ID: 270

Kawa: The use of an alternate methodology to explore the place of physical activity in the lives of young Indigenous Australians

Alison Nelson, Doune Macdonald & Rebecca Abbott
The University of Queensland, Australia

There is much literature espousing the health benefits of physical activity for young people (see for example Bull, Bauman, Bellew, & Brown, 2004; Riddoch, 1998). These epidemiological studies reflect epistemologies of health, where there is a separation of the physical body from the social, psychological and cognitive aspects of an individual. Involvement in physical activity has in many ways moved towards an individualistic activity with an internal locus of control (Kirk & Colquhoun, 2005). In Western societies, a discourse around the importance of the regulation of the body (e.g. eat well, exercise more) has become accepted as not only the way to health but a moral imperative. This has been termed “healthism” (Kirk & Colquhoun, 2005). However, these discourses of self-regulation have taken place without consideration of young people’s own perceptions about what it is to be healthy or unhealthy (Burrows & Wright, 2004). Nor do they offer any explanations about how young people understand and articulate their participation or non-participation in physical activity (Kirk, 1999). This may limit the potential agency and creativity of individuals to respond to their health needs (Anderson, 1995).

This research forms a part of a longitudinal Australian Research Council funded study called the Life Activity Project (LAP) that was developed in order to explore the perceptions of Australian young people regarding health and physical activity. The focus of this particular study is the place and meaning of health and physical activity in the lives of young Indigenous Australians. Currently the way in which Indigenous health is portrayed is that it is at crisis point. However, viewing Indigenous young people as “at risk” places them in a disempowered position. Research on or about Indigenous Australians continues to be mostly viewed from the perspective of having “problems” or being “dis advantaged” and resource “poor”. Whilst by some measures this is irrefutable, it also limits researchers and policy makers from seeing Indigenous young people as possessing valuable resources, even if those resources are different from what one might expect (McNaughton, 2006). Lyngier, (2003) argues that we need to empower Indigenous young people to use their knowledge, values and culture and to see these as a strength in facilitating control over their lives.

As this research is a part of LAP, it will use the same methodological tools (interviews, diaries, photos, mapping) in order to provide data which can be compared and contrasted with the existing project data set. However, research with Indigenous Australians raises some unique methodological challenges, especially when performed by a non-Indigenous researcher based in a Western academic institution. There is a need to be aware of imposing certain worldviews and trying to make the research fit into western paradigms (Walker, 2003). In response to these difficulties, a methodology was sought which might privilege Indigenous knowledges more effectively.

Aim
This paper therefore aims to demonstrate the ways in which an alternate methodology which is not based on western epistemologies might be useful in exploring the perspectives of Indigenous young people regarding the place of physical activity in their lives.

Methods
A qualitative methodology is being used in order to explore in depth the lived experiences of Indigenous young people over a 3 year period. This will allow the narratives of the participants to feature and is considered highly appropriate in the absence of a well-developed body of knowledge about Indigenous people and physical activity (Ramanathan, 1999).

Participants are 16 (8 male, 8 female) students from an urban Indigenous school in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, Australia. Participants are to be interviewed 6 times over three years but this paper will report on the methods used and data collected from the first interview.

A methodological tool was sought that was not based in Western paradigms

The “Kawa Model” (Iwama, 2006) was developed in Japan by a group of occupational therapists seeking a model of practice that was more congruent with their situated contexts. Kawa is a Japanese word for river or life flow and is used as a metaphor for a person’s life journey. This model has potential to enable a creative, wholistic and culturally safe exploration of the context in which Indigenous young people see themselves and the assets, liabilities and problems they perceive in trying to engage in physical activity at this point in time.

A cross-section of the river can be taken at any point in a person’s life and examines the ways in which the environmental, social and personal context of the person may be impacting on his/her ability to engage in physical activity.

The river wall is described as the person’s environment. This may include the physical or organizational environment and include things like the context of governmental policy and the way this might impact on an individual. The rocks “stand”
for problems the individual may encounter, for example, having a physical injury which prevents a young person from engaging in physical activity. The driftwood is seen as assets and liabilities and is described as any factor which might help the young person engage in physical activity and those that may not. Driftwood may help lever problems out of the way or it may get stuck with the rocks and further impede life flow. For example, one piece of driftwood may represent being determined to persevere through obstacles to physical activity. Another example may include having a parent who encourages and supports a young person’s engagement in physical activity and health.

In this initial interview of the project, Indigenous young people were asked a series of questions regarding their family, their involvement in school, friendships and daily activities and more specific questions about their perceptions of and engagement in physical activity. Following the interview questions, participants were given a choice of art materials with which to create ‘their river’ The Kawa model was initially demonstrated and explained by the researcher and participants were then invited to draw their own river.

Results
Results were varied in terms of how well participants engaged with the metaphor of the river but in all cases, additional information was provided through the use of the Kawa model that was not otherwise recorded through the interview process.

This information included perceived enablers and barriers to physical activity engagement and those people perceived to support their health and involvement in physical activity. At a more in-depth level, some participants were able to express their perspectives of themselves and their health in a way that was not displayed in interview questions. For example one participant when asked in the interview if he perceived any barriers to being active replied he did not. When exploring “his river” he identified he had been on crutches due to an injury. The interviewer assumed this was a barrier but when this was suggested to the participant he replied that:

……when I broke my toes I was on crutches and I had to walk around every where with them and we always go places and I had to always walk around and I’d always go to the footy club. I’d go all the way down to the footy club on crutches, to support my team and then walk back up home (Willy). This enabled his knowledge to be valued and an alternate perspective revealed.

Conclusion
The Kawa model appears to be a useful methodological tool in enabling Indigenous young people to explore the place and meaning of physical activity in their lives in a more culturally relevant manner. It allowed participants to relate their perspectives in a way that valued their ways of knowing. Further research with this tool is recommended to continue to explore its utility with Indigenous young people.

References