

“I would love to blast some pow music and just dance”: Aboriginal Students’ Experiences of Physical Activity on Campus

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Introduction

- Physical activity is valued in Aboriginal communities (Graham & Stamler, 2010), including leisure-time activities, sport-related activities, and traditional activities (Bruner & Chad, 2013)
- However, a growing body of literature highlights the low levels of physical activity among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada
 - Rates of physical *inactivity* and deteriorating health status among Aboriginal Canadians are greater than non-Aboriginal Canadians (Bruner & Chad, 2013; Foulds et al., 2011)
- An in depth understanding of the physical activity beliefs, behaviours, and experiences among urban Aboriginal Canadian peoples is absent from the literature (McHugh, 2011)

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to explore Aboriginal university students’ experiences and challenges with physical activity on campus.

A secondary purpose was to identify strategies that promote positive physical activity experiences for Aboriginal students on campus.

Method

Qualitative Strategy of Inquiry

- Narrative inquiry: participants share stories about their lives to illuminate meaning on their socially constructed experiences (Creswell, 2014; Smith & Sparkes, 2009)

Participants and Procedure

- Ongoing engagement with gatekeepers
- Purposeful and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2014) of five First Nations undergraduate students ($n = 4$ women; age range 18-28 years)
 - Three regularly active to obtain substantial health benefits (Godin, 2011)
- Data collection
 - Sharing circle: encourages interconnectedness, dialogue, respect, and co-creation of knowledge (Kovach, 2009)
 - One-on-one semi-structured interviews

Data Analysis

- The sharing circle and interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and an analytic coding process resulted in emergent themes that connected into storylines (Creswell, 2014)

Results

The themes that emerged from the participants’ narratives of physical activity experiences and challenges on campus are presented.

We are similar but unique

- Many similarities between participants’ stories and non-Aboriginal student experiences (e.g., lack of time to be active, feeling incompetent or self-conscious)
- Powerful uniqueness to their stories

“Most of the struggles I’ve had stem from past experiences with physical activity...mostly it’s my own inner battles stemming from things that have happened in the past because I am Aboriginal.”

Daenarys

“There’s not a whole lot of visible Aboriginal people...I feel kind of scared to face racism. I look First Nation and I’m just scared to be judged.”

Peeta

A longing for tradition

- Inherent to many shared experiences was a desire to have access to traditional cultural practices

“There’s this other girl who’s doing yoga by herself...I don’t feel comfortable imposing my music on somebody who might not like it.”

Flo

“I’m at this state where I would like to be more spiritual and get back to my beliefs. I know that’s what I want, but I don’t really have access to those kinds of ceremonies and activities and forums...those aren’t always available to me.”

Katniss

Extending a personal connection with physical activity

- The participants’ current stories of physical activity reflected their personal history and connection with being active

“When you live on the reserve there’s not a lot to do. We started sports night, and everyone goes to play volleyball or whatever...I’m pushing myself now and trying new things, but I’d rather play soccer than go to the gym.”

Beyonce

“I was actually involved in a lot of sports and made sure I was in phys. ed. every semester...I try to think of physical activity as another class, but it doesn’t always work out that way.”

Daenarys

Results Continued

Strategies and resources for moving forward

- Personal resources
 - Engage in positive and realistic self-talk, incorporate social network, integrate traditional beliefs and practices
 - Potential relevance and usefulness of self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
 - Similarities between self-compassion and traditional teachings (e.g., imperfection, respect, responsibility, self-care)
 - Concerns with being *too* self-compassionate
- Institutional strategies
 - Help remove barriers to physical activity and enhance quality of experiences
 - Develop Aboriginal-specific programming
 - More Aboriginal involvement (e.g., Aboriginal staff, recreational coordinators, trainers)

Interpretation and Discussion

- Common barriers to physical activity were identified (Arzu et al., 2006; Heesch et al., 2000); however, many stories and challenges with physical activity on campus were unique to the Aboriginal student experience
 - Misguided stereotypes and racist spaces (Paraschak, 2012)
- Lack of empowerment, a noted barrier to Aboriginal peoples’ physical activity (Skinner et al., 2006), resonated from the students’ stories
- Effective personal resources to cope with barriers and challenges related to physical activity experiences are needed

Participant-Identified Action Items

- Institutional facilitation of self-selection of activities (Foulds et al., 2011)
 - Example: Powwow fitness classes
- Childcare options on campus

Future Research Recommendations

- Participatory action research working collaboratively with Aboriginal students on university campuses to:
 1. Integrate traditional activities and practices
 2. Develop and implement strategies to enhance physical activity experiences

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