., identifying appropriate cultural protocols for engaging with urban Indigenous young people).² However, due to time and financial constraints, it was challenging to adhere to OCAP on many levels and due to a variety of circumstances – a crucial issue that the researcher hopes to investigate further in collaboration with VAFCS.

Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employees from a corporate sponsor of the VAFCS program, the relevant NGO staff members, and with young women were conducted. Following the transcription of interviews, participants were emailed a copy of their interview for verification and feedback.

Photovoice Activities

Photovoice activities were carried out with the Aboriginal young women participants following their interviews to obtain their perspectives. Young women were asked to photograph objects that helped them convey what it is that they enjoyed/disliked/wanted to change about the SFD program at VAFCS. The sole stipulation set out by the researcher was that they could not photograph anything that would enable them, or others, to be identified. In keeping with the decolonizing and participatory nature of this study, this method was selected based on discussions with the Executive Director of VAFCS and the young women at VAFCS to gauge their interest.

Photovoice is recognized as a participatory action research method where people identify, represent, and augment their community through photography (Wang, Burris & Xiang, 1996). At the same time, it is also important to be reflexive when using this method by acknowledging the colonial tendencies of photography and its role in the colonial process as a tool for representing the ‘Other’ back to the colonizers (Gallagher & Kim, 2008). Photovoice involves providing each participant with a camera and taking photos. The goal is that the cameras will function as “recorders and potential catalysts for social action and change in their communities” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 30).

Sharing Circles

The young women who participated in interviews had the option of sharing their photos and drawings with other SFD program participants through a “sharing circle” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 27). Sharing circles are similar to focus groups, but are used for sharing all aspects of the individual, heart, mind, body, and spirit (Lavallée, 2009). Specifically, sharing circles are traditionally used as a “healing method” through which all participants and facilitators are viewed as equals and “information, spirituality, and emotionality are shared” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 29). The facilitator is given permission to report on the discussion, and the circle is supposed to be caring, respectful and compassionate.

In partnership with VAFCS recreation staff, sharing circles were conducted in November 2012, after interviews were completed with the young women. As a key enabler of the Because We’re Girls group, the (former) VAFCS recreation supervisor disseminated information about the photo exchange and sharing circle discussion through the group’s Facebook page, invited young women to participate, and scheduled the circle at a convenient time for the participants (see also Hayhurst, Giles & Radforth, under review). A total of seven young women participated in the sharing circle. To promote the exchange of ideas and foster a collaborative environment, it was agreed that the circle would not be digitally recorded and transcribed, nor would any formal notes taken. However, following the circle, it was decided that the best way to capture the exchange would be for the young women to create a group PowerPoint presentation that summarized the key issues discussed during the sharing circle.

In short, the young women decided to use the format of the PowerPoint. After much discussion, they decided to share their collaborative PowerPoint with each other, the staff at the VAFCS, and on the Facebook page, which was a closed group for the girls in the program only.

Research results³

The findings of this study demonstrated that, from the perspectives of VAFCS staff members, the benefits of sport for development (SFD) programs targeting Aboriginal young women included: increased sense of community support and development (through their involvement in sport); development of confidence, respect and leadership skills; a boost in physical fitness levels; access to basic needs through program (food and water), exposure to employment (training) opportunities and increased engagement with female Aboriginal role models. At the same time, staff noted that the challenges of these programs related to intersecting gender inequalities, (neo)colonialism, and poverty.

From the standpoint of the young Aboriginal women, the program benefits were similar to those outlined above (by staff members). Specifically, challenges for these young women related to stereotyping, encountering racism and gender inequalities in day-to-day life (e.g., finding childcare) – and (at times) in the program – creating arduous circumstances for their involvement. The young women discussed how they found it difficult to purchase healthy food and found there was little time or opportunities to incorporate their culture and traditions (for example, smudging) into ‘contemporary’ recreational activities (e.g., basketball and soccer). Despite these obstacles, the young women used the recreation program as an opportunity to resist and confront perceptions about their bodies, sporting abilities, lifestyles and Aboriginal stereotypes.

In terms of the second objective, the majority of the young women interviewed (7 out of 11) were unaware of corporate involvement/funding of SFD programs, but felt that (for the most part) corporate interest would bring much-needed attention to the resources needed for recreation and sport opportunities for the VAFCS community. Those who were aware of corporate involvement (i.e., through, for example, grant provisions, sponsorship or donations-in-kind) felt that the private sector’s creation of Aboriginal-focused sport apparel (e.g., Nike N7 products tailored to Aboriginal groups) were, at times, (mis)appropriating Aboriginal symbols such as the medicine wheel (that were placed on Aboriginal-focused apparel such as running shoes). Though VAFCS staff were grateful for the resources provided through the private sector, they were wary of the politics involved in applying for funding, the strict monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place, the challenges invoked through the application process (although these challenges were not necessarily particular to private sector grant applications, but also government-funded applications), and the struggles involved in locating sustainable funding opportunities.

Results of the third objective – ways to create a decolonized SFD program for urban Aboriginal young women are discussed further below in the section on ‘policy implications.’

Policy implications

Based on our findings, it is suggested that SFD initiatives that target urban Aboriginal young women in Canada need to better connect to local and global activist agendas to address the broader structural issues that continue to result in Aboriginal girls and young women being deemed as ‘in need’ of recreation and sport-focused (social) development initiatives in the first place. In other words, we suggest that an Aboriginal-led, activist approach to SFD programs and policy development for young women in Aboriginal communities that,

for example, focuses on building confidence and leadership skills that are consistent with Aboriginal approaches to leadership and that emphasize uniting young Aboriginal women in fighting the colonial and capitalistic forces that have resulted in their marginalization may result in vast changes in the SFD landscape.

This relates to the third objective of this research, and the implications for policy: what would a decolonized approach to SFD programming for Aboriginal young women might look like in practice? Relatedly, if transnational corporations are indeed the “new colonial forces,” what are the implications of, for example, the increasing private sector involvement of TNCs in funding, developing and executing SFD programs for Indigenous peoples in Canada (and abroad)? How does their involvement impact the possibilities for decolonizing SFD programs?

While many TNCs, and corporatized non-governmental organizations such as Right To Play, purport to work in “partnerships” with Indigenous peoples when it comes to SFD programs, it is often difficult to get beyond the mere rhetoric of partnerships and to address power imbalances between donors and recipients (Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2010). As such, and in order to respond to the barriers that continue to hamper SFD efforts with Indigenous communities, it is important to ensure that SFD programs and policies are connected to local and global Indigenous-led (activist) movements that are grounded by self-determination, and that hold the potential to facilitate structural change (Hayhurst, Giles & Radforth, under review). Indeed, struggles for self-determination in response to the materialism of neoliberal power is a form of decolonizing SFD (see Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). That is, decolonizing involves resistance to the ways in which neo-liberal mechanisms embedded in development ‘(re)colonize’ marginalized groups via market forces and social hierarchies [(Wainwright, 2008) as cited in Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011]. At the same time, facilitating and sustaining this resistance is easier said than done, and we must be careful to ground these analyses in particular movements and struggles in specific locales, such as urban metropolises where many Aboriginal youth in Canada now reside.

Next steps

The findings of this study lend credence to the significance of Aboriginal young women’s perspectives as active agents in SFD programs. The experiences of these young women, and those of VAFCS staff members, as they negotiate the structural constraints (e.g., poverty) and neocolonial relations in and through the SFD program explored here are important to consider for future programming, policy and practice. In broad terms, identifying, and further studying, concerns pertaining to gender inequalities, racism, and stereotyping experienced both in and outside of girl-focused Aboriginal SFD initiatives would also be a useful departure point for future research.

The bullet point list outlined below features key ideas discerned by Aboriginal young women and VAFCS to improve programs as discussed during interviews. These assertions were made in response to the question: if you could improve anything about the VAFCS program, what would you do?

- Increase support & teamwork (more time with other Aboriginal girls)
- Better childcare options (subsidized/free)
- More consistent/regular recreation programming for Aboriginal young women
- More family sport programs offered
- Increased structure
- More girl-only focused programs
- Focus on programs for specific age groups

- Provide clean water supply (not out of bathroom sink) and healthy snacks during sporting activities
- More organized outdoor activities

Alongside these substantive suggestions outlined above, more research is needed to better understand the policy implications of corporate-funded SFD programs that target Aboriginal young women in Canada, and the neoliberal, capitalistic tendencies of the funding structures that impact these same initiatives. Since Aboriginal communities and SFD programs such as the initiative for Aboriginal young women run by VAFCS often lack the resources required to provide sport, recreation (and SFD) opportunities, it seems they are left with few choices but to take offerings from the private sector, or to ‘stretch’ the funding they have from government or other sources (see Hayhurst & Giles, 2013). It may also be beneficial to examine how government-funding (or lack thereof) impacts the ways these interventions are taken up by staff and participants. However, the challenge (and irony) is that the neoliberal conditions that are necessary for the withdrawal of the welfare state, and that enable corporations to invest in SFD programs for Indigenous peoples, are the very conditions that (often) result in the difficulty that Aboriginal peoples would very likely experience in building their own programs (cf., Hayhurst, Giles & Wright, under review).

Thus, future research should examine the mechanisms through which Aboriginal people might be able to ensure they have the opportunity, and the right, to exercise self-governance when it comes to the “new” SFD programming model, where private sector involvement seems almost inevitable. It is also important to consider that, in some cases, private sector involvement may actually increase self-determination – that is, if Aboriginal groups have full ownership and control over resources use to support these programs. Specific questions to be tackled by future research may include:

1. Has the provision of funding by private sector to SFD programs with Aboriginal and marginalized communities in Canada influenced these communities’ ability to address and negotiate issues concerning self-determination and sovereignty? How might Aboriginal young women be better positioned to negotiate and contribute to, self-determination and sovereignty through SFD?
2. Has the provision of SFD through partnerships with private sector resulted in the retreat of state-funded programs that would otherwise be used to meet the goals set out by SFD initiatives (e.g., promoting gender equality, staying in school, pre-employment training, and youth leadership initiatives)?

Notes

1. Parts of this report draw on the following two manuscripts that are under review (as of October 1, 2014):
 - Hayhurst, L.M.C., Giles, A.R., & Radforth, W. (Under review). “I want to come here to prove them wrong”: Sport, Gender and Development programs for urban Indigenous young women. *Sport in Society*.
 - Hayhurst, L.M.C., Giles, A.R. & Wright, J. (Under review). The benefits and challenges of girlfocused Indigenous Sport for Development and Peace programs in Australia and Canada. In L.M.C. Hayhurst, T. Kay & M. Chawansky (Eds.), *Beyond Sport for Development and Peace: Transnational perspectives on theory, policy and practice*. London: Routledge.
2. Despite best efforts, it was often difficult to arrange for in-person meetings with all council members, therefore most communication was conducted over email.
3. If more space were permitted, this section would focus on the stories and perspectives of the VAFCS staff and young women interviewed; however, the format of this knowledge translation report does

not correspond to an Indigenous-focused, community-based resource that may be useful for sharing and disseminating knowledge gleaned from this research. Thus, and in line with these limitations, the voices and quotes from those interviewed in this study are not the focus of this section.