The long road from local communities to professional sport and the culture of the global sport industry for indigenous Australians

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Abstract

This article draws on the findings of a three-year, inter-disciplinary study conducted on the journeys of sixteen Australian Indigenous sportsmen from their first touch of the 'footy' to the most elite levels of Australian football and rugby league and the central role of culture in these journeys. The first stage of their journeys involved the development of expertise and a distinctively Indigenous approach to their sport from early childhood to around the age of around thirteen. The second stage involved dealing with the challenges of cultural transitioning from small, local communities and practices to professional sport and the global culture of the sport industry

Introduction

Processes of globalization in sport have seen an increase in athlete mobility and transnational athlete migration that has attracted significant research interest from sociological and psychological perspectives (see, Agergaard and Ryba, 2014; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007). Within this literature, there is some concern over the vulnerability

of many athletes as they face the challenges of adapting to sport and life in foreign cultures (see, Campbell, 2010; Carrington, 2005a, b). The challenges are, however, not limited to crossing physical borders. They are challenges also typically faced by Indigenous athletes within their own country (see, Campbell and Sonn, 2009; Light, Evans and Lavallee, 2019).

In this article we draw on the findings of a three-year, inter-disciplinary study conducted on the journeys of Australian Indigenous sportsmen from humble beginnings to the most elite levels of Australian football and rugby league as a process of culturally situated learning (Light and Evans, 2018).

Focused on the stories of eight AFL (Australian Football League) and eight NRL (National Rugby League) players, we identify two distinct stages of their journeys. These were (1) the development of the foundations of expertise and a distinctively Indigenous approach to their sport from early childhood to around the age of around thirteen and, (2) transitioning from small, local communities and Indigenous practices of their sport to professional sport and the global culture of the sport industry

Stage one of our analysis identifies the importance of the social and cultural environment for the participants' early development of expertise and the inseparability of culture from learning. It also highlighted the pivotal role that informal and self-regulated 'knock up' games played in the development of their silky skills, game sense, creativity and anticipation that are hallmarks of Indigenous AFL and NRL players (Hallinan, Bruce and Burke, 2005). From their first touch of the footy (football) to around the age of thirteen they learned to play their sport as a cultural practice of their communities. They learned through an implicit pedagogy shaped by Indigenous culture that embodied a

distinctly Indigenous way and style of play that is much valued by AFL and NRL clubs across Australia.

The second stage involved processes of cultural transitioning (see, Ryba, Stanbulova and Ronkainen, 2016) from sport as a cultural practice into the culture of professional sport and of the global sport industry. This process required dealing with significant challenges as they moved into more mainstream, non-indigenous ways of training for, and playing their sport and through which their sport shifted from a form of play and cultural expression to work.

Sport as Indigenous cultural practice in Australia

Sport is an important social and cultural practice in Indigenous Australian communities as is evident in Norman's (2012) history of the New South Wales Aboriginal rugby league knockout competition. It plays a central role in promoting congregation and competition as a contemporary cultural practice linked to traditional cultural practice (Slater, 2010). Indeed, Judd (2005) suggests that Australian rules football is an Aboriginal cultural artefact. This study follows on from growing recognition of how the development of sporting expertise is shaped by the socio-cultural environment (see Côté, Baker and Abernathy, 2012; Côté, Ericsson and Law, 2005) but also looks at the challenges faced by the participants as they transition into mainstream sport and the culture of the global sport industry.

The influence of socio-cultural context on the development of expertise in athletes and coaches cannot be ignored in mainstream settings (see, Holmes, Light and Sparkes, 2020) but it is more significant for Indigenous Australian athletes (Nelson, Abbott, and

Macdonald, 2010). Socio-cultural and socio-ecological perspectives can illuminate the development of expertise as a process of learning shaped by Indigenous culture (see Light and Evans, 2018). They provide a valuable framework for understanding and promoting participation in sport for Indigenous communities while accounting for the complexity and diversity of Indigenous people's lived experiences (Bamblett, 2013).

The socio-cultural context can also have a positive influence on Indigenous health and wellbeing (Dalton, Wilson, Evans and Cochrane, 2015), but the development of Indigenous expertise as a culturally situated process of learning has attracted limited research attention (see for an exception, Light and Evans, 2018).

Cultural transitioning

The theory of athlete, cultural transitioning (see, Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek and Ng, 2012) was developed from Schlossberg's (1981, 2003) sociological theory of transitioning. It offers a useful way of conceptualizing and understanding the challenges that transnational athletes face and how they deal with them. It offers a way of understanding the challenges faced by the participants in this study that involved crossing a figurative border between Indigenous culture and the global culture of the sport industry. The challenges involved in adapting to a professional culture of sport were intensified for some of them by having to live in a non-Indigenous culture. For a few of them, this meant living over 3000 kilometres from home.

Schlossberg (2003) defines a transition as any event experienced by the individual that significantly changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. She proposes four psychological factors that assist in coping with them as being: the situation, self, social

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support and strategies for coping, but there is a lack of research attention paid to the adjustments required by athletes within the global, transnational sport industry and the implications these have for their sport performance and lives outside, and around, their sport (see, Ryba et al., 2016).

Career adaptability

Career adaptability is a psychosocial construct including both readiness and resources for successfully facing vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and unexpected challenges (Johnson, 2018). This area has become a focus of attention of sport psychology researchers and practitioners in recent years due to the direct impact that skills and employability have on life opportunities for athletes (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). A better understanding of how career-related skills are adapted over time can facilitate improving the transition experiences for athletes. In this study, we were interested in how the athletes learned and retained a broad range of diverse skills, and also acquired new ones, in order to successfully navigate a cultural transition.

Identification of the pivotal importance of culture in the study we draw on in this article contributes toward knowledge about athlete career transitions from a cultural perspective in the sport psychology literature, as a core component of the multi-disciplinary approach we take to understanding the nature and implications of the participants' transition into professional sport.

Methodology

The study drawn on in this article combined narrative inquiry and grounded theory methodology as suggested by Lal, Suto and Ungar (2012). This was aimed at providing an inside perspective and a holistic understanding of experiences in particular socio-cultural settings and situations that facilitated the participants' development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league. The study's use of a life history type interview and its emphasis on locating theory within a narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying emerging themes from which to develop theories grounded in the data. The combined, methodology approach also complemented the importance of telling stories in Aboriginal culture (Bamblett, 2013).

Participants

Sixteen former Indigenous players participated in the study comprised of eight who had played in the AFL and eight who had played in the NRL. All of them had played within the past ten years. Within the AFL cohort, four players were initially approached through the Indigenous manager for the Australian Football League Players Association with a snowball sampling approach used to recruit the other four. The NRL cohort sample was also selected using a purposive and snowballing approach to recruit participants.

Data generation and analysis

Data were generated through initial life history type interviews of approximately one hour in which the participants were asked to tell their story from their first exposure to their sport to making the AFL or NRL. During this interview we limited questions to getting clarification on points such as dates and chronological order. Analysis of this data

identified some emerging theories across all participants that were explored with two rounds of shorter, semi-structured interviews used to explore common emerging themes, while keeping the stories intact. These questions were focused on developing emergent, and then substantive, theories grounded in the data that were connected with more formal theory in the latter stages of the process to develop theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006).. The following section of the article presents and discusses the two main stages of the participants' journeys to the AFL and NRL.

Results

Stage 1: Informal learning through play and culture

From their first touch of a footy to around the age of twelve or thirteen, the participants developed the skill and attributes Aboriginal players are renown for in Australia through participation in the practices of their communities. For most of them, these were communities shaped by Aboriginal communities but two grew up in communities that were not dominated by Aboriginal culture. They were, however, strongly influenced by this culture within their communities. This occurred through their extended families within which behaviour, action and discourse was very strongly influenced by Aboriginal culture.

Across the sixteen participants, we identified three factors that most enhanced and facilitated their development of talent and expertise in footy. These were (1) informal learning through playing unstructured games, (2) the socio-cultural environment and (3) playing other sports.

Informal Games

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Learning through informal games appeared to have the strongest influence on the development of expertise during the sampling phase. Desmond's (NRL) experiences of growing up always, "being on a park or playing in the backyard, just constantly for hours and hours" is typical of the stories told to us by the participants in the study. It was intimately tied into the players' social and cultural environments, relationships with significant other people and playing a range of other sports. They did learn from adults and relatives such as uncles and older brothers, and from coaches of teams they played in from the time they entered primary school but learning through participation in informal, self-regulated games made the strongest contribution to their development of expertise as children.

Alvin believed that he learned through just playing games on his own and with relatives and friends as learning things that 'don't get noticed'. After watching local adult games and games on the television he would go out into the back yard where he would:

Kick anything shaped like a football, that's how bad we were. This (plastic) bottle - it's shape - so we used to kick around two-litre coke bottles, there was always these special little ways to make it a lot more harder so it's better to kick but we just had to be aware, I guess, of hitting the wrong tip of the bottle but we kicked toilet rolls, stubby coasters in the house, put goals everywhere in the yards and that's just how it was.

This also provides an example of how the physical and socio-cultural environment the participants grew up in encouraged creativity by being forced to adapt to particular constraints in terms of resources available to them.

The participants fondly recalled playing informal games modified to suit the particular conditions, or resources available that included, how many mates were available to play, the size and shape of the playing space available and in the availability of a ball. These games featured most prominently in the stories told of growing up in remote regions and in the Northern Territory in particular. As well as playing informal games most participants suggested the ways in which they felt they learned by watching others in their communities from an early age. This included watching adults, older boys in the community and older brothers as well as watching AFL and lower leagues on television and local league games at the ground. Carl believed that he learned to play most by watching good players and by playing backyard games. He suggested that the knowledge he developed through experiences of watching and playing 'backyard games' was enacted without any conscious or rational thinking:

> That's where you learn that sort of backyard skills and it just becomes natural, it just all happens and you don't think about it because you're playing with your mates, playing with cousins, you're just enjoying it and it's not really structured. (Carl, interview 1)

When asked about the importance of informal games on his development into an AFL player, Max (AFL, interview 2) replied by saying that:

> I think massive…We were always doing stuff down at the place called the low level and we'd all have barbies and that and that was it. That's where you learned all your skills, you know, you'd chase your older cousins around and that sort of stuff, so I think that was massive in obviously the early development.

The Socio-Cultural Environment

Relatives figured prominently in setting up opportunities to train and play footy to advance the participants' careers that often involved moving homes. They expressed great gratitude for the effort their mothers put into raising them and guiding them into a successful 'footy' career and were highly motivated to succeed by a need to repay their mothers, as was the case with Alvin (AFL, interview 1):

> Well my mum, like I said, that's the thing that sort of stuck in my mind is that I wanted to make my family proud, like the people up in Darwin, make a name for myself but also the big drive thing was to make her proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never thank your parents enough.

The participants had grown up immersed in their sport as a cultural practice from an early age and this was particularly the case for those who had learnt to play footy in the Northern Territory and remote regional locations in New South Wales. Participants who had grown up in Melbourne, Sydney and in Victorian and NSW rural settings, were introduced to footy informally at a very young age but in environments that were different to those of the participants from 'the Territory'. Many could be seen as communities strongly influenced by Aboriginal culture but Carl (AFL) grew up with little to no contact with other Aboriginal boys. He joined the local Australian football club where his father had played and grew up immersed in footy culture and was influenced by his extended family:

I would go to watch Carlton (AFL team) on a regular basis on a Saturday afternoon with my mother, my nan (grandmother) and my aunty so I really got involved in football then and took a real interest in it and about playing AFL football and what it takes to play AFL football and I'd get the prep talks on the way there, on the way home and the dissecting of the game and of how Carlton went and how bad they went and how good they went. (Carl, AFL, interview 1)

For most of the participants footy was the dominant cultural practice in the communities they grew up in. It was so dominant that none of them remembered making a conscious decision to play, because it was just what you do:

… all I did was play football, cricket, soccer, you know, whatever sort of ball we could get our hands on or whatever was happening we all did and 'cause my family were really orientated with sports so as a young kid it was just engrained in me that that's what we did. (Austin, NRL, interview one).

Clive grew up playing sport as an Indigenous cultural practice and part of day-to-day life for him. This was not just in his community but is part of Aboriginal culture. As Clive pointed out, sport has cultural significance for Aboriginal people and holds an important place in their culture:

It's part of our culture to do things as a group, to enjoy each other's company and all that sort of stuff... Indigenous people play football the way they do and enjoy training the way they do. It takes them back to those cultural ways that our people have, you know, and I

think competitive games and stuff like that…we just love being out there. (NRL, interview

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Playing Other Sports

For all sixteen participants, footy was not the only sport they played growing up in their

communities. Sport was part of social gatherings with them playing a range of other

sports sch as basketball, rugby league, cricket and football (soccer).Research in sport

coaching suggests that playing a range of sports as children contributes positively toward

enjoyment, continued participation and the development of expertise (Côté, 2005; Côté &

Hay, 2002) and this semed to be the case in this study. The participants would all play a

mix of sports and particularly when younger:

The earliest memory of growing up was pretty much going to parties, going to barbeques,

cousins, uncles, and it would be always sport, whether it was the game we used to play, fly,

or we'd play other games, ball games, soccer, cricket, cricket was a big thing. We'd always

have two teams and cricket would go all day, just in the backyard… we'd play cricket

morning 'til sunset and, yeah, a lot of it was around sport. (Austin, NRL, interview 1)

Many of the participants suggested the positive influence that playing sports other than

the code of footy they played. Brent moved interstate to rural Victoria at ten years of age.

He had played a lot of basketball but had never played Australian football. Despite that,

he picked up footy quickly and suggested the contribution the other sorts he had played

helped him learn and become skillful at footy. He believed that his extensive experience

of playing football (soccer) and basketball helped him learn to play footy quickly.

First exposed to footy in informal games with new friends and at school he joined a local club at twelve years of age and contributed his ability to learn quickly to his basketball experience: 'Playing basketball at school, playing just at club level, had a massive influence to actually working out angles, to be able to bounce the ball and look up and do three things at once.'

Stage two: Cultural transitioning into professional sport

Stage two involved leaving the familiar surrounds of the communities where they had learned to play their sport to join more 'mainstream' clubs where they began to believe in their ability to make the AFL or NRL. As they improved and moved up to higher levels of competition, they had to increasingly adapt to high performance environments and then to professional environments.

The Challenges

The participants grew up playing sport as a meaningful practice in their communities and culture but their movement toward and into the AFL and NRL involved increasing exposure and adjustment to the practice of footy with different meanings and within different socio-cultural contexts. All but one had to move away from family, small communities and the culture they had grown up in into bigger, foreign and confronting socio-cultural environments.

Two participants felt so lonely that they cried every night for the first year or two of being in an AFL club with others feeling the displacement, isolation and alienation that research on athlete transnational transition commonly identifies (see, Agergaard and Ryba, 2014, Ryba et al., 2012; Ryba et al., 2016; Shinke at al., 2013). Some of the NRL players

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suffered serious injuries in their first couple of years in the NRL and were demoted to a lower team or competition. Injury is a common concern for any professional athlete but is accentuated when transitioning into different cultures of the sport with anxiety about being demoted (see, Ryba et al., 2016). The AFL and NRL participants had to deal with the personal, psychological and emotional challenges involved in transitioning into the culture of professional sport as well as the foreign culture surrounding it. Like first nation athletes in Canada, they had to learn how to manage emotional challenges and to draw on cultural connections for strength (Jonston, Crosschild, Poudrier, Foulds and Ferguson, 2019).

After growing up learning footy in small supportive communities the participants were confronted by more individualized approaches to training. This involved constant measuring and monitoring of performance and fitness, individual accountability and expectations of individual discipline. Bernie (NRL) found being 'up' and 'on' every day in a highly competitive environment without a sense of community, a challenge that is typically faced by Indigenous players (Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, Danielson, Peltier, et al., 2006).

As he moved up into higher level teams Carl (AFL) struggled to deal with structure so much that he quit a representative schoolboy team to return to his local club at the age of fifteen. Two years later, he was drafted into an AFL club in Melbourne where he again struggled with the emphasis placed on fitness, strength training and meeting quantified standards but enjoyed anything where he had ball in hand.

Moving into professional sport meant a change in meaning of footy. It changed from cultural expression to work. They felt a disjunction between the game they had grown up with and its professional version (see, Schinke, et al., 2006). The communities that the

participants grew up in were shaped or at least influenced by an Indigenous approach to playing footy. Carl and Toby did not grow up in Indigenous communities but had strong identities as Indigenous Australians and played with other Indigenous Australians as they developed. The two factors that most supported the participants and contributed to them being able to meet the challenges and to their career adaptability were, (1) the influence of mentors and (2) being able to draw on learning from family and community.

The Influence of Mentors

In sport coaching, mentoring is seen as a role played by coaches in developing their athletes beyond the improvement of technique with the term generally taken to refer to guiding and supporting them (see, Bloom, 2013; Chambers, 2015) It implies developing, 'trusting relationships with athletes to nourish and catalyze their personal and athletic development' (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke and Salmela, 1998, 211-278). Having a mentor during cultural transitioning helped most of the participants' ability to transition into foreign approaches to training and playing. It also helped them make sense of day-to-day life in very different social and cultural environments.

From the age of twelve Alvin moved from the Northern Territory to rural Victoria for six months of the year over a two-year period. In Victoria he lived with an uncle who was also coach of the team he played in and helped him adjust to training and approaches to play that were more structured than what he had been used to. When he moved to Sydney Danny (NRL) lived with an Aboriginal league legend, Andy Brown (pseudonym), for a few months and stayed in contact with him after that. Andy helped Danny adjust to the culture of the NRL and encouraged him to persevere after being dropped from the first-grade squad in his club. Up until being drafted into the AFL Toby did not have an

effective mentor until his move into an AFL club in Adelaide where his Indigenous

mentor, Allen (pseudonym), was pivotal to his success:

> He became like a brother or father or father figure you get put in that kind of space that was
> what his family did as well. It was only when I got there that I actually really, really
> flourished...I almost solely put it down as being with Allen. (Tony, (interview 1)

Carl (AFL) struggled the most with transitioning from the Aboriginal culture of footy

to the culture of commodified, professional footy from the age of thirteen onwards. His

club coach made an effort to help him, but it was not until making it to the AFL that he felt

he found an effective mentor who could help him transition into the culture of professional

footy:

> (He) just painted the canvas of what you need to do to win AFL games. So, I started realizing
> what I needed to do and then what my teammates needed to do and just painted a clear picture
> on how football is played. (Carl, interview 1)

Bernie (NRL) had very strong support from his family and community and saw his best

friend's father and his high school coach as mentors who had guided him and encouraged

him over his high school years. However, this was no so much a case of having to suddenly

adjust to more structured approaches to training and playing as most other participants did

because this was the approach taken over his years at a specialist sports school.

Learning from family and community

Schlossberg (1981, 2003) emphasizes the importance of social support for coping with the stresses and challenge that arise from transitioning. Specifically, she identifies the influence of (1) intimate relationships, (2) family units, (3) networks of friends and (4) institutions and communities that are reflected in our findings. Support from their social networks and communities, and intimate relationships such as with their mothers supported them when moving from small communities toward the AFL and NRL. Moving closer toward and into the AFL and NRL involved moving much further away from home into increasingly challenging cultural contexts, but they all felt that their values and strong identity as Aboriginals sustained them.

For those who had moved to the AFL or NRL before finishing school, this included adapting to very different school environment that typically presents a challenge for any young person (see, Engec, 2006). This was accentuated by the other challenges involved in a major cultural transitioning (see, Shinke, et al., 2013). Close relationships with uncles or aunties, a brother or a boyfriend of a sister or the family of a friend were of great help in adjusting to new environments. Those with no mentors relied on what they had learned from their families and communities to persevere. Even those who had support from mentors drew on what they had learned from family and community were for their success in meeting the challenges of transitioning.

Danny (NRL) felt that the way in which his parents raised him prepared him for meeting the challenges of living in Sydney, going to a new school and handling the pressure of making the most of his opportunity to play for an NRL team. Mark's (AFL) biggest challenge was moving from a remote community in the Northern Territory to spend six

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years in an elite independent school in Sydney where the support he received from his Aunty was pivotal to his success at school and in footy.

For Ryan (NRL), his people, his family, community and his (Aboriginal) country made him the sort of person who could succeed in rugby league. His experiences of growing up in this meaningful and supportive environment promoted confidence in his ability to succeed and helped him deal with adversity in the early stages of his NRL career. Bernie had remained in his home suburb in Sydney up until the end of his first five years in the NRL and stayed in contact with his family and community. He felt this kept him grounded and gave him the confidence to deal with the challenges he faced. His ability to give back to his community and how he felt it inspired young people in the community also motivated him:

> … you can see that it inspires others around them so that it can create positive change in a community or in some individual's lives, and that's probably the biggest part of our rugby league, was my impact on other people, and to try and help and change their lives. (Bernie, NRL, interview 1)

Discussion

When the participants made it to the AF lot NRL they entered a different world. It was a world in which the meaning and practice of footy was immensely different to what it had been in the local communities where they developed their expertise. Australian football and rugby league are not global sports, but they are shaped by, a global culture of sport as business that is vastly different to the small communities that they grew up in. Arising from the globalisation of sport as business, the global culture of the sport industry has

vastly different values, beliefs and assumptions to traditional sport as education. For Australian Indigenous sport, the difference is even more marked.

Adapting to the culture of the global sport industry presents a challenge for any athlete but this and other studies (see, Campbell and Sonn, 2009; Jonston, et al., 2019) suggest it presents a significantly bigger challenge for Indigenous athletes.

The participants in this study learned to play footy as part of day-to-day life in their communities and cultures with support from relatives and other members of the community they trusted. They learned to play primarily through games that they designed and managed to suit their needs and the resources at hand. It was though organizing, playing and managing these games, shaped by Aboriginal culture, that they developed the distinctive abilities and characteristics of Aboriginal players in the AFL and NRL so widely respected in Australia. This suggests the cultural roots of the creativity, awareness and game sense described by Hallinan, Bruce and Burke (2005) as a 'sixth sense' possessed by Indigenous AFL and NRL players. It contrasts with the highly structured approaches to coaching that typically characterise mainstream coaching they had to transition into on their journeys to the AFL and NRL.

From around thirteen, the participants moved into training environments that were very different to what they had been used to and to which they had to adapt. They began to realise their talent and opportunities for playing in the AFL or NRL and moved toward achieving this goal, which required adapting to the world of professional sport and the values of the global sport industry.

They had to move away from home to live in social environments that were radically different to those they had grown up in. They often felt lonely, disconnected and

vulnerable (see also, Jonston, et al., 2019). Here they faced a confronting cultural border. It was one that was no less confronting than the international borders that migrating sportsmen and women have to negotiate when moving to foreign countries (see, Agergaard and Ryba, 2014; Carpenter and Light, 2019).

Athletes who transition into new cultures deal with a range of challenges similar to those that the participants in this study were faced with. These include feelings of being lost and disconnected, of not knowing, or understanding the new culture, the lack of meaning it has for them, and a loss of identity (see, Ryba, et al., 2016; Schinke, et al., 2013; Anderson, Goodman, J., and Schlossberg., 2011). These challenges are not limited to elite level, professional athletes but extend to non-professional athletes such as the cultural transitioning of non, elite-level Fijian rugby players into New Zealand (Carpenter and Light, 2019).

The participants who were most successful in developing long careers in the AFL and NRL felt that the grounding they developed from their communities. In particular, and their mothers helped them maintain their identity and helped them make sense of their new environments. This aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) emphasis on the importance of social support for coping with transitioning. Even for the two AFL players who had not grown up in Indigenous communities, their families and their strong sense of Aboriginality gave them strength when they needed it. For the NRL participants, this was assisted by frequently returning to their communities with the opportunity to play at the annual NSW Aboriginal (rugby league) Knockout (see, Norman, 2012) being very important to them.

As the participants navigated their way from one world view to another (Shinke, et al., 2013) they had to negotiate playing footy out of the cultural contexts that had given it meaning when growing up. This was made more difficult by the reduction in the excitement, joy and connections between teammates that they felt when playing footy with other Aboriginal boys, and the extent to which it could offer a medium for cultural expression. While the challenges they faced in coping with these changes align with sports psychology research on other athlete transitioning (e.g., Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019), the profound importance of culture, and the nature of Indigenous culture and its manifestation in style of play, provides important and distinctive insights into athlete transitioning and career adaptability.

Conclusion

The inter-disciplinary nature of this study and its focus on Indigenous sport contributes to knowledge across a number of fields and disciplines. In sport coaching and education seeing the development of expertise in sport as the result of a lifelong process of learning, shaped by culture offers a nuanced understanding of how complex the development of expertise is and not only for Indigenous peoples. In this study, Indigenous culture was central to how and what the participants learned in the development of expertise and resonates with approaches to learning that emphasize the inseparability of culture such as in the social constructivism of Bruner (see, 1996). Indigenous culture also made a powerful contribution to their transitioning into the world of the sport industry.

The findings of this study contribute to knowledge in the sports psychology field, transnational migration, and to transitioning with a focus on cultural transitioning. Seeing

the development of sport expertise as a culturally and socially situated process challenges current thinking in the sport psychology literature by providing an example of how much more complex the process is than it is currently assumed to be. This study provides detailed insights into individual experiences of transitioning from local cultures of footy to professional sport while highlighting the central role that culture played in these processes,

The pace of globalization and athlete mobility suggests that athletes will increasingly be faced with the challenges of adapting to the world of the global sport industry. This includes the challenges involved in transnational athlete migration and, as in this study, the challenge of crossing cultural borders within one country. We hope the insights this study offers can stimulate future research in this area through further methodological advancements in the area of transnational migration. Schlossberg's (1981, 2003) concept of transitioning and its application in athlete cultural transitioning provide effective means of understanding and explaining the challenges involved in making the significant cultural transition we describe and discuss in this article.

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