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Students' Corner

Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Individuals and Communities

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Abstract

Background: Within Indigenous communities, sports hold prominent importance in cultures and traditions, serving not only as a means of imparting valuable skills but also contributing to mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Sports enhance one's sport-related competencies while also having links to an individual's feelings of self-esteem and self-identity. **Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to explore the connections between sports participation, self-esteem, and identity within North American Indigenous communities, with an emphasis on Indigenous communities in Canada. **Methods:** A narrative review of existing literature, along with an environmental scan, was employed. **Results:** Sports create robust community ties, nurturing a sense of belonging and elevating self-esteem among Indigenous individuals. The integration of traditional Indigenous sports and teachings amplifies authenticity in self-esteem, validating personal identities and cultural values. Accurate representation of Indigenous athletes in media enhances self-efficacy and elicits collective pride and resilience, strengthening Indigenous peoples and communities' sense of identity. **Conclusion:** Three key findings highlight ways that participation in sports supports self-esteem and identity among Indigenous peoples and communities: connections to community and meaningful relationships, engagement in traditional Indigenous sports, and accurate representation of Indigenous athletes in the media.

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Introduction

The intricate relationship between sport participation, one's sense of identity, and self-esteem has been long documented in literature (Bowker et al., 2003; Chiengkul et al., 2023). Research has shown that engagement in sports builds sport-related competencies while also enhancing one's self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (Morano et al., 2022; Ouyang et al.,

2020). In simplistic terms, self-esteem is the measure and perception of value individuals attribute to themselves. It consists of three key dimensions: self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity (Stets & Burke, 2014). Self-worth reflects the degree to which individuals hold themselves in positive regard and seek social acceptance. As Stets and Burke (2014) explain, "self-worth is rooted in the

Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Peoples

idea that individuals desire to see themselves favorably, and they act in a way that maintains and enhances this positive self-view” (p. 2). Self-efficacy refers to one’s perceived ability to influence outcomes (Bandura, 1977a), while authenticity is “the unobstructed operation of one’s core or true self in one’s daily life” (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 3). High self-esteem implies a balanced and justified appreciation of one’s worth, success, and competencies, although this may vary from person to person (Baumeister et al., 2003).

On the other hand, an identity is a set of meanings that defines individuals in terms of the social categories or groups one belongs to, the roles they occupy, and the characteristics that make them unique individuals (Stets & Burke, 2014). Stets and Burke (2014) propose that self-esteem is closely connected to three types of identities: social/group, role, and person. Social identities, such as ethnicity or gender, and group affiliations like family or teams, contribute to self-worth when verified through recognition and acceptance. Role identities, tied to functions like athlete or student, enhance self-efficacy when performance meets expectations (Curry & Weaner, 1987; Stets & Burke, 2000). Person identities reflect core values and traits, and their validation reinforces authenticity. In this way, the different layers of identity influence how individuals see themselves and their place in society. The development of one’s identity is a complex process influenced by various factors; however, social psychologists hypothesize that it is rooted in the collective life and one’s interactions within societal contexts, such as sports (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Hogg & Smith, 2007). Understanding the connections between self-esteem, identity, and sports is particularly important with

regards to Indigenous peoples and communities, given the prominent role sports have and continue to play in Indigenous people’s cultures, practices, and traditions.

For centuries, Indigenous communities have engaged in traditional Indigenous sports such as lacrosse, canoeing, and archery (Edwards, 2018). Culturally, traditional games within Indigenous communities serve to both impart valuable skills and enhance one’s mental and physical well-being, contributing to an overall sense of wholistic well-being (Absolon, 2020; Joseph, 2024). The term Wholistic entails the integration of emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical dimensions of well-being into a unified whole, as reflected in the Medicine Wheel (Absolon, 2020; Hoffman, 2013). Spelled with a “W” rather than an “H,” Wholistic signals an Indigenous perspective that emphasizes wholeness and interconnection, as opposed to the Western framing of “holistic,” which often lacks cultural specificity (Miles et al., 2023). Many Indigenous communities approach health, wellness, and healing through the Medicine Wheel, which emphasizes the importance of achieving balance within oneself, in relation to other living beings, and the land (Joseph, 2020). Thus, sports and physical activity stand as a profound pillar of wholistic health and well-being for Indigenous peoples and communities given Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, being, and doing (Miles et al., 2023).

Moreover, the significance of sports in Indigenous history is undeniable, as evidenced by testimonials from residential school survivors. The narratives illustrate how sports functioned as a rare avenue for Indigenous students to assert identity, cultivate self-confidence, and experience a

Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Peoples

sense of accomplishment and dignity within residential schools in which the use of Indigenous languages, ceremonial practices, and other core cultural expressions were routinely suppressed (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Additionally, the history of Indigenous sports includes notable athletes such as Jim Thorpe and Waneek Horn-Miller, both of whom have paved the way for today's Indigenous athletes (Joseph, 2020). Jim Thorpe, an Olympic gold medalist, broke into fields that had previously been unwelcoming to Indigenous peoples, demonstrating exceptional talent in football, baseball, and track and field (Melwani, 2024). His success challenged prevailing stereotypes and opened doors for future Indigenous athletes. Waneek Horn-Miller, an Olympic water polo player, has actively advocated for Indigenous representation through speaking engagements and was a torchbearer for the 2010 Winter Olympics, symbolizing Indigenous pride (O'Hara, 2024). Their legacies continue to empower and inspire today's Indigenous athletes (Joseph, 2020; Melwani, 2024; O'Hara, 2024).

The purpose of this narrative review is to address a critical gap in the literature concerning the influence of sports participation on self-esteem and identity among Indigenous peoples and communities in North America. While existing research broadly links physical activity and sports participation to positive outcomes in self-esteem and motivation, there is limited focus on Indigenous populations in North America. Much of the current literature centers on Indigenous athletes in Australia, with relatively few studies considering the unique sociohistorical context of North American Indigenous communities. Given the central

role of sport in many Indigenous cultures, histories, and traditions, this narrative review seeks to explore how sports participation may contribute to self-esteem and identity formation within these communities.

Methods

This narrative review examines the impacts of sports participation on Indigenous individuals and communities' sense of identity and self-esteem were examined in this article through the integration of community-based participatory research (CBPR) and social psychology. CBPR is particularly important in the context of Indigenous peoples as it emphasizes collaborative relationships, respects cultural protocols, and empowers communities to actively participate in the research process, thereby ensuring that Indigenous peoples' voices and unique perspectives are considered (Tobias et al., 2013). To identify recurring patterns and central themes, qualitative literature was reviewed (Macniven et al., 2019). Resources used include scholarly databases such as PubMed, JSTOR and Scopus. Media sources were limited to reputable websites and online sources, including videos, articles, and publications from established organizations such as the North American Indigenous Games Council, ensuring that the content was aligned with verified academic and Indigenous-led resources. Searches were conducted using keywords such as Indigenous, sport, culture, identity, self-esteem, First Nations, benefits, social media and community. Scholarly articles that were not peer-reviewed or in relation to Indigenous peoples of North America were excluded. Preference was given to more recent studies, though there were no restrictions on the year of article

publication. An environmental scan was also conducted to include the examination of websites and YouTube videos that provided insights into the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG).

Results

The Medicine Wheel

For Indigenous peoples and communities, a sense of self-worth, identity and engagement in physical activity are deeply connected to the wholistic model of well-being (Joseph, 2020). Heightened self-esteem and identity act as protective factors against negative influences, promoting positive mental and emotional well-being which are integral aspects of the Medicine Wheel (Mann, 2004; Rogers-Sirin & Gupta, 2012). Furthermore, according to the First Nations Health Authority (2024), respecting one's culture, traditions, and self is also key to wholistic well-being. Research indicates that heightened self-esteem leads to increased self-respect (Dillon, 1997), contributing to one's wholistic health and wellness. The First Nations Health Authority (2024) also described how relationships, community, family, land, culture, and wisdom contribute to one's overall wholistic health.

The Role of Building Connections Through Sport

A key aspect of having strong connections to one's Indigenous community, which is an aspect of wholistic health, is the presence of mutual support and respect (McHugh et al., 2015). Through their community-based research, McHugh et al. (2015) concluded that factors such as belonging, supportive interactions, family and friends, as well as the significance of location, are contributors within the context of sports that enhance the meaning

of community for Indigenous individuals. Importantly, their findings also demonstrated that Indigenous youth and adults view sports as a community due to the sense of belonging and meaningful relationships it can foster (McHugh et al., 2015). The essence of community in sport was further illustrated by Johnson et al. (2020), who demonstrated that during sporting events, Indigenous athletes felt stronger community connections when family and friends came to support them. This support not only benefited the athletes but also enhanced the sense of community among supporters (Johnson et al., 2020). Exploring the importance of sports among Indigenous youth, Bruner et al. (2019) revealed, through sharing circles and interviews, that a crucial aspect lies in the opportunities that sport provides to connect with peers, friends, the community, coaches, and the land. This is significant, as social psychologists have shown that forming meaningful connections and identifying with a group fosters a heightened sense of purpose and belonging, which in turn contributes positively to one's self-esteem (Jetten et al., 2015).

The Role of Cultural Connectedness to Sport

Engaging in traditional Indigenous sports or integrating traditional and cultural teachings into sport provides Indigenous peoples with opportunities to connect with one's land, culture, and Elders (McCourt, 2021; Strachan et al., 2018). McCourt (2021) concluded that when Indigenous cultural components were incorporated into a basketball program in the Anishinaabe community, participants felt a greater sense of identity. This Indigenous identity formation aligned with three primary goals of the program's cultural component: fostering an

understanding of Indigenous identity, situating that identity within contemporary contexts, and connecting it to the game of basketball (McCourt, 2021). In a similar study, Gurgis et al. (2022) investigated the experiences of Mi'kmaw First Nation coaches as they integrated the Two-Eyed Seeing approach and Medicine Wheel into coaching programs. Two-Eyed Seeing refers to the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems through a balanced and reciprocal approach to understanding (Bartlett et al., 2012). The coaches highlighted that these approaches, particularly the use of the Medicine Wheel, played a crucial role in fostering athlete development, expressing gratitude to the Creator, and promoting community pride (Gurgis et al., 2022). Additionally, studies have shown that Indigenous youth attribute a comprehensive meaning to sports and physical activity, expanding beyond mere exercise to encompass cultural physical activity practices (McHugh, 2011; Tang et al., 2016). This observation is reinforced by Kerpan and Humbert (2015), who highlighted that Indigenous youth in Canada are more inclined to participate in traditional activities, such as hunting or jingle dancing, as these pursuits seamlessly integrate with Indigenous culture. Indigenous sporting events such as the NAIG and Alberta Indigenous Games, identified via an environmental scan, offer platforms for Indigenous youth to participate in traditional games alongside Elders and community members (Alberta Indigenous Games, 2023; North American Indigenous Games, 2023). Dubnewick et al. (2018) found that engagement in such sporting events enhances the experience of Indigenous athletes through interactions with Elders, instilling cultural pride, nurturing personal characteristics, and fostering a connection to the land. By cultivating a connection to the land, these games enhance the wholistic well-being of

Indigenous athletes (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013) while also prompting them to discover greater value, meaning, and inclusion through participating (Dubnewick et al., 2018). Similarly, a health and social impact survey conducted among participants of the 2008 NAIG revealed that individuals felt as though the games heightened their sense of pride as Indigenous individuals and contributed to them having a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures (Praxis Consulting, 2014). Furthermore, social psychologists have noted that when an individual's personality and culture match with those prevalent in their environment, it has a positive impact on self-esteem and subjective well-being (Higgins, 2000). Fulmer et al. (2010) theorized that such a match carries a self-validating effect, suggesting that when individuals feel akin to numerous people in a given social context, they experience a greater sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Indigenous Youth Media Portrayal in Sport

Media coverage of events such as NAIG offers an accurate representation of Indigenous athletes in both mainstream and Indigenous media (Fabian, 2022). This form of representation is significant because it enables Indigenous athletes, individuals, and communities to reclaim control over media portrayals of Indigenous peoples (Leavitt et al., 2015). This portrayal not only amplifies visibility of Indigenous games, but also underscores the collective strength and resilience of Indigenous athletes and communities, nurturing a more positive sense of identity (Dubnewick et al., 2018). Many NAIG athletes shared that knowing their communities back home were watching and supporting them helped them feel more connected to the broader Indigenous community and gave their participation in sport a stronger sense of meaning and

purpose (North American Indigenous Games, 2023).

From a psychological standpoint, research indicates that positive psychological benefits, such as enhanced self-esteem and identity, can result from observing the success of an external entity (e.g., athletes or sports teams) that holds personal relevance to the individual (Gordon et al., 2019; Tangney, 1999). Additionally, when this success is observed through media coverage, it may lead individuals to learn from and imitate the behaviours they see, a phenomenon known as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977b; Nielsen et al., 2021). Yilmaz et al. (2019) further illustrated this phenomenon by demonstrating that an individual's appearances on television programs, such as cultural and sporting activities, can be imitated as model behaviours by others. This relationship was evident in NAIG, as 91% of the athletes reported that members of their community who were watching the games back home viewed them as role models, thus aiming to imitate their behaviours (Praxis Consulting, 2014).

Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the analysis, shedding light on the connections between sports participation, self-esteem and identity for Indigenous peoples. These themes encompass connections to community and meaningful relationships, engagement in traditional Indigenous sports, and accurate representation of Indigenous athletes in media (Dubnewick et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; McCourt, 2021). Participation in sports enables Indigenous athletes to develop strong connections within their community, fostering a heightened sense of belonging and self-worth, consequently enhancing self-esteem (Johnson et al., 2020). Additionally, participation in sports and

the support of the community reinforce group and role identities among Indigenous peoples, strengthening self-worth and self-efficacy (Stets & Burke, 2014). Ferguson et al. (2018) also highlight that participating in sports can promote self-determination, self-respect, and self-esteem among Indigenous women, particularly when supported and recognized by their communities. Moreover, in terms of cultural connectedness, engagement in traditional Indigenous games, such as NAIG, or incorporating culturally rooted teachings and practices further enhances authenticity in self-esteem by offering athletes the opportunity to display their cultural beliefs and values (McCourt, 2021; Strachan et al., 2018). This validation of personal and group identities allows Indigenous athletes to feel acknowledged and seen for who they truly are (Stets & Burke, 2014). While the majority of studies on this topic have centred around Indigenous Australians, parallels exist between engagement in traditional and cultural sports and one's feelings of authenticity, personal identity, and social identity (Kickett-Tucker, 2008).

Accurate representation of Indigenous athletes in the media bolsters self-efficacy and authenticity within Indigenous communities while also positively influencing Indigenous athletes' sense of social identity (Dubnewick et al., 2018; Stets & Serpe, 2013). By showcasing the strength and resilience of Indigenous athletes, media representation reinforces a sense of collective pride and resilience, contributing to the overall self-esteem and identity of Indigenous communities (Leavitt et al., 2015).

Furthermore, our findings provide valuable insights that expand upon the 2015 report by the Truth and

Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Peoples

Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which emphasized the role of sports in improving the health and well-being of Indigenous individuals and communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) acknowledged the physical and social benefits of sport, this analysis highlights the deeper psychological and cultural impact, demonstrating how sports participation fosters self-esteem and strengthens identity through community connections, engagement in traditional Indigenous games, and accurate media representation. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on Indigenous health by emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant and community-centered approaches to sports programming. By recognizing the role of sports as a vehicle for cultural affirmation and self-determination, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can develop initiatives that not only promote physical activity but also reinforce Indigenous identity and well-being. Future research should continue exploring the long-term effects of sports engagement on mental health and social identity among Indigenous populations, ensuring that sports initiatives align with the values, traditions, and lived experiences of Indigenous communities.

While this narrative review provides meaningful insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The narrative review drew on a selective review of available literature, which may disproportionately reflect studies focused on specific regions, age groups, or well-established programs, while overlooking community-led initiatives or contexts that are less frequently documented. This presents a risk of omitting diverse

perspectives and lived experiences across Indigenous communities in Canada. Given the cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity among these communities, the findings may not be broadly generalizable. Future research should prioritize community-specific and participatory approaches that are grounded in the distinct values, contexts, and priorities of each Indigenous community.

Conclusion

The exploration of sport's influence on self-esteem and identity within Indigenous communities and peoples highlights key connections. This narrative review underscores how sports foster community ties, validate identities, and offer authenticity, significantly impacting self-worth and cultural pride. These findings expand our understanding and further support the health benefits outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), emphasizing sports as pivotal aspects for nurturing self-esteem and identity within Indigenous communities. Future studies should engage in collaborative research with Indigenous communities to examine these dimensions more fully, with the aim of tailoring sport programs that wholistically promote community health and well-being.

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Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Sophie Sajjadi BKin; Kirsten Woo BKin, Collin Seto BKin; Bashiru Sise Odaa BKin, MKin; Rosalin M. Miles BA, MHK, Ed.D.

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Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Peoples

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Sport, Self-esteem, and Identity Among Indigenous Peoples

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