Identity Issues, Basketball and Aboriginality

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Abstract:
This research was particularly interested in the circumstances and context in which sport might be used by and controlled by Aborigines so as to attend to the process of providing for Aboriginal athletes whilst promoting the culture and values of the Aboriginal community. Specifically, the aims of this research project were to examine the meanings associated with identifying as an Aborigine, an Aboriginal basketballer on a self-described Aboriginal team. All Aboriginal residents of the town come from elsewhere. Via open coding and axial coding we reflected on data generated to discuss the findings around the emergent themes and categories of External Engagement/Perceptions, Importance of Aboriginal Identity, and the Team as a Unique Team. Whereas Cathy Freeman and other Aboriginal champions have been appropriated to serve as exemplars of progressive national unity, the team in our study represent a powerful statement of resolve to re-unite generations of lost and stolen people into a configuration that celebrates real sovereignty. Playing basketball can allow individuals that are subjected to social disadvantage to feel a sense of empowerment and control. In this case, the opportunity arises of Aboriginal success on Aboriginal terms.

Disadvantage has been normalised for Australian Aboriginal peoples as evidenced in incarceration rates, early death, educational opportunity, denial of land rights. Aboriginality is linked with short life span, poor ill health, lack of housing, poor sanitation, high rates of unemployment, inadequate education, high suicide rate, and community social breakdown (Mellor, 2003; Tatz & Tatz, 1996). Amongst this widespread mistreatment and hardship, sport has been identified as a way in which...
Aborigines can be on equal terms and at times perform better than the wider community. Thus, sport is perceived to be relatively free of injustice and full of opportunity for Aboriginal peoples, and characterised as an avenue for social mobility, financial gain and a ladder to social improvement (Godwell, 2000). That is, positive life opportunities are limited for Aborigines and sport is seen to be one of the few options available. Furthermore, sports organisations are credited with being vanguards of progressive race relations. As part of a series of broader projects examining the dynamics of Australian Aboriginal identity, this research was particularly interested in the circumstances and context in which sport might be used by and controlled by Aborigines so as to attend to the process of providing for Aboriginal athletes whilst promoting the culture and values of the Aboriginal community. Specifically, the aims of this research project were to examine the meanings associated with identifying as an Aborigine, an Aboriginal basketballer, and the elements of interaction between the self-described Wanderers team and other teams.

Although sport may offer opportunity to the Aboriginal community, it has not been free of racial injustice. Throughout Australia’s history, sport has mirrored the wider society, being a promoter and source of Aboriginal hardship. A lack of resources for Aboriginal sport (e.g., facilities, coaches, physiotherapists, psychologists, and masseurs), has lead to a lack of chances for individuals to excel in their chosen sports (Tatz, 1995). In the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, there were no Australian Aboriginal participants, since Aboriginal talent was neither fostered nor promoted (Tatz, 1995). Further to this, Australian Aborigines have faced overt discrimination whilst playing sport in the form of racial taunting and racial vilification (Hallinan, Bruce & Coram, 1999).

The limited research undertaken on Indigenous involvement in the Australian football (Gardiner, 1999; Hallinan et al., 1999) and Australian rugby league (Hallinan, 1991), found that Indigenous players were over represented in positions that require speed and quickness and absent from positions that require leadership and intelligence. In addition, there are few Indigenous individuals moving into management positions after their playing days are over. These findings are also supported by research in Australian basketball, where African-American players tend to be segregated to less
dominant positions during playing careers and absent from management/coaching positions (Hallinan, Eddleman & Oslin, 1991).

Whilst some sports, particularly rugby league and Australian rules, have received limited sociological research in relation to Aboriginal involvement, other sports popular amongst the Aboriginal community, such as basketball, warrants research attention for several reasons. First, basketball is considered to be a favourite Australian pastime and Aboriginal basketball is very popular, perhaps being the most popular sport for Aboriginal males after Australian rules and rugby league (Tatz, 1995). Second, although the sport is popular in Aboriginal circles, and there have been some talented Aboriginal players such as Michael Ahmat, Jenny Bedford, Rohanee Cox and Michelle Musselwhite, there are no Aboriginal players in the national men’s competition (correspondence, Lorraine Landon, BA National Competitions Manager; Tatz, 1995; Tatz & Tatz, 2000).

**Into The Field**

The research presented here used a qualitative approach. The researchers were well acquainted with basketball participation as coaches, players and observers and our research assistant had played several seasons on an Aboriginal basketball team (the ‘Wanderers’) and has represented the team at regional tournaments. For various additional reasons we have become well acquainted and accepted within the culture and environment of the local Aboriginal community. The study took place over two basketball seasons.

Working from a naturalistic perspective enabled us to be flexible and to make allowances for changes in methodology. An emergent design allowed flexible methodology throughout the study. A core data source throughout the study has been interviews with the team associates. Individual interviews of approximately 1 hour duration were conducted with 10 male Aboriginal players and coaches from the Ballarat ‘Wanderers’ Aboriginal basketball team. The interviews were conducted at a time and location suitable for participants. The interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Interpretation was verified by discussion between researchers and community members. In addition to interviewing participants, we also observed and recorded data in the form of a reflective journal and field notes.
Support and Consent

While neither Ballarat nor the Ballarat Basketball Associations could be classified as Aboriginal communities, the research abided by the ethical protocols advocated by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, May 2000). That is, the researcher consulted and negotiated with all informants before and during the research process and obtained free and informed consent. Furthermore, the consultation and negotiation produced mutual understanding about the research outcomes and that these outcomes are to be shared. These guidelines were based around respect for Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination, control and maintaining their culture and heritage. The relevant “elder”-type Respected Persons were consulted on the content of the proposal and continue to be consulted on its progression. Merv Atkinson is both a Respected Person and is the organiser (Vice Chairman) of the Wanderers club. Merv has indicated support for the project and will continue to be consulted. Prior to European settlement the area in and around what is now known as Ballarat was occupied by the Wathawurung Aborigines. They are regarded as the traditional owners of the land. Merv Atkinson indicated that there are no known descendants of the traditional owners of the land. All Aboriginal residents come from elsewhere. Many, like Merv, were stolen from their families and placed in the Ballarat Orphanage.

Findings

Interviews were transcribed in full and then analysed following the steps outlined by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Miles & Huberman (1994). We have been using both data collection and analysis simultaneously and constantly throughout the research project. This enabled themes to emerge throughout the study. After identifying the core information units in the transcripts, several categories or codes were developed in which to locate the gathered data. Trustworthiness was established by triangulation of the methods, including peer debriefing and member checking. Via open coding and axial coding we have reflected on data generated to produce emerging themes and categories. These were: External Engagement/Perceptions, Importance of Aboriginal Identity, and Wanderers as a Unique Team. The following quotes are indicative of the views expressed about each of these themes. In each of three coded categories, the quotes belong to different members within the Wanderers team.
External Engagement/Perceptions

- It's quite funny ‘cause we had a very good side and we end up losing the Final by 3 or 4 points and some blokes on the other team said he was amazed. They thought we were going to lose our temper and crack and rip the whole place down sort of thing. I suppose that sums it up, what they think of us.

- They said, look, I’m not even going to get you to go for an interview. There’s an academic scholarship, we’ll just give it to you. I was pretty impressed you know, and was quite happy with that but, but then when I come to Ballarat it was the same old back against the wall thing for Aboriginal people.

- And, I was soul searching at that time cause that was about a year after I found out and it was very much a lot of, you walk in as if you small underneath the Uni. But, its still us against the world thing. I think it’s a big issue. If everyone turned their lights off we’d all be the same colour so it wouldn’t matter. That’s the way I have always thought of it.

- And then you get the blokes that come down from up in Northern Territory and they couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe how much sort of racial bullshit there is on the sports field. Definitely more in Victoria compared to the Northern Territory and definitely more in rural Victoria. There seems to be this thing that all Aboriginal people are just drunks and filthy and can’t look after themselves and don’t have anything.

- All it needs is one of those guys to play up and do something wrong and get kicked out of the court and then the whole team will be labelled bad losers or bad sportsman because of one coloured guy whereas if it happened to a white guy the whole team would not be labelled like that. But coloured people are, that’s the way society is.

- We’re forever having to prove yourself more as people than as sportsman. Unless you’re a Cathy Freeman and win a gold medal, you’re never really accepted. So you’re forever every day, every week having to prove that we are worth something.

These perceptions illustrate the capacity of inferential racism. It is problematised because white Australia’s operational definition of racism is contained to overt and blatant racist taunting and discrimination. Nevertheless, the players are subjected to on court taunts which they suspect are more likely away from heavily mediated matches and also more widespread than commonly believed (Mellor, 2003). The Wanderers players are well aware that their presence and activities are easily subject to marginalisation and patronisation.
Importance of Aboriginal Identity

- It is very important. It gives you a sense of who you are and where you are from. It certainly is important especially for younger people to have that identity because it helps them with who they are and where they fit in society. I suppose for me Aboriginality is very important, especially knowing where you are from and who your family are is one of the most important things in my life as well.

- It’s fairly important, but it’s not what I was brought up on. I didn’t find out that I was Aboriginal till I was 15. My family wanted to hide it. I always felt there was something missing in my life till I discovered that side. It sort of filled a huge gap. It brought me to the fact that I love the people who associate with - my cousins and that sought of stuff. I’ve got a real soft spot for every Aboriginal person I meet. But I still go back home and my step-father still denies the fact that there’s Aboriginal blood in there and he doesn’t like it. There’s not much he can do about it.

- Having been bought up in an orphanage, part of the stolen generation, right from about four five years old our Aboriginality was taken away from us from that moment - that was 1964. So I’ve learnt till 2000 that I've actually started being a Koori per se. There are a lot of times in between that I've still got to make up for but it’s about learning who you are and what the people are about and that sort of thing. So, at this point in time, it’s very important for my children and that sort of thing. My daughter is very Koori orientated and that’s important for me to know what I'm talking about and leading our culture and experiencing our culture too because that’s what we are. Whereas, because you’re a copper, you’re not allowed to be Koori. It’s fairly hard to explain, you probably understand.

Central to these responses is the reflection of both loss of family and denial of Aboriginality over various periods of time. The modestly expressed frustration of regret is offset by the optimism associated with the opportunity to fully embrace a fortification of a valued identity in general and Aboriginality in particular.

Wanderers as a Unique Team

- There’s a varied group of guys involved. You got some blokes are unemployed, some blokes are into a bit of substance abuse that type of thing. But then, you’ve got guys that are doing well for themselves in the community and that type of stuff. So we have a mix of guys so that makes it unique. And if the commitment was there and the structure was there I think we could probably go a lot further - develop a lot more players within Ballarat.
- We all go out there to represent the community basically - not just a bunch of guys from around town going along to play basketball for that particular team. We’re actually representing the whole of our community and so its like the community versus that team and the next team that comes along and I think that is representing everybody, not just those guys in the team, its representing Aboriginal people across the board per se.

- Look, to be part of this town is to be a Wanderer and to be part of like the community - you get to see the mob, and that’s part of the thing, you know. Being a Wanderer its part of the community thing and it represents the Blackfellas in Ballarat. That’s the main reason really.

- I think It’s great just being involved in team sport and ah, I think the main things that I like about basketball is just to get out there and compete basically…compete against other teams and playing with your brother boys and cousins and so on and its like stuff as well….I think that’s the strength of the sport, being a team sport and um having everyone involved as well. Like you know you’ve got coaches and you know other support staff around. So everyone is sort of involved on the night and the community as well you know like you see your girlfriends and they bring along their kids. Mothers and fathers also come along every now and then.

- I can’t say I look up to Cathy Freeman I just think she’s just a puppet, and someone else is behind it pulling the strings telling you to say what she says.

Whereas Cathy Freeman and other Aboriginal champions have been appropriated to serve as exemplars of progressive national unity, it was argued elsewhere that this is symbolic (Bruce & Hallinan, 2001). The Wanderers are a powerful statement of resolve to re-unite generations of lost and stolen people into a configuration that celebrates real sovereignty.

**Concluding Remarks**

Basketball, like many other sports, can be an outlet for social escapism or social reflection. Playing basketball can allow individuals that are subjected to social disadvantage to feel a sense of empowerment and control (Mandle & Mandle, 1994; Boyd, 1997). Conversely, playing the game can also, at times, reinforce or reflect the feelings of social disadvantage, in the form of loss, failure and disappointment. Overall, it is clear there are many identity issues relating to Aboriginal participation in basketball. According to Gardiner (2003), when contemporary Australian sporting culture mediates Aboriginal performance, successful Indigenous men and women in
sport have been celebrated as Australian heroes—and as icons of national unity and exemplars of egalitarian race relations, but ‘re-characterised in popular discourse as Aboriginal when success dwindles or wanes. According to Gardiner, “this attends to the process of White sports rearing Black athletes.” In the case of the Wanderers, the opportunity of Black teams with Black leadership rearing Black athletes clearly raises the prospect of Aboriginal success on Aboriginal terms.

References


