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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Sport, Education and Society on 19th October 2017, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13573322.2017.1391085>

The cultural transition of Indigenous Australian athletes' into professional sport

Richard L. Light¹, John R. Evans² & David Lavalley³

¹ College of Education, Health and Human Development, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

² Health Faculty, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

³ School of Social and Health Sciences, Abertay University, Scotland

Abstract: This article reports on a study that inquired into the journeys of sixteen Indigenous Australian athletes from their first touch of the footy to the Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League (NRL) that identified two distinct stages of their journeys. These were: (1) the development of expertise and of a distinctly Aboriginal style of play from their first touch of a footy to around the age of thirteen and, (2) a process of cultural transitioning toward and into the AFL and NRL. This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to focus on the second stage of transitioning into the world of professional sport and sport as business. Identifying this as a process of cultural transitioning from local Aboriginal culture to the culture of professional sport provided insight into this transitioning process while illuminating the profound importance of culture in this process. It also helped identify the ways in which tensions between local approaches to ‘footy’ as play and cultural expression and professional sport as work, within the global culture of sport-as-business, were manifested in the challenges that the participants had to overcome. This article thus contributes to knowledge about Indigenous development of sporting expertise, of the specific challenges they face in transitioning into the global culture of commodified sport and how they succeed from a cultural perspective.

Key words: Indigenous sport; Australian sport; cultural transitioning; culture; global, local, commodification; economic rationalism.

Introduction

On February 10, 2017 the Indigenous All Stars team overpowered the World All Stars team 34-8 to confirm the dominance of Indigenous Australians in rugby league. Only making up 3 percent of the Australian population (ABS, 2011), Indigenous Australians account for up to 14 percent of players in the NRL (National Rugby League) and the AFL (Australian Football League) (Harvey & Halloran, 2010) while constituting 35 percent of players in the Australian national rugby league team (Evans, Wilson, Dalton & Georgakis, 2015). While some recent attention has sought to explain this success beyond it being a reflection of innate racial qualities (Adair, 2012; Adair & Stronach, 2010; Evans, Wilson, Dalton & Georgakis, 2015; Light & Evans, 2017), the ways in which Indigenous players are able to succeed in transitioning into the world of professional sport has received scant attention (see for an exception, Campbell & Sonn, 2009).

To redress this oversight this article reports on a three-year study that inquired into the journeys of sixteen Indigenous Australians (eight AFL and eight NRL players) from their first touch of the ‘footy’ to entering the AFL or NRL as a process of learning. The findings of the study identified two distinct stages of development with the first stage involving the development of a distinctly Aboriginal approach to play and learning up to around the age of twelve or thirteen shaped by Aboriginal culture that we have recently reported on in this journal (Light & Evans, 2017). Here we report on the second stage, which involved a process of transitioning from mostly small communities shaped by Aboriginal culture to the culture of professional sport shaped by a global culture of the sport industry and economic rationalism. The small communities we refer to are relatively isolated communities in the Northern Territory for three of the AFL

participants and a rural community in West Australia for one. Each of the NRL participants came from small rural communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory with five coming from rural New South Wales.

In this article we adopt an interdisciplinary approach by drawing on a body of work in psychology on cultural transitioning (see, Ryba, Stanbulova & Ronkainen, 2016) that we locate within larger social, economic and cultural fields through Bourdieu's work on cultural reproduction to better understand the nature of these transitions. In doing so we identify the importance of (1) having a good mentor and (2) life lessons learned from family and community for this transition. Through this approach we are able to identify how local communities and culture, and larger social, cultural and economic fields shape individual experience and learning. This allows us to add to knowledge about the challenges faced by Indigenous athletes in adapting to the culture of professional sport while redressing a gap in the literature on athlete cultural transitioning by accounting for the significant differences between Aboriginal culture and a global culture of commodified sport.

Athlete transitioning

We draw on the work of Schlossberg (1981) on transitioning to provide a way of conceptualizing the challenges faced by the participants in adapting to the immense cultural differences between the small communities where most of them learned to play and the culture of commodified, professional sport. This approach offers a useful way of contextualizing how, from around the age of twelve or thirteen the participants in this study adapted to an increasingly professional culture of sport and to living in non-

Indigenous settings. In this article we define a transition as any event experienced by the individual that significantly changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1981).

Despite the growing literature on athlete transitioning the adjustments required by athletes to culturally transition within the global, transnational sport industry (or market) and the implications these have for their sport performance and lives outside and around their sport (see, Ryba et al., 2016) have been largely overlooked. Identification of the pivotal importance of culture in the study we draw on in this article thus makes a valuable contribution toward advancing knowledge about athlete career transitions from a cultural perspective as a core component of the inter-disciplinary approach we draw on to understand the nature and implications of the participants' transitions into professional sport. We then locate this process within larger social, cultural and economic fields, with a focus on how tensions between local, Indigenous sporting culture, and global cultures of sport shaped by economic rationalism, by drawing on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Cultural transition

There is a body of work on the challenges facing transnational athletes as a process of cultural adaptation that we drew on to understand the process of adapting an Aboriginal approach to professional and commodified sport as one of cultural transition (see, Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Ryba, Stanbulova, & Ronkainen, 2016; Schinke, McGannon, Battochio, & Wells, 2013). This work draws upon a number of transition models that outline the different types of transitions that individuals face. A transition generally results

from one or a combination of events which leads to a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2011). As a result, transitions are related to the developmental context in which they occur and include those transitions inherent in their involvement in sporting contexts, as well as those related to their development at psychological, psychosocial, academic, and/or vocational levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Learning how to transition into a different culture of footy emerged as being critical to the participants' development into expert players competing at the highest levels in Australian football and rugby league from the age of around twelve. However, little is known about the adjustments required by athletes to culturally transition within the global, transnational sport industry or market and on their implications for sport performance and their lives outside, around and beyond sport (Ryba et al., 2016).

Habitus, field and practice

Here we briefly identify and outline the key analytic concepts of Bourdieu that we used to shift substantive theory, as a theory of action for the specific context we were studying, to conceptual theory that was used to make conceptual distinctions and organize ideas in the latter stage of the grounded theory process.

Habitus is the key concept through which, Bourdieu avoids oppositional relationships in an approach that Wacquant (1998, p. 217) describes as being 'resolutely anti-dualistic'. It is the embodied social history of the individual comprising a set of dispositions and inclinations that structure action, thinking and behaviour. It is constructed through the individual's participation in the social and cultural *practices* of a cultural *field*, *subfield* or

communities within them over time ranging from the communities the participants grew up in to the larger cultural fields of sport and business. Structured by past social experiences the *habitus* structures individual responses to particular circumstances (Bourdieu, 1986). Although individual life trajectories are different, those who pass through similar *fields* tend to develop a similar *habitus* that reflects the successful negotiation of particular environments in life but it is not coherent and may display varying degrees of integration and tension depending upon the social settings that have shaped it (Wacquant, 2006).

Practice mediates between *field* and *habitus* with them being mutually-constituting and the activities that people take part in produced by the interaction of agency and social structure such as the individual actions of the participants and the ways in which this was influenced by the tensions between the field of sport for sports sake and that of sport as business. In this article we consider *habitus* in relation to Bourdieu's other key concepts and particularly those of *field* and *practice*. Bourdieu uses his key concepts to capture the complexity of social existence and capture the relationship between the individual and his/her social world is one of mutual possession in which, "the body is in the social world but the social world is in the body" (Bourdieu, 1982, cited Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 20).

Methodology

The study drawn on in this article combined narrative inquiry and constructivist, grounded theory methodology as an interpretive approach to provide a subjective perspective and a holistic understanding of experience and learning in particular socio-

cultural settings (Lal, Suto & Ungar, 2012). It used a life history type interview as used to capture people's own perceptions of their lives (see Goodson & Sykes, 2001). This and the emphasis placed on locating theory within narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying emerging ideas and themes to develop theories from that were grounded in the data.

The combined, methodological approach used complemented the importance of telling stories in Aboriginal culture (Bamblett, 2013) that we aligned with the Indigenous methodology of *dadirri*. *Dadirri* requires a degree of empathy, sensitivity and openness on the part of the researcher. Grounded theory suited this purpose due to its rigorous, open ended and inductive approach. The methods used in this approach require the researcher remaining non-judgemental with understanding generated through non-intrusive observation, deep, active listening that involves "hearing with more than the ears", building knowledge through sensitivity and awareness, and developing understanding through contemplation and reflection (Atkinson, 2000: 16).

Participants

Sixteen Indigenous players participated in the study with eight having played in the AFL and eight in the NRL. 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. The criteria were that they had to be Indigenous and were playing in or had played in the AFL or NRL within the past fifteen years. Of the eight AFL participants

one was still playing but not at AFL level. One had retired less than five years before the first interview with five having retired around ten years prior and one around fifteen years before. Three were from the Northern Territory, two from Adelaide, one each from the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and one from rural West Australia. One NRL player was playing at the time of the interviews with the other seven having retired ten years or fewer prior to the interviews. One grew up in Sydney, one was from North Queensland, one from the Northern Territory and five from rural NSW. Of the sixteen participants ten were from small rural or remote communities.

Data generation and analysis

Data were generated using an initial life history type interview 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. The duration of the interviews varied from 50 minutes to 70 minutes. Initial coding of this narrative data and then focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) was developed through shifting to grounded theory and the use of two more rounds of shorter and more focused, semi structured interviews. This enabled us to develop emergent, and then substantive, theories grounded in the data that were connected with the formal theory of Bourdieu and of athlete transitioning in the latter stages of the process where we integrated substantive theories to move to conceptual theory, which is a major challenge in grounded theory.

The University of Sydney granted ethical approval for this study with pseudonyms used for all names and places or institutions where possible to maintain anonymity.

Findings

Here we trace the participants' experiences of learning to play footy, shaped by Aboriginal culture, and then outline and discuss their transition toward and into the AFL and NRL. We then focus on the two socio-cultural factors that most assisted their transition into the AFL and NRL. These were: having effective mentors and drawing on learning from family and community for the strength required to overcome the challenges involved in cultural adaptation on and off the field. This transition involved dealing with what Ryba et al. (2016, p. 8) describe as the "mismatch between their own mode of being" and their new social and cultural contexts.

Early experiences: Aboriginal cultures and contexts

All of the sixteen participants' exposure to 'footy' began from early childhood where it was a prominent cultural practice (Light & Evans. 2017). Most grew up in small, Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, West Australia and rural New South Wales and Queensland where day-to-day social life and learning was shaped by Aboriginal culture. A few grew up in suburban settings in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide characterized by cultural diversity but in which the influence of Aboriginal culture was still significant for these participants. As they developed their expertise and moved toward and into professional sport they had to adapt their training and playing approaches without losing what made it attractive to AFL and NRL clubs and were increasingly faced with the challenge of adapting their Aboriginal approach to a very different culture of sport while also adapting to new ways of living. They had to adapt the culture-specific abilities, understandings and embodied knowledge they had developed to

far more structured, monitored and constraining approaches than those they had learned through as children. This involved adapting to regimes of individual accountability, measurement, statistics, the structures of large clubs and detailed team tactics in the pursuit of success. They had to adapt to an environment shaped by a global culture of sport as business and approaches to training and playing that Duncan (2016) argues characterize contemporary, commodified sport and which Huizinga (1938/49) suggests, mirrors the economic rationalism of the capitalist world. This also suggests how this transitioning was shaped by the contradictory *doxa* of the fields of sport for sport sake and sport as business (Bourdieu, 1978, 1986). *Doxa* are the unquestionable beliefs and sets of assumptions taken for granted in a field or subfield that can also reinforce social limits within the field/subfield captured in the individual's sense of place and belonging, and acceptance of the 'natural order of things' (Bourdieu, 1986).

Adapting to the culture of AFL and NRL clubs required adapting an Aboriginal approach that was open, free flowing, creative, intuitive and was expressive of Aboriginal culture (Butcher & Judd, 2007; Hallinan & Judd 2007; Stronach, Maxwell & Taylor, 2012) to a structured, professional approach to play shaped by global developments in sport.

From the mid nineteenth century Australian football developed as a game with more spontaneity than most other football codes and encouraged players to play with flair and freedom (see, Murray, 1994). This is how Indigenous Australians still play in central and northern Australia (Butcher and Judd, 2016) but contrasts with contemporary AFL in which, "teams have set plays, game plans, specific structures and instructions players are to follow, all of which reduce the creativity and inventiveness of players" (Duncan, 2016,

p. 62).

Cultural transitioning into the AFL and NRL

The participants grew up with footy as a meaningful practice in their communities and culture (authors' publication) 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. They had to adapt to different ways of playing and training with all but one also moving 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 (AFL and NRL) feeling the displacement, isolation and alienation that research on athlete transnational transition commonly identifies (see, Ryba et al., 2012; Ryba et al., 2016; Shinke et al., 2013). Some of the NRL players were also intimidated by playing against "grown men" at seventeen or eighteen years of age in a heavy contact sport. Two suffered serious injuries in their first couple of years in the NRL and one was demoted to a lower team or competition due to a number of injuries. Ryan had injured his shoulder earlier but recovered and was playing well enough in reserve grade to feel he was next in line to be promoted back to first grade but damaged his other shoulder twice:

I was like the next player that's going to move into first grade, that's how they saw it but the following year, it didn't eventuate that way because I dislocated my other shoulder twice... I was 18, I played five first grade games, but I just wasn't ready mentally, physically, it felt like there was a long way to go.

While injury is a common concern for any professional athlete it is accentuated for those transitioning into different cultures of the sport and of life outside sport along with the worrying threat of being demoted that three of the NRL participants said they faced (see, Ryba et al., 2016). In this study this was more pronounced due to the stark differences between the collective and supportive nature of the communities they grew up in and the highly individualized world of professional sport as business. For example, Danny (NRL) noted the problems he had adapting to an emphasis on individual responsibility when compared to the collective nature of Indigenous culture that he described:

It's part of our culture to do things as a group, to enjoy each other's company and all that sort of stuff and I think that's what comes into why Indigenous people play football the way they do and why they enjoy training the way they do.

Succeeding in the AFL or NRL required the participants being able to deal with significant personal, psychological and emotional challenges involved in transitioning into the culture of professional sport and the foreign culture surrounding it. Although these are also experiences that would be similar for non-Indigenous players from the rural areas moving to the bigger cities in Australia they had the added challenge of adapting to such significant cultural differences.

The more individualized approach to training, characterized by constant measuring and monitoring of performance and fitness, individual accountability and the need for individual discipline was confronting for most participants. For example, Bernie (NRL) found being ‘up’ and ‘on’ every day in a highly competitive environment without a sense of community a challenge for him and one that is typically faced by Indigenous players (Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, Danielson, Peltier, et al., 2006). Carl (AFL) struggled to deal with structure as soon as he began to play in higher-level teams and 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 initially struggled with the emphasis placed on fitness, strength training and demands for meeting measureable standards but enjoyed anything where he had ball in hand and was relevant to playing the game: “The speed I was okay at, the weights? I wasn’t lifting the heaviest weights, but as soon as the footballs came out, there was a sense of – how would you say it? I was comfortable.” This was also where he felt he outperformed the other players.

As the participants moved from playing footy for enjoyment and cultural expression to playing footy as work they experienced something of a disjunction between the game they had grown up with and its professional version (see, Schinke, et al., 2006) that could be seen as a misfit between their playing *habitus* and the *doxa* of sport as business. In their local communities they not only learned the techniques and skills of the game but also important cultural lessons that Bruner (1996) suggests cannot be separated from other learning. To different degrees, the communities that the participants grew up in were shaped by a broader notion of an Aboriginal approach to playing footy. This was not only evident in small communities in the Northern Territory, West Australia and rural

NSW and Queensland but also in diverse communities in the suburbs of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. Carl (Melbourne) and Toby (Sydney) did not grow up in Indigenous communities but had strong identities as Indigenous Australians and played with other Indigenous Australians as they developed. Toby's mentor in Adelaide had also helped him find his country, which helped him deal with the challenges of fitting in by affirming his sense of Aboriginal identity.

The influence of mentors

Opinions on the use and effectiveness of mentoring in education are widespread and diverse with some controversy about its efficacy, meaning and the differences between mentoring and coaching (Bodkin-Andrews, Harwood, McMahon & Priestly, 2013). In relation to the use of mentoring to improve Indigenous educational outcomes Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2013) also suggest that understanding of the term must extend beyond a simplistic view of it as merely being a process of role-modelling. In the sport coaching literature 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, Chambers, 2015). Lyle (2005) suggests that the term, mentor, might better describe the more holistic and person-centred role that characterizes much contemporary coaching.

Mentor implies a close and familiar relationship with a focus on more than merely developing skill and technical competence to suggest a holistic development of the athlete that inherently involves relationships of trust and respect between coach and athlete

(Bloom, 2013). It is a relationship in which they develop, “trusting relationships with athletes to nourish and catalyze their personal and athletic development” (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke & Salmela, 1998: 211-278). Having a mentor during their cultural transition made a significant contribution toward most of the participants’ ability to adapt to more structured approaches to training and playing and to making sense of a different culture of footy.

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. At sixteen he stayed with the family of another uncle in Adelaide who mentored him in adapting to the professional approach and after being drafted into an AFL club a few years later his (non-Indigenous) coach acted as a mentor for him and was central to his success as player and his development as a person:

I still remember him saying, one day you’ll be a great leader for your people, and I sort of had a giggle at the time, just thinking ‘yeah’, and you’ll potentially be the captain of this club one day...I was thinking no way will I get be getting up speaking in front of people or media or whatever but I just sort of grew into it.

When he moved to Sydney Danny (NRL) lived with an Aboriginal rugby 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 NRL 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.

Carl (AFL) had immense talent that was evident from a young age but he struggled with the processes of transitioning from the Aboriginal culture of footy into and toward the culture of professional footy from the age of thirteen onwards. He quit a schoolboys' representative team because he felt the structure took the joy out of footy. His club coach made an effort to help him but it was not until making it to the AFL that he felt he had 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.

Mick's (AFL) most effective mentor in West Australia was his coach from the age of fourteen to eighteen who taught him what he said were important lessons about stepping up to more competitive environments. His mentor also cared about Mick as a person and

treated him with respect and consideration, which some suggest are the characteristics of a good mentor coach (see, Bloom et al., 1998; Lyle, 2005).

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 that facilitated his transition. Barry (AFL) lacked any significant mentors over his career. He had a very talented older brother who guided him when he was young but who was not around after being drafted into the AFL at seventeen. His mother and other people helped him on his AFL journey but there was no, one person who acted as an effective mentor for his development as a footy player, which seemed to contribute to his late entry into the AFL.

Ryan's (NRL) move into year 11 and 12 at a non government school which was well known for its excellence in rugby league exposed him to more structured ways of training and playing as preparation for making it to the NRL at seventeen. The coach of the first grade team encouraged him to work hard on his strength and fitness and took some interest in him, which saw him selected in first grade at the age of eighteen. In the absence of a good mentor, when Ryan suffered serious injury he had to rely on his own motivation to come back from injury and work his way back into first grade.

Learning from family and community

All of the participants identified the importance of the life lessons they learned in their communities and/or families for adapting to new environments for living and ways of playing footy. Schlossberg (1981) sees a transition as being any event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles through the individual's experiences of it and suggests the importance of the situation, self, social support and strategies for successfully negotiating them. This offers some insight into how the sixteen Aboriginal athletes in this study succeeded in adapting to the world of professional sport.

Schlossberg's identification of the importance of social support for coping with transition in terms of the influence of (1) intimate relationships, (2) family units, (3) networks of friends and (4) institutions and communities is reflected in our findings. During their early experiences of moving from the small communities in which they laid the foundations of expertise (Light & Evans, 2017) toward and into the AFL and NRL most of the participants enjoyed the support of social networks, their communities and intimate relationships such as with their mothers. While most participants had guidance from fathers when very young by the time they had set their sights on making the AFL or NRL in their teens five AFL players and three NRL players were in single parent (mother) families. Moving toward the AFL and NRL involved leaving these familiar surroundings for increasingly challenging cultural contexts that the values they had learned, strong identity as Aboriginals and links with their communities and families assisted them in meeting. Most expressed gratitude for their mother's guidance and strength of character and wanted to make their family and community proud: "Like the people up in Darwin - make a name

for myself but also the big drive thing was to make her (his mother) proud and pretty much say thank you in a way because you can never thank your parents enough” (Alvin - AFL).

For four participants this transition included adapting to a new and very different school environment that typically presents a challenge for any young person (see, Engec, 2006) but which was accentuated due to the other challenges involved in a major cultural transitioning (see, Shinke, et al., 2013). Danny (NRL) missed the community feel of his school back home and felt isolated at his Sydney school:

I went to school down here and went to Madison College and I just couldn't get over the, you know, the fact that people stuck to themselves a lot and there were not many people to interact with and so I used to spend a lot of time in the library by myself.

Intimate relationships such as those with uncles or aunts, a brother or a boyfriend of a sister or the family of a friend were of great help in adjusting to new environments for some but a few others had no mentors or contacts to help them. In these cases they said they relied on what they had learned from their families and communities to give them the strength to endure and succeed.

Mothers were central to providing most of the participants with the ability to succeed in adapting to non-Indigenous ways of training and playing and particularly for those with single mothers. For example, Alvin felt his mother had given him a life education that allowed him to achieve his dream: “...you get trials and setbacks and if you're serious about what you want to achieve, and like I said, I was strong on what I wanted and the thing behind it all was my mum.”

Malcolm (AFL) also recognized the importance of his mother for his transitioning into professional sport: “I was learning lessons that I didn’t know I was learning, and about responsibility... So these little things I learned along the way and I think she’s been an inspirational person in my life.” Danny was also confronted with significant emotional and physical challenges upon joining his first NRL team that required strong “character” and confidence in his ability to succeed that he said that his father and mother had helped him develop. Carl’s father had supported his footy from an early age with a focus on his attitude and behaviour on the field:

The only time dad gave me advice was when I either lost my temper and how should I go about it...dad would have had a big influence, a massive influence just on me in terms of keeping your cool and keeping your temper.

Mark’s (AFL) biggest challenge was moving from a remote community in the Northern Territory to spend six 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. Barry’s (AFL) brother had also exerted a positive influence on him growing up but has far less influence from the time he had been drafted into an AFL team at the age of 17. Danny (NRL) had very strong connections with his family and his community in the NSW country that sustained him in Sydney. For him, the values of his ‘mob’ and his connection with them gave him confidence and the ability to deal with the challenges he had to face:

Having strong connection to your community is something I'm really passionate about and really proud of. All my mob back home are very important to me about whether they're family or they're not family. When I go back it's about trying to inspire them to be better and to do better in their lives.

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 at the Cougars (pseudonym) in the early stages of his NRL career.

Bernie had remained in the same 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 it kept him grounded and gave him the confidence to deal with adversity. 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.

Discussion

The participants who made the smoother transitions into the AFL and NRL identified the grounding they developed from their communities and families (and their mothers in particular), their sense of Aboriginal identity and effective mentoring as being of pivotal importance. While this aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) emphasis on the importance of social support for coping with transitioning it suggests a far more significant influence of culture. Even for the AFL players who had not grown up in Indigenous communities, their families their strong sense of Aboriginality and the influence of Aboriginal culture gave them strength when they needed it. For many of 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.

Entering the AFL or NRL involved a shift from a form of play toward it becoming work and the need for discipline, effort and individual responsibility. This contrasted with the ways in which the participants learned to play footy up until the age of around twelve through impromptu games that seemed to offer what Hendricks (2006) calls 'laboratories of possibility' in which the characteristics of Aboriginal play that are widely respected in Australian sport, such as creativity, intuition, anticipation and having a 'sixth sense' of the game (Hallinan & Judd, 2009), flourished. Playing footy out of the familiar cultural contexts that gave it meaning when growing up was a challenge for the participants as they navigated their way from one world view to another (Shinke, et al., 2013). Locating these individual experiences within larger cultural dynamics of fields and sub fields as a process of negotiating the tensions between the local sporting culture they had grown up in and the

culture of sport as business with its conflicting *doxa* emphasizes the importance of context and of culture in particular. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* contextualizes the individual experience identified through the use of the athlete transitioning framework to highlight the significance of the challenges the participants faced.

The *habitus* of the participants were constructed over long periods of time through participation in the practices of their communities and within the context of Aboriginal culture to provide a comfortable fit with community and the *subfield* of Aboriginal sport, as sport for sports sake (Bourdieu, 1978). The challenges of adapting to the global culture of professional sport reflected tensions between a *habitus* constructed in local cultures of Aboriginal sport as sport for sport sake and the *doxa* of subfield of sport as business. In doing so it locates the psychological processes involved in transitioning deeply within the context of culture and tensions between cultural fields. The powerful and implicit way in which the *habitus* structures thinking, behaviour, action, taste and dispositions, and its durable nature, suggests the magnitude of the challenge the participants all faced.

The influence of larger social and cultural contexts

The interdisciplinary thinking evident in this study allows us to see how the participants' personal, psychological experience of transitioning into the NRL and AFL were influenced by larger social, economic developments and dynamics. The participants transitioned from a local culture of Aboriginal sport to a professional culture of the same sport and in the same country but one that was strongly influenced by the global culture of sport as a commodity acutely shaped by economic rationalism. Although Australian

football and rugby league are not global sports they are intimately shaped by global developments in the commodification of sport and its links with the media within the context of the intensifying globalization of media and sport (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). The term, the commodification of sport, refers to processes through which sport at elite levels has become a valuable commodity that is traded in, and subsumed into, the logic of the global marketplace as a consumer product (Stewart, 1987) with the interdependencies between sport as a commodity, the media and marketing organizations at a global level exerting a powerful influence over professional sport that extends to Australian football and rugby league (Duncan, 2016; Maguire, 1991; Raney & Brynat, 2009). As Duncan (2016: 58) suggests, the shift towards economic rationalism in the AFL is a “reflection of the economic landscape in Australia and, indeed, in most of the Western world.”

The growing links between contemporary, professional sport, culture, and media promote the development of sport as a global commodity with values that can contradict those of sport-for-sports-sake (Bourdieu, 1978). Focused on AFL Duncan (2016, p. 41) draws on Huizinga to examine the ‘play element’ in culture and society to suggest that in pre-industrial revolution communities play produced culture but has since become, “more organized, structured, and influenced by economics” as part of the “culture industry”. Viewed from this perspective, the cultural transitions the participants undertook to make it into the AFL and NRL were not only shaped by moving from Indigenous culture to mainstream culture but also by tensions between local (Aboriginal) sport culture and a global culture of commodified, media-sport (see, Maguire, 1991).

Conclusion

This article provides detailed insights into individual Indigenous Australians' experiences of transitioning from local cultures of footy to professional sport and the global cultures shaping it to highlight the central role that culture played in these processes. It identifies the vast differences and tensions between the local Aboriginal culture that shaped and enhanced most of the participants' development of expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal approach to playing footy and a global culture of commodified, professional sport as a product of economic rationalism.

The concept of transitioning (Schlossberg, 1981) and its application in athlete cultural transitioning (see, Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek & Ng, 2012) provides an effective means of understanding and explaining the challenges involved in making this significant transition at an individual level for each of the sixteen participants. Locating this within larger social, cultural and economic considerations through the use of Bourdieu's key concepts provides for a broader understanding of the cultural dimensions of this process to demonstrate the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to research in this area. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to knowledge about the Indigenous development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league and to knowledge of athlete transitioning with a focus on culture located within the tensions between local cultures of sport and a global culture of commodified sport as business that is shaped by economic rationalism.

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