Title

Sport and Well-being: Benefits and Barriers to Participation in Sport for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and African-Australian young people

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Abstract

Members of disadvantaged socioeconomic groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and African-Australian communities often experience some barriers to participating in and benefiting from sporting activities. Therefore, this article examines the benefits and barriers of participation in sport for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and African-Australian groups. The data is drawn from a systemic literature review to understand the benefits and barriers of participation in sport in these particular communities. Participation in sporting activities has been recognised for its benefits and continues to be promoted in developed and developing parts of the world for many reasons, including its economic, social and cultural and well-being benefits. Participation in sport and physical exercise is strongly encouraged by contemporary policy-makers, health and well-being workers in Australia. In the policy context, there has been increasing interest in the promotion of sports participation and a growing number calls for more diverse sports participation. Some of these calls have been directed at sporting associations and clubs to increase their levels of engagement with diverse cultural groups and, encourage young people and their families to participate in sport. However, many barriers make it difficult for these young people to navigate their way through organised sporting associations.

Key words

participation, wellbeing, sport, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, African-Australian, young people

Introduction

Participation in sport comes with many social benefits for young people from disadvantaged and low socioeconomic communities. The benefits of participation in sport include both physical and psychosocial benefits, such as enhanced health and well-being and social inclusion (Gibbs & Block, 2017). Young people from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged community groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and African-Australian communities frequently experience barriers to sports participation (May et al., 2020; Charles, 2016). These barriers include but are not limited to lack of financial support, lack of mentoring and racism and discrimination (Abur, 2016). First, it is important to establish an understanding that Australia's First Nation people face common cultural, social and political issues as African-Australians. Young people in these community groups face more barriers due to racism and discrimination in sport compared to other community groups. Also, young people in these communities' love sport (Charles, 2016; Charles, 2018b), and they are more likely to excel and do well in a sport if they are well-supported by sporting clubs. Sport can be a mirror of many aspects of society, including political views (Abur, 2016). Therefore, participation in sporting activities has been recognised and continues to be promoted in developed and developing parts of the world for many reasons, including for its social and cultural, economic and well-being benefits (Charles, 2018b; Charles, 2017; Charles, 2016; Charles, 2018a). Participation in sport and physical exercise is strongly encouraged by contemporary policy-makers and well-being workers in Australia (Dwyer et al., 1983; Bauman et al., 2001). In a policy context, there has been increasing interest in promoting participation in sport and a growing number of calls for diversity in sporting codes (Abur, 2016). Some of these calls have been directed at sporting associations and clubs to increase their levels of engagement with cultural community groups and, thus, encourage young people and their families to participate in sport (Abur, 2016). These community groups include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and African-Australian groups. Young people from these community groups are curious about participating in sports for many reasons, including for personal well-being and connecting with mentors. However, many barriers make it hard for these young people to navigate their way through sporting associations. This literature review will explore the well-being benefits and barriers to sports participation for young Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders and African-Australians. The study aims to collect evidence from the literature and to contribute to the knowledge about sport and well-being in these communities.

Context of the study

Sport is and has been an important vehicle for development in communities, especially for young people. Since the 1970s, the Australian Government has been committed to this and has provided political and financial support to athletes to perform on the global stage, such as at the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup (Green & Houlihan, 2005). This investment in and commitment to supporting athletes to achieve high levels of sporting participation is returned through pride in national identity and personal benefits (Merchant et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2004). However, there are still significant barriers to participation in sport for the minority community groups identified above. Although the Government may claim to encourage and value participation in sport, there is a clear underrepresentation of diversity in sport (Spaaij et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a great need for policy-makers to encourage leaders in sporting associations to consider issues related to diversity and minority community groups in sport.

Traditionally, participation in sport and recreational activities forms part of the well-being and life-learning activities of indigenous community groups around the world. Aboriginal Australians had established sport and other recreational activities before the colonisation and introduction of Anglo/Celtic games (Dalton et al., 2015; Adair & Rowe, 2010). Aboriginal Australians have shown they are very athletic and have been for many thousands of years (Webb et al., 2006; Watkins et al., 2006). The tremendous running speed of ancient Aboriginal Australians was documented in 21,000-year-old footprint trackways at Lake Mungo in the Willandra Lakes area of New South Wales (Johnston, 2014). Physical activity and sport are an integral part of many Aboriginal cultures; e.g., the Kaurna People (Aboriginal Tribe) were witnessed by the colonists in 1840 playing 'Parndo', a type of football that the entire community would participate in (Watkins et al., 2006). This athleticism of Aboriginal Australians is evident in modern professional sports activities such as the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL). They represent an estimated 10-20% of all players (League, 2014), even though Aboriginal people account for only 3% of the total Australian population ((ABS), 2013). The Aboriginal community has also produced world champions in many different sports (Spirits, 2016). In recent years, research has suggested young Aboriginal Australians are flourishing in elite sports such as boxing, rugby league and Australian Rules football (Adair & Rowe, 2010; Stronach & Adair, 2010). The modern sporting culture of Aboriginal Australians is

no more evident than in their participation in various State and National Aboriginal NRL, AFL, netball and cricket carnivals (Terzon, 2014; Department of Sport and Recreation, 2014; League, 2014; Association, 2016). These events are passionately contested and are an exhibition of their speed and agility. Despite showing such natural ability for athleticism and sport, there are many barriers preventing Aboriginal Australians from participating in sport (May et al., 2020). Some of barriers for young people from including discrimination and racism, lack of financial resources, lack of family support and lack of professional coaches or trainers in community.

This also applies to African community groups where young people spend many hours playing sport in their villages for fun and personal well-being (Abur, 2016; Spaaij, 2015; Singer, 2005). People from heritage are excelling in elite sports such as soccer and basketball as sporting games they love and perform well in when they are given the opportunity to play (Abur, 2016; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003). Therefore, sport has shown some potential evidence and hope of becoming an avenue to assist young people from disadvantaged communities in developing life skills and well-being (Dalton et al. 2015). Participation in physical activities and sport significantly benefits the health and well-being of both individuals and community groups (Abur, 2016; Townsend et al., 2002). The World Health Organization defines health as 'as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (Townsend et al. 2002: 2). Participation in sport brings a range of benefits, such as social capital and well-being and individual and community pride, and sporting events act as a great source of social interaction between different age groups in the community. Participation also improves the players' confidence and self-esteem. For instance, being a good team player brings recognition and respect, and improving fitness levels can help individual players feel positive about themselves and enhance their pride due to the hard work that is required to achieve a certain level of fitness or weight loss (Fox & Lindwall, 2014). Participation in sport also assists young people in making connections with their peers, friends, coaches and community. Young people do enjoy participating in physical activity, and this helps them with their physical, emotional, and cognitive development (Bruner et al., 2019). Given the well-being benefits associated with sport, physical activity is promoted more broadly as a response to well-being issues by some government and non-governmental agencies. This paper provides a critical analysis of existing literature as a way of understanding the barriers to participation in sport for the groups identified above. It makes some recommendations that can be used by policy-makers to increase diversity in Australian sport. This critical analysis not only advances the understanding of existing gaps but also contributes to a theoretical understanding of the well-being benefits that come with participation in sport such as basketball, Australian football League, netball, cricket, soccer and so forth

Decolonising theory

Given the colonisation experiences and ongoing racism and discrimination in sports, stories of indigenous people from decolonisation perspective (Esgin et al., 2019). The research field of indigenous sports has been developed from ongoing matters of civil and human rights in context of social, political, and economic participation. Bamblett (2011) argues that "speaking loudly and often against stereotypes of innate abilities while detailing examples of racism were important parts of the efforts to advance the legal rights of black people in America and Australia" (Bamblett, 2011. p 6). This research paper is drawn from decolonisation theory. Decolonising theory is a critical understanding of underlying assumptions, motivations, and values about indigenous communities around the global (Smith, 2013). In other words, decolonising theory is a genuine returning of indigenous people to their cultural roots and direction after realisation of the damage imposed on indigenous community groups by their colonisers (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019). Thus, the decolonising theory is an empowerment and liberation from colonisation to decolonisation and it is a powerful theory from indigenous research perspective. Social capital theory from Bourdieu's different forms of capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), has also been applied to understand the benefits of sports. For instance, social capital framework is used to understand the social benefits of participation in sport (Abur, 2016; Spaaij, 2015; Seibert et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2019). social capital is a conceptual framework deployed as a method in the literature review to provide a comprehensive assessment of the literature on sport and physical activity (Spaaij et al., 2019).

Method

Therefore, the structure of this paper is based on the following key concepts. Firstly, a system literature review is deployed as conceptual framework and methodology for the research. This is followed by an outline of the key themes in relation to barriers and benefits. What is a systematic literature review? Well, it is a method that is widely deployed in research that seeks to reduce the potential bias and increase the transparency of findings (Torgerson, 2003). Therefore, the systemic review method involves a process of searching for relevant literature and is research in itself, considering all the

processes and steps involved in addressing broader questions in empirical studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Siddaway, 2014). In addition, a systematic review is a framework that offers protocols and processes that are followed by the researcher or reviewer throughout all stages. This critical approach importantly involves interpreting and incorporating social and political issues within an epistemological framework (Torgerson, 2003). A critical analysis is about examining issues using a critical lens without taking any information for granted (Kendall, 2007; Fairclough, 2009). The figure below presents the selection process for this systematic literature review.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in the literature review process

Inclusion and exclusion
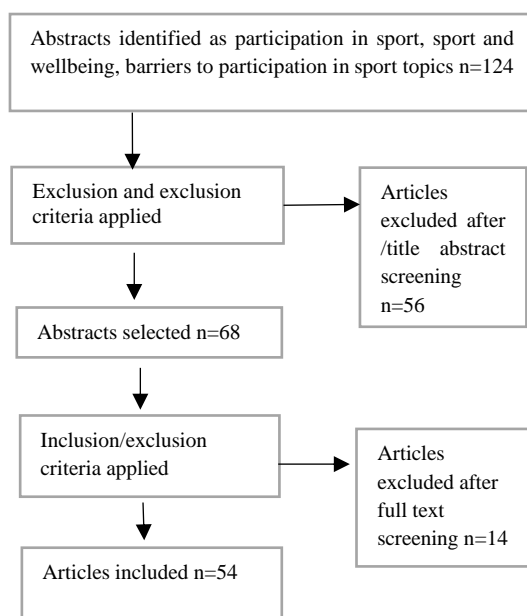
As demonstrated in the figure above, seven criteria were used to select the eligible articles. The eligibility of articles was based on readings of abstracts. Several papers were rejected or excluded based on the researcher's judgment. Such papers were excluded because the abstracts stated little about sporting participation.

Limitations

Similar to any research, there are limitations to a systemic literature review, and this study is no exception (Mallett et al. 2012). One of the limitations is that this literature review has a limited scope. However, there is a great need to conduct a broad literature review in these areas and make recommendations.

Findings and discussion

Findings from this literature review revealed both the benefits of participation and barriers to participation in sports. Benefits include well-being benefits and social capital benefits. In addition, barriers to participation include racism and lack of economic capital. Despite the barriers to participation, it is important to acknowledge that participation in sport for young people is recognised and valued in many parts of the world by governments, policy-makers, parents, and others, such as health workers, for its well-being benefits (Nicholson et al., 2010). Although, significant time, energy and money are needed to support young people to engage actively in sport. Findings from this literature review suggest that parents from higher socioeconomic groups have clear goals or strategies in wanting to raise their children in active ways through participation in organised sport. Those parents can either have direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional strategies (Wheeler, 2012). However, many parents and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds miss out on participating in sport due to a lack of financial resources and support. Some other social issues that are determining factors in sport participation include gender, social class and ethnicity. These factors play a huge role in families and often negatively affect the level of participation of young people in sport (Wheeler, 2012). Social inclusion in sports participation is a tool that can be used to assist young people in gaining self-confidence and self-pride (Bruner, et al., 2019)

Benefits: Social capital

According to social capital theory, sport is a great way of connecting young people with each other to have fun with friends, to be productively competitive and to stay in good physical shape. Players can improve their skills, make friends and learn how to be part of a team. Playing sport is a meaningful and pleasurable activity for anybody who engages in or follows sporting activities. Physical activities and sports are integrally related to their social contexts. As social meanings and power shift in society, the purpose of organised sporting activities and games also changes (Abur, 2016; Bunde-Birouste et al., 2012). Participation in sport is a useful way of engaging young people in any society. Playing sport can be a rewarding experience, particularly for young people who wish to engage in physical activity. In some cultures, games and contests are grounded in folklore and religious belief (Charles, 2016; Watkins et al., 2006). Therefore, participating in sport can be a meaningful and purposeful way to promote well-being and social connections among young people (Abur, 2016; Spaaij, 2015). Sport has emerged on the global stage as an avenue to improve outcomes

in communities with a high level of social and economic disadvantage (Dalton et al., 2015; Spaaij, 2015).

In theory, people choose to engage in sport for three main reasons: (1) a person's abilities, characteristics and resources; (2) influence of significance including parents, siblings, teachers, peers and role models, and (3) the availability of opportunities to play sport in ways that are personally satisfying. Participants may be given an opportunity to take personal responsibility for the creation of a quality lifestyle (Leeann et al., 2013). Participating in sport has also been shown to have other benefits. These include gaining employment thorough sporting networks. Networking is more important in the sports industry because individuals in sports organisations often hire those they know personally (Abur, 2016). Participants may gain employment opportunities in the sports industry. This is extremely important in many ways (Alan & Michael, 2013) and can be a great help for refugees and other migrants. This social capital cannot be ignored: sport may provide an opportunity to meet people in the field who can be a great help and form personal and professional networks (Leeann et al., 2013). Besides the social benefits of participation in sport, there are many health benefits associated with actively engaging in sport or physical activity. For instance, people who actively engage in physical activity benefit from a higher level of fitness and a lower risk of adverse medical conditions compared to inactive people (Eime et al., 2013). Research has also indicated that young people who actively participated in sport are more likely to be physically active in their adulthood compared to those who did not participate in sport during their childhood (Eime et al. 2013: 3).

Barriers to participation in sport

The barriers were only discussed briefly in the literature reviewed, with much more space given to the benefits of participation. The preceding section discussed the barriers to participation in sport for young people and their families in the groups specified earlier. Some of these barriers include economic barriers, racism, discrimination, and cultural insensitivity (Abur, 2016, Abur 2018). In addition, other barriers hold back parents and young people in disadvantaged community groups from engaging in sport such as the availability of time and suitability of sporting locations. Some parents or guardians of young people that have a disadvantaged background do not have access to cars to drive a young person to a venue that may be some distance from their residence.

Economic barriers to participation in sport

The effective engagement and participation in organised sporting programs at both national and international levels, as well as at a local community grassroots level, are very important to minority groups. However, effective participation in organised sports programs or associations comes with a high cost that excludes many lower socioeconomic groups. One barrier to the effective participation in sport for young people and their families from disadvantaged backgrounds is, therefore, costs. A lack of financial resources is a common barrier for young people from cultural groups such as African and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups (Abur, 2016). Research suggests that young people from low socioeconomic families often miss out on participating actively in sport because of the cost involved (Somerset & Hoare, 2018). Lack of finances often affects young people's ability to engage in sport, even though they might like to participate with their colleagues from the opposite side of the economic spectrum (Abur 2018). Evidence suggests, 'Children from poorer backgrounds and those from single parent families are more likely to be affected by these barriers' (Somerset & Hoare, 2018: 32).

Racism in sport

Sport is a principal social field where players, parents and other supporters can come to participate as spectators, which is highly positive in terms of engaging the wider community. However, ugly racist behaviours are often displayed or appear in sport and are inflicted on players from minority community groups. These racist behaviours discourage young people and families from minority groups from committing to and engaging actively in sport. International research in Canada suggests that racism is an ongoing problem in society and often manifests itself in sport (Abur, 2016, Abur 2018). In this paper, racism is explored as a critical problem in sport for the specified groups. From the lens of critical race theory, some live with an acute awareness of oppression or disadvantage in society because of their race, social group, ethnicity, nationality and social intersectionality such as gender, class, disability, and so on (Hylton, 2010). The racism issue in sport is comprised of both casual racism on the field and institutional racism. The latter exists in both the sporting arena and at the structural levels of associations. Ill-advised or racially stereotyped comments from a coach, sports journalist, sports leader or the athletes themselves often send a very strong negative message to young players and their families (Massao & Fasting, 2010). It does not matter whether the comment is intentional or unintentional; they all have the consequence of potentially steering people in

cultural minority groups away from full participation in sport. Racism is a serious problem that causes fear, anxiety and mistrust and, ultimately, becomes a barrier to participation in sport and society.

Cultural insensitivity

Cultural insensitivity on the sports field is problematic to players and families from minority cultural groups. Some programs and activities are insensitive to cultures and traditions. This cultural insensitivity can be an agent for deterring families and young people from minority cultural groups in engaging actively in sports associations (Somerset & Hoare, 2018). Therefore, sporting associations must rethink their policies to accommodate cultural issues. They must create or provide a positive environment that welcomes families and their young people from different community groups and different lifestyles.

Those in leadership positions in sport have been shown to pay little attention or no attention at all to the issue of diversity and underrepresentation of community groups in sporting clubs (Spaaij et al., 2019). There are some such leaders who resist the idea of diversity in sporting clubs and promoting the participation of sport to culturally diverse community groups. Such resisters include coaches, managers, directors and other key decision-makers in sporting associations. Sometimes, a struggle within leadership to accept changes that accommodate minority community groups may unfold. Resistance to change is part of a de facto program in sporting organisations. It also forms part of social justice and power struggles within sporting associations (Spaaij et al., 2019).

Even though governments and policy-makers have recognised the advantages of participation in sport, we still have a long way to go in Australia for diverse community groups to attain an effective level of participation in sport compared to their mainstream counterparts. Young people and their families from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and African community groups will remain underrepresented in sport due to the barriers identified above. Through the findings from this paper, we know that marginalised community groups are less likely to participate in recreational sports activities and organised sports clubs (Spaaij et al., 2019). We have highlighted both the benefits of participation, including the well-being and social benefits, as well as the barriers to participation in sport.

The findings in this paper suggest that participation in sport is vital due to its social, well-being, cultural and economic benefits. Further, such participation can foster unity in the community, a sense of national worth or nation-building, as well as improved social and health outcomes for society more broadly. Sport is considered by some developed and developing countries as a worthwhile investment as their governments allocate resources and develop better policies for all community groups (Nicholson et al., 2010). Participation in sport has multiple benefits, such as the improved physical and mental health of individuals and the wider community as well as increased social capital.

Recommendations

We hope that policy-makers in sporting associations and their leaders, such as coaches and committees, will consider the findings in this paper and assist young people in minority groups by removing the identified barriers so they can participate in sport equally. Government and non-governmental community organisations or associations need to take responsibility for promoting sport to lower socioeconomic community groups to increase the sports participation of young people from those groups. We also recommended that all sporting clubs or associations address issues of racism and discrimination in order to keep young people from minority groups safe from racism and discrimination in the sporting arena. There is a strong need for sporting associations to work closely and collaboratively with those same groups to encourage them and address the barriers to their engagement in sport. Those young people require careful and sensitive support for them to successfully participate in organised activities. By working in partnership with community groups, there is greater opportunity for the involvement of diverse families and young people in organised sports programs. In this article, we remind sports clubs and sports associations as well as policy-makers to promote inclusive sports programs. Sport can be an important instrument to reduce critical health and social issues, such as antisocial behaviour and social isolation, while improving community safety and cohesion (Abur, 2016; Abur 2018, Gibbs & Block, 2017)

Conclusion

Lack of support and engagement from sporting associations with young people from disadvantaged families or community groups may perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage and increase their likelihood of being involved in antisocial activities. This paper has analysed and synthesised the critical issues that are holding back young people in Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and African community groups from engaging effectively in sport. We have outlined the benefits of participation in sport for these community groups and general society, as participation in sport and physical activity is gaining momentum in many communities around the world. Therefore, this paper makes a significant

contribution to existing research knowledge and, specifically, to the understanding of the critical issues facing Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and African young people in sport in Australia. We know that sport can be a great vehicle for peace in disadvantaged communities. Therefore, the participation of disadvantaged young people in sport may prevent them from engaging in some anti-social activities that may bring unrest to society in general.

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