

BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH; IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH, POLICY, AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates barriers to physical activity, sport, and exercise for Aboriginal youth in the province of Alberta. Focusing on the experiences of Aboriginal youth, this analysis considers the common structural, institutional, intrapersonal, and cultural constraints that many participants encountered. In response to a significant body of literature suggesting that Aboriginal peoples suffer with obesity and obesity related disease at higher rates than non-Aboriginal populations in Canada, researchers have invested more time in examining how changes in exercise and lifestyle are part of these higher levels of disease. Despite this line of inquiry, studies that comprehensively assess the complex factors that impact participation in physical activity for Aboriginal peoples are very limited. This article is concerned with how various barriers influence levels of physical activity as part of the broader context of health in Aboriginal communities. This study emphasizes Aboriginal perspectives by drawing primarily on semistructured interviews with participants. We assert that any measures directed at improving policy related to the physical activity experiences of Aboriginal youth must consider the multiple socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues that affect their lives.

Key Words: Aboriginal peoples, physical activity, health, barriers.

This article examines some of the barriers that Aboriginal youth face in participating in physical activity in both urban and reservation settings in the province of Alberta.¹ A plethora of research indicates that the lack of physical activity for youth populations is a major contributor to childhood obesity and obesity related diseases in Canada (DeGonzague et al., 1999; Findlay and Kohen, 2007; Haman et al., 2010). Aboriginal youth suffer much higher rates of obesity and related diseases than the general Canadian youth population (Gittelsohn et al., 1995; Hanley et al., 2000; Katzmarzyk, 2008; Young, 2000; Kriska et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2010). While a large body of literature identifies Aboriginal youth as a vulnerable population and considers low levels of physical activity a significant factor (Tjepkema, 2001; Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2003; Katzmarzyk, 2008; Young and Katzmarzyk, 2007; Harris and Zinman, 2002; Robidoux et al., 2009), less research analyzes the specific inhibitors that Aboriginal youth encounter. Even though some research identifies barriers to physical activity for Aboriginal youth, few studies actually specify how these constraints either limit or enable activity through understanding individual experiences (Forsyth and Heine, 2008). More studies that directly consult Aboriginal youth are needed to understand these challenges from their perspectives in a Canadian context.

1. Currently in Canada, "Aboriginal" has been established as one of the most useful terms for referring collectively to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. For this reason, throughout this paper we have chosen the term "Aboriginal" when describing Canadian contexts. That being said, it is critical, whenever possible, to invoke an Aboriginal nation's own self-appellation. Attention to such terminological specificity prevents a homogenization of distinct Aboriginal cultures and recognizes the heterogeneity and diversity of Aboriginal languages and cultural groups (Mason, 2009).

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This paper relies on semistructured interviews with Aboriginal youth as a source of primary information. By focusing on the individual experiences of the interviewees, we investigate the factors that affect participation in physical activity. We contend that personal interviews are a critical method to evaluate the diverse exercise and physical activity experiences of Aboriginal youth. Personal interviews, in comparison to the more common approaches of questionnaires and focus groups, offer unique opportunities for researchers to interact with Aboriginal youth and better understand their physical activity experiences.

In this paper, the following key questions are addressed: What are the main factors that limit or enable participation in physical activity for Aboriginal youth; how did their experiences of physical activity differ from reservations to urban environments; and, how did participants manage the challenges they encountered in pursuing an active lifestyle? While our findings do reflect the diversity of physical activity experiences among Aboriginal youth, they also indicate that many of them face very similar institutional, structural, intrapersonal, and cultural barriers to participation. We argue that any successful measures, or public policies, to improve the physical activity experiences of Aboriginal youth must account for the multiple socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors that shape their lives.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

In this paper, we have chosen an inclusive definition of physical activity, incorporating a broad spectrum of practices, including various exercise, leisure, and sporting practices. This perspective partly stems from the participants' understandings of physical activity. Throughout the interviews, we encouraged participants to discuss the physical practices that mattered most to them and they responded with multiple and diverse interpretations of what constituted activity. As a consequence, physical practices from competitive individual and team sport to unstructured and informal activities are all part of this analysis. That being said, most participants referred more often to structured and semistructured sport and exercise.

Despite this broad understanding of physical activity, where possible, we are specific about the physical practices referred to by participants in samples of their individual texts.

In addition to defining key terminology, it is important to discuss the methodological basis of this study. This project was envisioned while both researchers were involved as volunteers with community-based organizations for Aboriginal youth in Alberta between 2007–2009. Based partly on our involvement with programs that were designed to encourage Aboriginal youth to be physically active, we became interested in the factors that affect levels of participation in physical activity and their individual experiences. Sitting in on focus groups to assess Aboriginal youth activity levels, convinced us that personal interviews could be a much more productive way to understand the unique and sometimes difficult experiences around physical activity. While focus groups can be an effective method for some research designs, it is our opinion that interviews offer a much more comfortable environment for youth to share their experiences around this topic. Not only do interviews allow for more detailed discussions and exchanges with participants, they also ensure that interviewees can discuss more sensitive topics without being influenced or judged by their peers.

We were familiar with all the participants in the study through the programs for Aboriginal youth we volunteered with in Edmonton and Morley, Alberta. Participants were informally recruited from these programs to participate in the study. Although 16 individuals were invited to participate, we were able to organize interviews only with 10 individuals. The interviews occurred between April 2009 and May 2010. It proved to be a significant challenge to coordinate meetings with all participants because of the time commitment involved with in-depth interviews, the busy schedules of interviewees, and the travel itineraries of some participants as well as the researchers. It required an eleven-month period for all interviews to be completed. Although the majority of interviews took place in Edmonton, interviews were also conducted in Banff and Morley, Alberta. The interviews varied in duration from twelve minutes to almost three hours. All interviews were tape

recorded and transcribed verbatim. The age of interviewees ranged from 16–28 although most participants were under the age of 25. Despite the different ages of participants, they were all asked to reflect on their youth experiences of physical activity.² The gender distribution was equal (5 women and 5 men). All individuals self-identified as Aboriginal, First Nations, Native, or their respective self-appellations (Cree, Dene, and Métis). We purposely selected this group based on their age and their interest in discussing their youth experiences of physical activity in Edmonton and throughout the province.³ Although the interviewees grew up in various places, they all spent a significant portion of their youth in Edmonton. Two participants also lived for a portion of their youth in two other Canadian provinces (British Columbia and Saskatchewan). Most of the interviewees had spent a period of their lives in rural areas (most often on reservations) and also in the urban environment of Edmonton. The participants were asked to describe both their level of activity as a youth and their current level of activity. All participants characterized themselves as either active or very active as a youth. There was more diversity among the participants when considering their current level of activity, ranging from very active in competitive athletics to relatively sedentary lifestyles that did not include any regular forms of physical activity. Whenever possible or relevant, we specify the context that participants refer to when drawing on certain texts from the transcripts. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and pseudonyms were allocated to each individual. We followed a semistructured interview approach (Sommer and

Quinlan, 2002) and each interview was conducted with the use of an interview guide to direct topics of discussion. Our position in the interviews was active (Patton, 2002) and we regularly deviated from the guide to engage with participants on certain topics of interest. Our discussions were centred on the following four subjects of inquiry: 1) forms of physical activity participated in; 2) positive and negative experiences associated with physical activity; 3) limiting and enabling factors affecting participation; 4) differences between rural and urban physical activity environments and related challenges. In the next section, we specifically examine, and categorize into several groups, the common constraints to participating in physical activity that were identified by the interviewees. We have tried to include larger portions of text directly from the interviews to reconstruct the dialogue and reflect the participants' perspectives as much as possible.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS: RESOURCES, ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION, AND EQUIPMENT

Previous research reveals that economic resources and related structural constraints are contributing factors in levels of participation in physical activity for youth populations in Canada. In particular, low socioeconomic status has been identified as a limitation (Frisby et al., 2010). These findings have also been extended to Aboriginal youth (Findlay and Kohen, 2007). Our interviews support this research. Throughout all of the interviews it was clear that structural constraints were paramount in their impact on participation in physical activity. For most of the interviewees, transportation was a significant barrier to being physically active. Access to transportation, or lack thereof, was repeatedly identified as a constraint. As Jenna states:

If you wanted to stay after school and play [sport] you would need a ride home ... which a lot of people didn't have because they lived so far from the school. So a lot of kids didn't get to play sports because of living so far away and they didn't have funds to pay for it as well. (Jenna, 2009)

2. Although various researchers debate the proper age category associated with the term "youth," (Wyn and White, 1997), for the purposes of this study, youth is considered between 8–18 years of age.

3. Recruitment was sought from two youth organizations in Alberta (Journeys Cultural Exchange Program, Edmonton; Stoney Park Aboriginal Cultural Society, Morley) Ethics approval was granted for this study in October 2008 by the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Ethics Committee at the University of Alberta. The application included both a participant information letter and an informed consent form. In addition to the review and signature of these forms, researchers emphasized orally before the interviews that participants were free at anytime to stop the audio recorders or refuse to answer questions. They were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at anytime after the interviews. Fortunately this never occurred with any of the participants. After the interviews were transcribed, interviewees were asked to review their transcription and provide feedback or indicate any information they wanted removed from the analysis. While most interviewees did not provide any feedback, two interviewees responded in detail.

Curtis also expressed a similar experience growing up in a rural area:

Transportation was the biggest thing, when I was trying to be on the running team and having practices in the nearest town, that was a major issue. (Curtis, 2009)

Mel adds to this discussion by indicating that transport was also an issue for her in the urban environment of Edmonton:

Yeah well transportation and having the funds always matters ... I mean you need bus fare to get around to the gyms ... but I didn't have a job or any income, so it was kind of hard to come up with bus fare. (Mel, 2009)

Not having access to resources is often compounded by other social barriers for youth that are associated with low socioeconomic status (Frisby et al., 2010). For example, Mitchell extends this conversation by making a clear link not only between access to transportation and economic resources, but he also indicates how these factors are related to social problems in Aboriginal families:

If you came from a poor family, they certainly couldn't afford to drive the kids back and forth from activities, but also it seemed like the low socioeconomic families were the ones who also suffered from other problems ... like alcoholism. (Mitchell, 2010)

In addition to transportation, access to sports equipment also inhibited participation in physical activity for several interviewees. As Mike suggests:

What made it difficult to participate or what held me back was probably not having the money to do activities ... like when I wanted to play hockey and I didn't have the money for skates ... yeah I never had the money for equipment. I guess poverty is a big thing ... I mean you also need food for energy to participate in activities ... and that was a problem for me. (Mike, 2009)

Mitchell directly connects access to equipment to economic resources:

... the socioeconomic conditions are a big component of physical activity and sport.... I came from a poor family and at times I was embarrassed about that because I couldn't afford equipment and other aspects of team sports. (Mitchell, 2010)

In another interview, Aaron also emphasized this point:

Well I was poor so I couldn't afford to be in sports and buy my own equipment. (Aaron, 2009)

While numerous participants commented on access to resources as a larger endemic challenge that implicates many Aboriginal families and communities, a few also directly linked this to policy. We found that several interviewees had nuanced understandings of how the failure of municipal, provincial, and federal governments to address inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians was connected to health and physical activity issues for Aboriginal peoples. The following quote from Catherine demonstrates a broader awareness of these inequities as well as some suggestions of how to improve access for youth:

... resources are a problem ... 'cause there are just the private gyms sometimes ...not everybody can afford a \$500 gym pass, so they [government] should target people with lower socioeconomic status. Not like the Tory government is going to do that anyway.... Yeah I'm learning about politics too! (Catherine, 2009)

Even though structural constraints were most often discussed by the interviewees, it was clear that from their perspective, other types of constraints were also relevant.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS: FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS

In addition to structural constraints, institutional barriers were consistently identified by participants. In reviewing the texts from the interviews, we noted that 8 of the 10 participants directly referred to institutional constraints. Issues with sport and activity facilities were most often discussed. The poor condition of facilities in both urban and rural areas were regularly recognized as barriers to participation in physical activity. In particular, Aaron viewed this as a major issue for Aboriginal youth:

Well in my area they [the facilities] were poorly taken care of so the ice at the hockey rink we used to skate on was all bumps and cracks, sometimes you would just be skating on it and you would trip

and fall ... playing basketball there were a bunch of broken beer bottles and all that stuff laying around ... you could pop your ball or cut your foot ... no one really wants to play on a poor looking basketball court where it's all glass and the cement is not even cement anymore. (Aaron, 2009)

He continued by suggesting that poor local facilities on Aboriginal reservations and in socio-economically depressed areas of urban centres not only discouraged active lifestyles for youth, but also facilitated involvement with other activities that may be unproductive or damaging for youth:

Where it's more run down and you have poor facilities ... if they had more money to improve the facilities ... so they [youth] can actually have some sort of access to recreation ... it would keep them off the streets and out of trouble. (Aaron, 2009)

Also in her interview, Miranda touches on this issue. Although more explicit, she makes a similar point:

If all the places where kids could be playing sport ... like parks and basketball courts ... are really run down and no one wants to go there and get activities started ... then the kids all end up just hanging out on the streets and then they become easy targets for being mixed up with gangs and getting into trouble with the police. (Miranda, 2010)

As well as facilities, participants also identified sport and physical activity programs as an issue for Aboriginal youth. Several interviewees stated that programs for Aboriginal youth were difficult to access, too restrictive and in some case severely underfunded. This is supported by research findings in the field (Findlay and Kohen, 2007).

Referring to some of the issues with activity programs for Aboriginal youth:

One thing is that there aren't enough programs for the kids to be active. From my experience this is the case on reserves and in the city [specifically referring to Edmonton] ... only some kids fit the programs ... you know like the ones that are run by the university ... and also the kids have trouble finding rides to them ... if they aren't easy to get to ... kids just won't be able to be involved ... even though many of them would love that kind of opportunity. (Miranda, 2010)

Another participant discussed the problems of access to age specific activity programs and considers the few alternatives that some Aboriginal youth have to spend their leisure time:

A lot of the programs they have now help kids but they didn't have them back then. Like outreach where they have recreation services for kids and they sometimes help with transportation. A lot of times it's for certain ages ... and then after that there's nothing ... there is also the problem with being too young for the programs ... as kids are getting into drugs these days at 11 or 12. There's outreach for activity, but who is going to take them there? Who is going to take them when their parents are drinking and doing drugs? Nobody is going to get them there ... that's something that could be changed like making arrangements to get them to and from ... if they don't have stuff to do, they hang out with older kids and that's how it starts. (Mel, 2009)

Similar to the case with facilities, programs were considered by the interviewees as significant issues contributing to institutional constraints that Aboriginal youth face in participating in physical activity. Interestingly, some interviewees also drew a correlation between institutional constraints and pressing social issues for Aboriginal youth. In their research with Aboriginal youth in inner city Winnipeg, Forsyth and Heine (2008) show that poor facilities and programs in the socioeconomically depressed neighbourhoods (where a high-percentage of Aboriginal people live), greatly affected activity levels of youth. They not only demonstrate that the facilities were neglected in these parts of the city, but also that these areas were sometimes unsafe for youth to frequent due to local gang activity. Their research in Manitoba supports our participants' assertions that poor facilities and activity programs on reservations and urban centres in Alberta, affect how youth spend their leisure time. Also our findings suggest that the barriers associated with active spaces, facilities, and programs for youth have direct and indirect social consequences for Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society in general.

INTRAPERSONAL CONSTRAINTS: LIFESTYLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The participants in the study all directly referred to various aspects of intrapersonal constraints that affected their capacity to engage in physical activity. Based on their comments, we discuss a few of the constraints that were commonly mentioned in the interviews. The issue of having what they considered a transient childhood was mentioned by half of the participants, and viewed as a factor that limited their ability to get involved in activities in the numerous communities they lived in throughout their youth. Mike refers to a transient lifestyle in explaining how constantly being in new places prevented him from accessing sport and physical activity programs:

Always being here and there you know? When I was younger we never stayed in one spot too long. We would always move to different sides of the city or somewhere different completely. (Mike, 2009)

Jenna also captures this sentiment in the following quote, linking it to substance abuse and related social problems that her family struggled with:

The fact that I moved a lot when I was a kid because of ... the whole family situation was definitely an issue. I went from school to school. I didn't participate in much and I missed a lot of activities because I was moving from town to town. There were alcoholics in my family ... there were a lot of foster homes and then I'd go back to my parents and we'd move again. (Jenna, 2009)

In addition to the alcohol and drug abuse of family members as a factor in constraining physical activity, a few participants also indicated that their own problems with substance became an issue. Sara alludes to this:

Well I missed a lot of school because of fighting or I just didn't feel like going. But also drugs and alcohol ... 'cause everyone just seemed to be getting drunk or high ... so I wasn't very active in those years [later teenager years]. (Sara, 2009)

Jenna makes a comparable point:

I didn't care about what my grades were in school. I dropped out of school which made me not do

any activity and then I started doing drugs and there was no activity after that. (Jenna, 2009)

In another interview during a similar discussion, Mel not only mentions substance abuse but also indicates how it can relate to other social contexts in the home. In particular she mentions that an excess of responsibility for youth can lead to further social and health problems.

Well I think with physical activity ... your home life has a big effect. If there are problems at home, then you cannot do anything else, as you need to take care of the problems first. When you have a lot of responsibility ... like taking care of younger ones and worrying about your parents always drinking ... the cycle ... that's why people don't get active because they have these other problems to deal with at home. I've been through that ... that's why a lot of them [youth] get into drugs because of the problems at home. (Mel, 2009)

As expected, intrapersonal constraints clearly influenced the levels of participation in physical activity for each of the interviewees. Although numerous other constraints could have been highlighted in this section we limited this discussion to the aspects that were most often brought up by the participants.

CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS: RACISM AND GENDER ROLES

As already indicated, there is a considerable amount of sociocultural research that assesses barriers to physical activity for marginalized populations in Canada (Vertinsky et al., 1996; Frisby and Millar, 2002). Although many of these studies allude to the possibility, or in some cases suggest, that racism and other cultural aspects affect levels of participation in physical activity and sport, few of these studies actually provide evidence of the forms of racism that exist or, perhaps more importantly, reveal the ways in which individuals are shaped by these experiences. When considering Aboriginal youth, the body of literature comprehensively examining types of cultural barriers is severely limited. Although various cultural barriers were identified by interviewees in our study, the focus was on how these cultural barriers facilitated forms of exclusion. The two

forms of exclusion that were most often discussed were based on limiting concepts of gender and race.

Four of the five women who were interviewed in our study faced forms of gender-based exclusion in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal physical activity environments. Specifically referring to the rural reservation where she grew up in northern Alberta, one participant discussed how the expectations of women in her community affected her activity experiences:

For me it was clear that sport was for boys and men once you reach a certain age ... women were encouraged to a point, but as a teenager I was excluded from opportunities to be active and play sport ... this was solely because I was a woman ... I mean I was more competitive than many of the guys but they didn't want me playing with them anymore ... and that was sort of supported by the rest of the community. (Miranda, 2010)

In another interview, Mel reiterates this point:

When I got older all of the sudden I wasn't allowed to play because I was a girl. (Mel, 2009)

Although Jenna experienced similar types of gender-based exclusion from physical activity on the reservation she lived on in northeast Alberta, she also makes a comparison to her experiences in urban Edmonton:

As a kid I could participate, but when I got older girls couldn't play ... in the city it is different, but on the reservation girls are not supported to do activity ... women are encouraged to make babies and stay home not to play sports. (Jenna, 2009)

Another participant also alludes to how levels of participation in physical activity and sport are connected to the social limitations that many women encounter.

Well sometimes it is a cycle ... many women my age have three kids already ... they have a husband and no education. The women would stay home and there's no independence. (Mel, 2009)

It was clear from the analysis of the female participants' experiences that several of the individuals had felt that they had been excluded from activity as they aged. This exclusion became more of an issue throughout their teenage years. It is also worth

stating that forms of gender-based exclusion were not limited to reservation settings, as participants recalled similar experiences in the urban centre of Edmonton. Studies suggest that young non-Aboriginal women also face forms of gender-based exclusion throughout Canadian society and that women from marginalized populations typically encounter additional cultural barriers compared to those from Euro-Canadian backgrounds (Vertinsky et al., 1996; Frisby, 2011). Although our findings indicate that young Aboriginal women confront similar types of gender-based exclusion as other women in Canada, as research on the topic effectively demonstrates (Paraschak, 2007; Giles, 2004, 2008), they also have unique cultural challenges when pursuing a physically active lifestyle.

A common theme discussed throughout most interviews was racism as a form of exclusion and a cultural barrier to participation in physical activity. Most interviewees at least alluded to racial discrimination as an issue that affected their sport, exercise, and activity experiences.⁴ These discussions took various forms in our interviews with participants. In all of the texts cited below, participants are referring to either their experiences in urban environments or in rural areas where Aboriginal peoples represented a minority population (not on reservations). In most cases racial discrimination related to physical activity was subtly referred to in the context of exclusion, as in the following text from an interview with Curtis:

Ninety-nine percent of the time I was the only minority ... I was the only person of colour ... it was all white. Things would come up that would make me uncomfortable ... it was a negative experience ... it is when people are learning about First Nations that it was the worst, I just kept experiencing the same thing over and over again. (Curtis, 2009)

Curtis also developed this point by sharing a personal experience of racism he encountered from teammates on his high school running team:

4. Eight out of the ten participants in some way referred to racial discrimination as a factor influencing their activity experiences. One participant clearly did not want to talk about this issue, so follow-up questions around this topic were not asked. As should be expected, for some participants racial discrimination was clearly a difficult topic of discussion.

I was on the cross-country team when I was in grade twelve. We were on our way to the provincials in a van. I was in the back and one person made a joke and I wasn't really paying attention, but the punch line was about an Indian and everyone laughed for a split second and then everyone just went really quiet. They realized I was there and I said: "What did you say?" ... that really pissed me off, but it wasn't enough to make me not be on the team. (Curtis, 2009)

While Curtis viewed this as only one of many negative experiences he had around racial discrimination that frustrated him, interestingly these overt expressions of racism did not diminish his resolve to engage in competitive sport and physical activity at his school. That being said, he admitted that without these types of discrimination, he would have more positive associations with that team specifically and with the sport of running in general.

Although some interviewees did not share personal examples of racial discrimination, they did talk about their perspectives of racial-based judgment, which shaped their activity experiences. Below Jenna discusses how she confronted the judgment and related ignorant stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples through physical activity and sport circles:

I wanted to play, I wanted to be able to relax ... but I couldn't because all I could think was are they going to judge me. They weren't Native so I was scared to get judged by them. I mean when you're Native everybody thinks that you're poor ... and they didn't want to hang out with me. (Jenna, 2009)

She continued to express how these types of racial discrimination and exclusion, experienced through forms of physical activity, had broader consequences that had significant impacts on her social life as a youth:

I didn't really have any friends ... there were no Natives there. So a lot of the time no one liked me because I was Native.... Yeah I wasn't too popular. (Jenna, 2009)

In contrast to the subtle references to the topic, some participants were more direct in their responses to inquiries about their experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and racism in physical activity and sport environments. When asked about

whether she had ever experienced forms of prejudice or racism in activity circles, Sara gave us a very honest reply:

Tons ... tons ... I'm Native and I partly grew up in a white neighbourhood. Of course I was fucking judged like that since the day we moved in. (Sara, 2009)

Sara clearly had strong and emotional responses to this topic and she expressed them openly to us. It was apparent that sport and activity environments were spaces of conflict for Sara and racism was a significant part of her activity as a youth. Sara indicated that these types of negative experiences are part of the reasons why she eventually removed herself from sport, exercise, and activity circles all together. In another interview, Tommy was very clear in drawing a connection between forms of racial discrimination and his sport and activity experiences. He references personal incidents in schools and neighbourhoods throughout Edmonton:

For me sport and racism go hand and hand. I don't know what it is about sport ... maybe just the competition and those attitudes ... but it can bring out the worst in some people. Whether it was from people I was playing against ...coaches and sometimes even my own teammates ... racism was always a part of it. Sometimes it was racial slurs and whatnot, but a lot of times it is just unsaid, but it's still there with the tension ... I couldn't escape it. I made a decision one day if I wanted to be involved ... I would just have to deal with it or move on and not play sport. (Tommy, 2010)

Although rarely dealt with explicitly by scholars, cultural barriers, such as limiting understandings of gender and race, were identified as significant constraints to participating in physical activity for Aboriginal youth. Demonstrating how the cultures of marginalized peoples are discriminated against can offer new insight into why cultural barriers should be a critical component of any analysis of constraints to participation in physical activity. Comprehensive research in this area can also provide some solutions to improving opportunities and access for particular groups. This study demonstrates why cultural barriers to activity require further examinations to better understand how they are

also interrelated with other economic, institutional, and interpersonal constraints to active lifestyles for Aboriginal youth and other marginalized groups.

CONCLUSION

Aboriginal peoples are currently managing a myriad of social and health issues throughout Canada, some of which are directly associated with physical activity. While it is critical to have an extensive knowledge base about how barriers to participation affect Aboriginal peoples, researchers must also consider the ways in which physical activity can be enabling for Aboriginal communities. Scholars in physical activity, leisure, and sport studies contend that in addition to health-related benefits, physical activity and sporting experiences can also facilitate spaces for Aboriginal peoples to exercise agency and challenge and produce cultural representations (Paraschak, 1997; Robidoux, 2006; Mason, 2008; 2012). Along with identifying the barriers that Aboriginal youth face trying to be physically active, more research on this topic could help Aboriginal Canadians across the country find significant ways to engage in physical activity and process the cultural and physical benefits involved with their own experiences of participation.

Drawing from interviews, as opposed to surveys and focus groups, this paper advocates a research approach that consults Aboriginal youth in a way that encourages them to share their perspectives on a variety of topics around their complex experiences of physical activity. More studies that directly consult Aboriginal youth are needed to understand these challenges from their perspectives, including research that centres on particular regions as well as broader Canadian contexts. Our findings reveal that many Aboriginal youth encounter similar structural, institutional, interpersonal, and cultural barriers to participating in physical activity. Despite these similarities, the experiences of each participant were unique and offered significant insight into the conditions that produced these experiences as well as how each participant managed these challenges in their individual lives.

Researchers have established that physical activity is a critical area of community development (Frisby and Millar, 2002). As a consequence, activ-

ity programming should be an imperative aspect of any community's development plan (Carter and Friesen, 2005). As shown in this study, the proper implementation of activity programming that specifically targets youth participation is perhaps even more important in Aboriginal communities and in urban areas that have a significant population of Aboriginal residents. Although facilities and access are major issues to consider when developing youth activity programs, another important aspect is creating programs that are culturally specific to Aboriginal youth. Establishing physical activity and sport programs that are based on, or at the very least informed by, Aboriginal cultural and physical practices is certainly a way forward (Lavallée, 2007, 2008). This may be one way of encouraging programs that interest and retain participation from Aboriginal youth. This point can also be extended beyond the municipal level of governance. Enough research exists to demonstrate that physical activity, sport, and exercise programs often fail to reach the most marginalized communities in Canadian society. As demonstrated in this paper, Aboriginal youth represent one component of the population that are being left behind. Provincial and federal policies must also address these current inequities by improving the quality of, and access to, facilities in addition to developing inclusive and culturally sensitive programs to increase Aboriginal youth participation in physical activity. Research that fosters better understandings of the potential barriers to pursuing physically active lifestyles for Aboriginal youth can certainly inform these processes and guide the formation of more comprehensive and effective policies that engender constructive change at regional, provincial and federal levels.

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