WORK IN PROGRESS.

Indigenous women and sport, a means of expressing agency, promoting health and well-being?

Abstract

This paper explores the distinctive experience that Indigenous Australian women have with sport and physical activity. The study brings together a number of data sources including interviews and focus groups with twenty-two Indigenous women living in urban and rural areas, narratives from elite Indigenous athletes and coaches and the findings of a recent Australian Parliamentary inquiry into Indigenous health and wellbeing. An interpretative qualitative methodology is employed, with researchers guided by an Indigenous philosophical approach to research known as Dadirri. The concept of the ‘habitus’, derived from Bourdieu’s social theory, is used to enhance our understanding of the values and social practices brought by the Indigenous women to their sport and physical activity experiences. Alongside the habitus, Bourdieu’s second concept—that of ‘agency’—is used. This is the notion that ‘individuals are equipped with the ability to understand and control their own actions, regardless of the circumstances of their lives’ (Webb et al., 2002, p. ix). In other words, even with a durable and transposable habitus, individuals still have the capacity to take opportunities that come their way, although these may be influenced by the individual’s life experiences and social situations. A combination of cultural beliefs and traditions, history, gendered factors and geography is presented in the Indigenous women’s stories. Sport and physical activity provided the Indigenous women with opportunities to preserve their culture, and to develop distinct identities as enablers. Furthermore, the women called for more culturally safe spaces to participate in activities, and for other Indigenous females to act as role models. Participants described the value of attending Indigenous-women only classes and activities offered by local Indigenous organisations. Government, sporting and community organisations who provide these conditions in their program design appear to facilitate Indigenous women’s agency in overcoming entrenched social, historical and health inequalities.
Introduction

Sport and physical activity (PA) can contribute to health and social engagement within Australian society (MacDonald, Abbott & Jenkins, 2012). Yet Indigenous women register significantly lower rates of participation in sport and PA than all other population groups (ABS, 2012). These low rates are concerning, as despite improvements since 1977 and much government investment, Indigenous women continue to report poor health, poor socio-economic situations, and a lower life expectancy by 9.5 years (73.7 years) than non-Indigenous females (83.1 years) (AIHW, 2016).

In trying to understand this conundrum, we have chosen a strengths perspective to identify potential strengths linked to Indigenous women’s unique connections with sport and PA (Paraschak & Thompson, 2014). In particular we are searching for positive qualities expressed by Indigenous women that contribute towards their sport and PA practices. This will require exploring individual agency and empowerment, and the connections between these and health and well-being in Indigenous societies. To do this we drew on data from a range of sources, including interviews and focus groups with 22 Indigenous women living in urban and rural areas, narratives from elite Indigenous athletes and coaches (Stronach, Maxwell & Taylor, 2016) and the findings of a recent Australian Parliamentary inquiry into Indigenous health and well-being (Maxwell, Stronach & Adair, in-print).

The role of Indigenous women, as “bedrocks” for community sport, and indeed their role in promoting their families into sport, is a fascinating subject area and requires understanding of Indigenous culture, family networks, gender norms, and history. At a time when Indigenous families are often looked at pathologically (i.e. domestic violence, alcoholism, sexual abuse), a focus on women as empowering agents—if this is the case—would seem welcome.

Historical Content

Before colonisation, sport and PA were crucial elements in the lives of Indigenous women (Edwards, 2009). Sport provided competition, fun and recreation in gendered spaces, and PA gave women special status in communities. After colonisation, Indigenous women were stymied from participating in their traditional sports and games, and these all but disappeared. PA, once a key component of Aboriginal culture and life, was corrupted and took on new, horrific meanings (Atkinson, 1991). Women’s physicality increased their economic value, and for some, this provided a means of survival in the hostile colony. Women were debased and exploited by white men and suffered cold-hearted condemnation by white women (Atkinson, 1991).

In 2012, ABS (2012) figures showed that only 23.3% of Indigenous women participated in sport or PA during the previous 12 months. This compares with participation rates for Indigenous men (37.7%), non-Indigenous Australian women (66.7%), and non-Indigenous Australian men (69.8%). Respondents were asked to describe their participation levels in physical activities for recreation, exercise, or sport.
In considering why the levels of participation of Indigenous women in sport and PA remain so low, female Indigenous scholars contend that modern sport serves to subordinate and marginalise Indigenous women and girls within the current Australian patriarchal sporting system (Fredericks, Croft & Lamb, 2002). This is because, they assert, sport and PA within a capitalist society are highly commercialised commodities, dominated by patriarchal images, with women frequently represented as leisure objects and as ‘service agents of male recreation desires in the home and outside’ (Atkinson, 1991, p. 26). Indigenous people today are strongly influenced by their precolonial traditions and their experiences since colonisation, and have resisted tremendous pressures to ‘assimilate’. Thus Indigenous women continue to reject efforts to encourage them into ‘westernised’ sport, preferring instead concepts of sport, PA, music, dance and craft work that are non-competitive, exciting, creative and culturally acceptable (Fredericks et al, p. 144).

Conceptual framework

Habitus

In earlier publications (Stronach et al, 2016), Bourdieu’s social theory proved useful as a ‘toolkit’ to help provide social explanations of everyday life’ (Kitchin & Howe, 2013, p. 124). Within a Bourdieuan approach, the habitus is a central construct that aligns closely with identity and seeks to explain the dispositions that influence individuals to become who they are (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu, ‘the habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which predispose the individual to act, think and behave in a particular way’ (Zevenbergen, 2006, p. 617). These ‘durable dispositions’ are carried with us, and work to shape ‘attitudes, behaviours and responses to given situations’ (Webb, Shirato & Danaher, 2002, p. 114). In other words, habitus can be understood as the values and dispositions gained from the women’s cultural history which generally stay with them across contexts (as they are durable and transposable).

The habitus is said to allow individuals to respond to situations in a variety of ways, but the responses are largely determined by where and who they have been in terms of their culture. Thus, the concept of habitus explains certain cultural behaviours such as habits, beliefs, values, tastes, bodily postures, feelings and thoughts, which Bourdieu (1984) argued are socially produced. The inculcation of dispositions appears to happen throughout childhood, as children watch and listen, thereby adopting the cultural capital of those around them. As a result, the habitus is not ‘something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something one is’ (Webb et al, 2012, p. 114).

Empowerment and Agency, are they the same thing?

The concept of empowerment is related to terms such as agency, autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, participation, mobilization and self-confidence. It is a debated terms, which has been ascribed a wide variety of definitions and meanings in various socio-economic contexts.
Empowerment is generally framed as an increase in power, understood as control or a real ability to effect change (Oakley, 2001). A useful definition of the concept is ‘individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice and fulfill their potential’ (Mayoux, 2000, p. 49). Once choices are made they can then be transformed into desired actions and outcomes (Alsopt, 2006). Empowerment is also seen as an increase of certain kinds of agency (Alkire, 2005), or put simply, ‘an expansion of agency’ (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 9).

So what is agency? Sen (1985, p. 206) defines agency as ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’. It follows that agency should be socially beneficial, and that agents (or ‘actors’—those who act and bring about change) advance goals people value, and have reason to value (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 9). The processes of agency may involve bargaining and negotiation as well as resistance and manipulation (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Agency can be experienced with respect to different tasks, such as the ability to help others, make decisions for one’s family or a general ability to plan effectively. A lack of agency is often seen as central to ill-being.

Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) work extends the notions of agency, and introduces both a temporal element (oriented variously toward the past, future, and present), as well as clear synergies with Bourdieus notion of ‘habitus’. These authors define agency as:

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 970)

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest three dimensions linking agency and habitus which they refer to as ‘temporal-relational contexts’ (p. 970). The dimensions are:

- **Iterational element** (which links habitus to the past). This refers to refers to a selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.

- **Practical evaluative element** (which links habitus to the present). This is the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.

- **Projective element** (which links habitus to the future). This refers to the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future.
These elements make up a chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as 'separate but not always harmonious tones’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). However, in any given case, one or another of these three aspects might predominate. For example, it is possible to speak of action that is more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present. In this article, agency will be ascribed to the three different domains as outlined above.

Utilising these theoretical concepts the research examines:

- What is the role of Indigenous women’s agency in their experience of sport and physical activity?
- How can Indigenous women’s agency bring about changes in their own health and wellbeing and that of their families and communities?

**Method**

**Indigenous methodology: Dadirri**

During the research processes it is was essential for the research team to adopt an Indigenous methodology. Researchers (for example, Morton-Robinson, 2000) have illustrated how—in the past—the legacy of some research involving Indigenous peoples has been one of disempowerment, with Indigenous peoples often treated patronizingly or paternalistically, as subjects to be ‘observed’. Therefore we have committed to a methodology known as Dadirri. The methodology provides a culturally appropriate pathway for the team to follow in their quest to appreciate how and why Indigenous women function in their own cultures and environments. Dadirri has been used in research with Indigenous people where complex cultural and personal issues have needed investigation (for example Atkinson, 2000). Indigenous scholar Professor Judy Atkinson explains:

[Dadirri brings] a knowledge and consideration of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community; ways of relating and acting within community; a non-intrusive observation, or quietly aware watching; a deep listening and hearing with more than the ears; a reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and heard; and, having learnt from the listening, a purposeful plan to act, with actions informed by learning wisdom and the informed responsibility that comes with knowledge.

(Atkinson, p. 16)

Dadirri proceeds inductively by gathering information through quiet observation and deep listening, building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing understanding by contemplation and reflection (Atkinson, 2000). Dadirri is therefore a critical feature of this research.

**Content Analysis**
A qualitative content analysis was undertaken of the 58 submissions (1366 pages) presented as formal evidence to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. The texts were received by the parliamentary committee on behalf of Indigenous representatives, sport organisations, community agencies, academics and social workers. Content analysis was used to identify, and analyse occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics embedded in texts. The majority of content analyses employ quantitative procedures that involve counting and enumerating units of analysis. However, in qualitative content analysis, researchers are more interested in the meanings associated with messages than with the number of times message variables occur. Berg (2007) testifies to the use of content analysis in qualitative research, arguing:

Content analysis … is a passport to listening to the words of the text, and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words (Berg, 2007, 242).

The content of each of the submissions was read and coded by the authors to identify the material that related to the focus of this study. This was followed by a second level analysis on the submissions that addressed the following criteria:

- The submission specifically mentioned female participants;
- Specific females’ programs/activities were mentioned; and/or
- Events, carnivals and competitions involving females were outlined.

To aid in managing the data, the NVivo-9 software package was utilised. The subsequent thematic analysis process followed guidelines established by Miles and Huberman (1994), and involved an initial broad coding of all themes relevant to the research questions. Codes were analysed and condensed into dominant themes. Themes were derived from ideas, thoughts and concepts described in the submissions.

**Interview protocols (IN PROGRESS)**

Findings were derived from 1-hour dialogue with the participants, either in groups or individually. This ‘conversational approach’ is a fluid and flexible invitation to share information by personal narratives or ‘story-telling’. Given the strong oral traditions of Indigenous peoples, a strategy to allow the women to provide information using a narrative style and face-to-face engagement is considered most appropriate, and certainly more effective than standard question and answer sessions (Ralph, 1997). This approach has the potential to uncover, from an inside perspective, a broad range of topics, including the women’s experiences of agency, perceived values of sport and PA, as well as barriers and enablers to participation. Relevant literature as is examined to gain broad understanding of the issues. In particular, four general subject areas are canvassed:

- The meaning of sport and PA in the lives of the women.
• Barriers to and enablers of participation.
• The unique cultural traditions that Indigenous women bring to their sport and PA experiences.
• The future hopes and aspirations for sport and PA.

Conversations were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Supplementary notes were taken throughout the sessions. All data were transcribed verbatim, and again the NVivo-9.0 software package is used to manage the data. A thematic analysis process followed, as per the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1994). Codes are analysed and condensed into dominant themes, which derive from participants’ ideas, thoughts, and experiences, as well as the literature. Hence themes emerged both inductively and deductively. A cross examination was then conducted between the three researchers to ensure that the themes are representative of the transcripts, and culturally accurate. Participants were invited to review the data and the themes that emerge, and following their suggestions, minor amendments may be made. Ultimately the two data sets were merged, allowing delineation of the findings.

Findings (IN PROGRESS)

Iterational element (which links habitus to the past).
• What we know: With colonisation, the experience of sport and PA for Indigenous women changed irrevocably. Indigenous women resisted pressures to ‘assimilate’, and efforts to encourage them into ‘westernised’ sport and PA. Even in the 21st century Indigenous women feel shame and have endured racism in sport and PA environments. The iterational element of women’s agency is expressed as resistance.
• What we think: An impasse exists, with Indigenous women’s agency stifled because of their grim history, racism and ongoing links with the past.

Practical evaluative element (which links habitus to the present).
• What we know: We know that sport and PA are valued by Indigenous women, and provide them with agency to maintain strong communities, preserve culture and develop distinct identities as ‘enablers’—but this is for children and male family members, at the expense of women’s own participation. The practical evaluative element of women’s agency is expressed as the capacity to help others, and make decisions for one’s family.
• What we think: This agency is limited, and women continue to lag behind non-Indigenous women in terms of participation in sport and PA except where directed programs exist, such as the Deadly Sistas Girlz Program, Gwabba Yorga-Gabba Worra, and Moorditj Mums.

Projective element (which links habitus to the future).
What we know: We know that Indigenous women want culturally safe spaces in which to engage in sport and PA, and would like more Indigenous female role models to encourage girls’ participation.

What we think: With assertive action and more culturally-aware directed programs, women will develop agency to take control of their own activity wants, needs and practices. The projective element of agency may require bargaining and negotiation.

Discussion and Conclusion (IN PROGRESS)
Reference List


