



**Sport Gave Me Something to Wake up For: Aboriginal Adults with Disabilities
Speak about Sport**

Melanie Elliott



Abstract

This exploratory and descriptive study described the experiences of disability from the perspective of Aboriginal adults and the meaning they give to the importance of sport in their communities. The experiences of 3 Aboriginal adults with physical disabilities were captured using the phenomenological methods of one-on-one interviews, artifact collection, and field notes. The co-participants were provided the opportunity for collaboration at each research stage, from clarifying the purpose to finalizing and interpreting the emerging themes, in an effort to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for their Aboriginal culture, beliefs, and community. The thematic analysis and interpretation of the findings facilitated by the co-participants revealed 4 themes: (a) we have to get out first, (b) not being a priority, (c) pride through accomplishments, and (d) the gift to grab others. The co-participants reflected the need to educate and build awareness of sport opportunities for other Aboriginal people with disabilities. The co-participants also expressed the need to encourage and support people with disabilities to get out of their homes and become active, visible members of society.



According to the Canadian Census (2001), there are just fewer than 1 million people in Canada who identify themselves as Aboriginal. The rate of disability amongst this population was reported to be 2.3 times that of the National average in 1994 (NAND, 1994) with approximately 494,000 Aboriginal people having a disability. Aboriginal people in Canada have congenital disabilities at approximately the same rate as the rest of Canada; however, they have a higher rate of disability due to acquired disabilities caused by environmental and trauma related events.

The disability movement has been criticized for silencing members of its own community, particularly those that are from minority groups (Ali, Fazil, Bywaters, Wallace, & Singh, 2001). The disability movement, disability studies, and disability literature has been defined and dominated by the mainstream Caucasian population. Ethnicity and disability are often considered to be two separate issues and people with disabilities from a minority population may be living the reality of overcoming multiple oppressions throughout their lives.

Aboriginal persons with disabilities may identify with their Aboriginal culture and furthermore may also identify with a disability culture. Gill (1997) presented four types of integration in disability identity development. The first type of integration was *coming to feel we belong*. People with disabilities strive for a comfortable identity in society despite being part of a marginalized group. People with disabilities want to be included into society with everyone else and expect to be accommodated for their differences. *Coming home* describes the comfort that people with disabilities may have with people 'who have been there.' There is a level of connection, understanding, acceptance or culture that people with disabilities share within their disability community. The third form of integration Gill identifies is *coming together*. According to Gill, people with disabilities have the right to embrace their sameness with the human family as well as their differences as part of the disability family. There is often a tension inside people with disabilities that is resolved as people assimilate their disability into a positive self-identity. The fourth and final form of integration is *coming out*. People with disabilities accept their differences and are ready to present themselves in public. In coming out, individuals with disabilities present themselves without any internal conflict or social discomfort (Gill). As Gill states, "The 'coming out' process is often the last step towards disability identity in a path that begins with a desire to find a place in society, continues with a discovery of one's place in a community of peers, and builds to an appreciation and acceptance of one's whole self complete with a disability" (p. 45).

The minority group model purports that self-advocacy through group association can bring about the social, political, and economic changes needed to overcome the barriers people with disabilities face in society (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2002). Moreover, the minority group model provides a dynamic view of disability that acknowledges the interaction between the individual and the environment, thereby challenging the assumptions that people with disabilities are the primary source of their problems. Hahn (1993) suggests that social attitudes rather than physical and/or mental inabilities are the primary source of the problems confronted by people with disabilities. The minority group model shifts the blame from the individual who is responsible for his or her own



situation to the larger social context and provided the conceptual framework for the interpretation of the findings.

The experience of disability may be influenced not only by the nature of the impairment, but also how it is viewed within the context of the strong cultural values held by an ethnic community. Our understanding of issues and celebrations surrounding disability sport opportunities within Aboriginal communities have yet to be ascertained even though sport and physical activity have the strength to positively impact Aboriginal people. Durst & Bluehardt (2001) conducted a benchmark study and found that low participation in sport and recreational activities was attributed to financial and transportation obstacles and concluded that participation in physical activity was not viewed as a priority amongst Aboriginal people. The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive study was to understand the experience of disability from the perspective of 3 Aboriginal adults and the meaning they give to the importance of sport in their communities.

Method

A phenomenological approach was utilized as it seeks to provide a deep understanding of the nature or meaning of the co-participants everyday experiences of disability and sport. The phenomenological approach was also well suited to the co-participants as lived experience is viewed as a legitimate form of knowledge by Aboriginal peoples and stories are an expression of the truest form of knowledge (Relland, 1998).

A collaborative approach was employed wherein the researcher collaborated with members of the Aboriginal community in efforts to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for their culture, beliefs, and community. The researcher acknowledged her position as a White, middle class member of the University, and worked towards establishing an equal relationship with the co-participants (Bishop, 1996). The research process was culturally sensitive and respectful, promoting a partnership of mutual trust and cooperation (Relland, 1998).

Co-Participants and Community Partnerships

Prior to the study, the researcher consulted with individuals from the Aboriginal community to obtain valuable information on the development of the methodology. Recruitment strategies were discussed and criterion based sampling was utilized to purposefully select individuals who could provide information rich stories about the phenomenon of interest. The sampling criteria included individuals who: (a) had a physical disability for five or more years, (b) identified with their Aboriginal ancestry, (c) 18 years of age and older, and (d) were currently involved in sport as athletes or were interested in promoting sport. A maximum variation sampling strategy was also employed as the individuals who were eligible for this study were not limited to a specific disability classification. The documented experiences would be reflective of the individual's experiences irrespective of their disability classification.



Participants

The first co-participant Wheels, was a 23 year old male with spina bifida. Wheels lived in an urban community but identified with his First Nations community. Wheels participated in a variety of sports before joining track and field. At the time of the study he was a highly involved track and field athlete who practiced daily and competed regularly in provincial and national sport events. The second co-participant, Pooh, was a 57-year-old woman with paraplegia. She lived on a First Nations reserve near a rural community in Northern Saskatchewan. Pooh was a long time advocate for sport and was a competitive athlete prior to her accident. At the time of the study, she was attempting to develop sport and recreational programs in her community for Aboriginal people with disabilities. The third co-participant, Pedro, was a 33-year-old man who lived on his First Nations reserve. Pedro competed as an amputee athlete. He organized and participated in many sports and regularly competed with able bodied teams on his reserve. Pedro was highly involved with coaching and developing sport and recreational opportunities in his community.

Data Collection

To accommodate for the difference in cultures between the researcher and the co-participants, the interview guide was developed with the assistance of a member of a First Nations community.

Interviews. One-on-one, audio taped, semi-structured individual interviews were used to explore recollections of disability and sport. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed the co-participants to guide the direction of the conversation and discuss experiences of meaning to them. Sample interview questions included: What does the word disability mean to you? Tell me about your sport experiences as an Aboriginal person with a disability? How do you feel you are perceived as a person with a disability in your community?

Artifacts. Artifact collection was used to pull together the meaning of the experience and build an in-depth picture of the stories that were told (Creswell, 1998). Pooh and Pedro expressed their preference to use photographic images as their artifacts and Wheels chose to express his feelings in a poem.

Field Notes. At the end of each interview, impressions about what was said at the interviews and preliminary thoughts about the emerging themes were recorded. In addition to being a data source, the field notes were also valuable in conceptually returning to the setting during the analysis of the shared stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was completed. (van Manen, 1997). According to van Manen, thematic analysis is “a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p.79). The findings were analyzed



by highlighting and coding meaningful phrases, grouping similar codes and labeling them and finally inspecting the labels for themes about the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). The researcher then shared the themes and thematic descriptions with the co-participants to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning from their perspectives. The co-participants and researcher attempted to interpret the significance of the preliminary themes within the context of the research question. While reading the highlighted themes and descriptions to the co-participants, questions were asked such as (a) What does this mean, and (b) What is the significance of this statement? The co-participants shared their views on the descriptions initially developed, as well as reinterpreted, omitted, added, or reformulated the themes (van Manen, 1997).

Trustworthiness and Emerging Criteria

Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to examine information rich cases in depth to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study. Multiple methods (e.g., interview, photographs, poetry, and field notes) were also incorporated into the research design for purposes of triangulation. Dependability was established through member checks with the co-participants. The co-participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy as well as to become involved in a face to face discussion for reflection and discussion of their stories. An audit trail was also created to monitor the collaborative approach with the co-participants, methodological steps, and decision points that were made by the co-participant throughout the process. Confirmability was established using multiple investigators and peer debriefing to discuss the study.

The research study can also be judged to be trustworthy by the extent to which voices other than the researchers were expressed and by the engagement of Aboriginal individuals within the study. The voice of the co-participants was present primarily through their words in the interpretation phase of the study.

Results

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis (a) we have to get out first, (b) not being a priority, (c) pride through accomplishments, and (d) the gift to grab others.

We Have to Get Out First

The co-participants spoke of the lack of Aboriginal people with disabilities visible in their Aboriginal communities. By doing so the contributions they could offer their communities would be witnessed, thereby potentially dispelling assumptions of contagion and dependency. As Pedro stated, "Community members must see a person with a disability before they are expected to understand a person with a disability."

Pooh shared very strong feelings about the lack of people with disabilities "getting out" in her community. Pooh used words such as 'us,' 'we,' 'them,' and 'they' when telling personal stories. Within her community, Pooh felt people with disabilities were divided



into two separate disability groups. Pooh was proud of her disability identity and because of that pride, internally imposed the status 'us' as a term to describe herself and other people with disabilities who integrated themselves into society. Pooh perceived herself to be a visible member of her Aboriginal community and acted on her desire to be a member and feel a sense of belonging within her larger community. Pooh stated:

It was important for me to get out and into the community cause I've never seen anybody in a wheelchair before I first moved here. It's gotta change...I told myself it's gotta change, you've gotta see people out in wheelchairs. Just because they're in a wheelchair they can't be stuck in the house. So I went out and did my own grocery shopping and stuff like that. I'll just let the Aboriginal community see me.

The second group that Pooh made reference too was 'them' meaning those individuals with disabilities who were hidden in their homes and invisible to the community. Pooh described 'them' with an example. When Pooh went into public she indicated that people approached her and said, "Oh my Auntie is in a wheelchair and she never comes to the café." Pooh felt that "Auntie" was identified primarily by her wheelchair and isolated from society because of it.

Pooh felt that people with and without disabilities did not yet recognize the importance and value of getting out. Pooh strove to take control of this situation by attempting to connect with people with disabilities and build a sense of community. She believed only by 'getting out,' would she be able to do that. Pooh stated:

Here [my community] you have to get *them* out first, cause you don't see too many of *them* around. Talk to my old man and he will tell you how excited I get if I see someone in a wheelchair...like I'm just tickled, I can hardly wait to get at them and let them know that there are more of *us* around, you just don't see them. I want to talk to them right away and say "Right on! You're getting out" and let them know that there are other people like *them* out there too.

Pooh felt the lack of disability presence in her community may have been directly influenced by some family's perceptions about the stigmas of disability. These external social influences have helped impose the status of 'them,' thereby further separating those with disabilities from their community. Pooh stated,

They (their family) still hide them away, like it reflects bad on the family to have someone with a disability. I still think...just like Aboriginal people and what they do with people with AIDS. It's the same thing.

Pooh presented the comparison to AIDS because some Aboriginal people and their families perceive AIDS and physical disabilities to be a disease that is contagious by touch. When Pooh goes back to her home reserve there are people that will not talk to her because they think her disability might be contagious and they might, "get what she's



got.” Pooh said, “I don’t think that people fully understand the two because they don’t have the full story and there is not enough education provided.”

Not Being a Priority

The co-participants presented many social barriers within their communities that lead to not being a priority in sport as advocates, athletes, or spectators. According to Wheels, Pedro, and Pooh, members of their communities assumed people with disabilities were not interested in sport and therefore did not feel the need to make sport and recreational facilities physically or psychologically accessible. The co-participants explained people’s perceptions towards sport, lack of sport programming, lack of interest, and inaccessible facilities as social barriers all leading to them ‘not being a priority.’ Furthermore, the co-participants had minimal opportunities to interact in sport with other Aboriginal people with disabilities. Pedro stated, “I’m just trying to think of anyone else who has a disability that enjoys sports. But right now it is very hard.”

Pedro spoke more globally about the interest level in sport by his able bodied community members. Pedro and Wheels agreed that sport programming was lacking for all Aboriginal people. However, because they had a disability they were not only advocates for Aboriginal sport opportunities but social actors for sport opportunities for people with disabilities. Wheels stated, “I would like to see more Aboriginal people getting involved with sport and specifically more people with disabilities.” Pedro added,

I know there’s not a lot of programming out there for Aboriginals, period. They have to set programs for just Aboriginal people before they even think of getting to Aboriginals with disabilities.... I look at it as being Aboriginal first, not being disabled. So once we fix the Aboriginal part of it, then we can start looking at the disability.

Pride Through Accomplishments

Although the co-participants did not perceive that their interest in pursuing sport was a priority in their Aboriginal communities, through personal determination they discovered the significance of sport in their lives and the lives of others.

Wheels reflected back upon the uncertainty of his life before joining track. In high school, Wheels used to hang out with friends whom lived destructive lives. At age 22, he said, “It’s a relief I found myself in track or I would have been one of them.” The poem that Wheels wrote described Wheels’ life prior to finding sport, and his pride in his accomplishments under difficult circumstances. The poem described his entrance into sport as a vehicle to fill the void and the emptiness in his life. Wheels joined sport independently striving to change the negativity in his life. Wheels progressed from “having not much going for him” to gaining a coach, participating in a competition, and becoming a mentor. Wheels was proud to identify himself as an athlete who chose to leave his negative lifestyle for a more positive one. He felt sport gave him a sense of belonging within society and the larger community. Wheels also felt that sport could influence other people with disabilities in the same manner. Wheels added, “I’d like to see more people with disabilities getting involved in sports like this because it gives us a



way to express ourselves and something to work for, something to make our lives worth waking up for.”

The co-participants appeared to have gained a strong sense of strength from their past experiences of sport. The co-participants were proud of their accomplishments as they set personal goals for sport, worked towards them, and became dedicated athletes or advocates of sport.

The Gift to Grab Others

All three co-participants agreed they have worked hard and now possess a ‘gift to grab others.’ They wanted to be seen as role models who could potentially motivate Aboriginal people with disabilities to participate in sport. Wheels perceived being an accomplished athlete as a ‘gift.’ He worked hard at becoming a wheelchair athlete, but also felt he was given a gift of natural talent. Wheels wanted to utilize his experiences in sport to help other Aboriginal people with disabilities understand the importance sport can play in their lives. Wheels strove to use his gift as a strategy to affect people’s attitudes and perceptions towards sport. Wheels wrote

It began to sink in that I had been given a gift
So I used it to promote track and wheelchair racing
One of the things that I would truly like to see is more
Aboriginal people involved in athletics.

Discussion

There was evidence in the findings of a level of understanding that able bodied peers and family members may not share with people with disabilities. The co-participants did not have the opportunity to experience an Aboriginal disability community as so few people with disabilities were perceived to be active in their communities. If more of ‘them,’ emerged from their homes, the opportunity to meet other people with disabilities may present itself. The phrase ‘coming home’ has been used to describe a connection made between people with disabilities. However, there is no mention in Gill’s (1998) article as to unique connections that may be shared amongst people with disabilities from common ethnic backgrounds. A unique bond may be experienced by people of the same culture as they can identify with both their identity as a person with a disability and their identity as an ethnic minority.

Due to the lack of presence of people with disabilities in the co-participants’ Aboriginal communities, a second form of integration, ‘coming to feel we belong’ was apparent. The co-participants carried a strong identity and felt comfortable relating to their Aboriginal communities. Pooh, Pedro, and Wheels expressed the desire to fit into their Aboriginal communities and felt they had the right to belong within their communities despite being part of a minority group. This study did not investigate the extent to which the co-participants felt integrated into an able bodied, Caucasian society. This is an important study for future considerations.



The third type of integration apparent in the results was “coming together.” Gill (1998), stated that family members, professionals or other social figures may carry perceptions of disability that can lead to stereotypes or misconceptions. For example, members of Pooh’s community carried the belief that physical disability can be a disease that is contagious by touch and therefore would not touch an individual with a disability because they might “get what she’s got.” All of the co-participants could see beyond the negative views of disability experiences in their Aboriginal communities, in part due to their sport involvement.

Although the co-participants felt they had integrated themselves into their communities and possessed a strong personal disability identity, they acknowledged that having others with disabilities to converse with and share their experiences would have enriched their journey and facilitated a larger sense of disability community. The minority group model as it applies to disability and Aboriginal persons highlights the adaptive behavior displayed by the co-participants as they recognized the significance of having a disability community.

Within the minority group model, Asch and Fine (1988) stressed the importance of separating an individual’s impairment, from the social ramifications of the condition. Social or environmental barriers need to be overcome for the co-participants to be full members of their communities. The existence of the social and environmental barriers faced was interpreted to mean that they were not valued, and their needs to lead active and inclusive lives were not a priority.

As was highlighted by the co-participants, however, the argument becomes somewhat circular. If members of the community with disabilities are not visible, then the incentive to increasing facility and resource accessibility is not present. The significance of creating a disability community with a common voice, a common message, and a shared vision as a means by which to foster social, policy, and economic supports becomes increasingly clear.

Within the minority group model, a single issue, such as disability, is usually the focal point for identity formation (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2001). We also know from previous literature (Ali, Fazil, Bywaters, Wallace, & Singh, 2001) that disability has been in part defined by the attitudes and beliefs held by members of the mainstream Caucasian population. Caucasian individuals with disabilities can recognize that their disability is the primary reason they may be excluded from sport programming (Block et al.). Comparatively, the co-participants may face discrimination on multiple fronts, making it more difficult to identify the most poignant negative influences on their opportunities for social inclusion and sport participation. Until the leaders of their Aboriginal communities made sport for all youth a priority, their efforts to advance sport for youth with disabilities would be very challenging.

In the face of identity challenges that can arise when people are faced with multiple stigmas, the co-participants found that sport provided an avenue to make good life



choices. The sport experiences were a deterrent to succumbing to the social roles imposed by those around them. The co-participants' stories were not ones in which they perceived themselves to be victims of the circumstances imposed by their disabilities, socially isolated, or defined by their individual pathology.

At the time of this study, the co-participants reported that they witnessed small but positive changes in their communities. The co-participants felt that their journeys placed them in a position to be role models for members of their communities who had disabilities. By portraying a strong disability identity that was based on good decision making, goal setting, hard work, and self motivation, the co-participants felt they presented an empowered and self-determined image that they could use to “grab others” and help others find a place in their disability and Aboriginal communities (Gill, 1997).



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