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To cite this article: Andrew Bennie, Nicholas Apoifis, Demelza Marlin & Jeffrey G. Caron (2017): Cultural connections and cultural ceilings: exploring the experiences of Aboriginal Australian sport coaches, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2017.1399924](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1399924)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1399924>



Published online: 13 Nov 2017.



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Cultural connections and cultural ceilings: exploring the experiences of Aboriginal Australian sport coaches

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ABSTRACT

Sport researchers have begun to appreciate the perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal athletes in various global communities, yet little is known about Aboriginal sport coaches. Considering sport can play a positive social, psychological, and physical role in the lives of Aboriginal people, it is problematic that there is a dearth of academic literature exploring the narratives of Aboriginal coaches. This is one of the first studies to specifically explore Aboriginal Australian peoples' experiences in sport coaching roles. Using a socio-ecological framework to frame our discussions, we share the insights of 28 Aboriginal Australian sport coaches from a variety of team and individual sports as they describe an array of factors that facilitated and impeded their sport coaching journeys. By shedding light on these narratives this paper performs two main tasks. First, taking a qualitative approach, it gives agency and voice to Aboriginal people, long-neglected in academic sports scholarship. Second, it provides insights for coaches, athletes, academics, policy-makers, and sporting organisations interested in enhancing opportunities and developing pathways for Aboriginal people in sport coaching roles.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 July 2017
Accepted 30 October 2017

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal sport; coaching; socio-ecological theory; mentoring; racism

Research investigating Aboriginal peoples'¹ sport experiences has expanded over the past 30 years (Hallinan and Judd 2012) and scholars within Australia have shown that sport provides opportunities for social participation, identity construction, and engagement in the workforce (Campbell and Sonn 2009, Tatz 2009, Maxwell *et al.* 2017). Alongside positive impacts on health and well-being (Tatz and Adair 2009), sport has also been used as a vehicle to promote Aboriginal success and afforded continuous inspiration to young people through mentoring programmes with Aboriginal Australian athletes (Tatz 2009, Pascoe 2012). Despite these benefits, researchers in Australia have also reported on constraints that have limited sporting opportunities for many Aboriginal peoples (Adair and Stronach 2011, Tynan and Briggs 2013, Light and Evans 2017, Apoifis *et al.* 2017). For example, in professional sport codes within Australia (e.g. the National Rugby League [NRL] and Australian Rules Football [AFL]), systemic racism, and racialised stereotyping may have prevented many talented Aboriginal people from pursuing sporting careers (Adair and Stronach 2011, Tynan and Briggs 2013, Apoifis *et al.* 2017). While sport researchers around the world have begun to appreciate the experiences of Aboriginal athletes, little is known about Aboriginal sport coaches (Bennie *et al.* 2017). Considering sport can play a positive role

in the lives of Aboriginal people (Campbell and Sonn 2009), it is problematic that there is a dearth of academic literature exploring the experiences of Aboriginal coaches.

The absence of Aboriginal Australian coaching narratives in academic research seems to map directly onto the statistical variance between an over-representation of Aboriginal athletes in elite sport, and under-representation of elite Aboriginal coaches in those sports (Apoifis *et al.* 2017). For example, Aboriginal Australian people make up 9% of professional players within the AFL; however, they comprise less than 1% of the total high performance coaches (AFL 2014, Creative Spirits 2017). Perhaps most significantly, no team in any of Australia's professional sport leagues has a full-time, permanent Aboriginal head coach on their staff (Apoifis *et al.* 2017). While Aboriginal Australian sport coaches have been employed at the highest level of sport – Glen Ella was an assistant coach for England's 2016 National Rugby Team and Laurie Daley held one of the most prominent head coaching roles within the NRL from 2013 to 2017 (Apoifis *et al.* 2017) – Aboriginal people remain largely underrepresented in sport coaching roles at this level. This is regrettable because of the potential benefits that coaching roles can have for Aboriginal communities and individuals.

Coaches, by nature of the role, are leaders in their communities who can significantly shape the experiences of athletes within and beyond the playing field (Bennie *et al.* 2017). Indeed, researchers have found that Aboriginal coaches play a central role in teaching youth the value of sport as well as developing strong ties between sport and their culture (Blodgett *et al.* 2008, Thomson *et al.* 2010, Tynan and Briggs 2013). For instance, Aboriginal Australian coaches have played a significant role in deepening the cultural understandings in the policies and practices of sporting organisations (Tynan and Briggs 2013). As Tatz and Adair (2009) argue, such cultural, political and social benefits are particularly pertinent to Aboriginal peoples, many of whom have a history of dispossession, ongoing social disadvantage and exclusion from mainstream society. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to engage with Aboriginal coaches about their perceptions of, and experiences in, sport coaching roles. This is an important step in furthering our understanding how Aboriginal sport participation and the coaching role can act as a positive 'vehicle' for change over time.

There have been calls to address the under-representation of Aboriginal Australian coaches in professional roles (Hallinan 2015). Despite this, there remains a significant gap in knowledge about the experiences of Aboriginal sport coaches across all sporting contexts (Bennie *et al.* 2017), which is unfortunate given that sport coaching has been identified as a key area for the development of Aboriginal athletes and young people (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs [HRSCATSIA] 2013). Gathering insights from the Aboriginal coaches themselves may lead to more inclusive practices aimed at creating and supporting Aboriginal sport coaching pathways (Bainbridge *et al.* 2014, Forsyth 2014, Evans *et al.* 2015). Recognising this, our study takes a qualitative approach to investigating the facilitators *and* barriers that have influenced Aboriginal Australian peoples' experiences in sport coaching roles. This represents our attempt to actively resist the dominant narrative of viewing Aboriginal people as 'in need' (Schaefer *et al.* 2017, p. 275), and shifts away from a research approach that solely focuses on the deficits of Aboriginal people (Craven *et al.* 2016). Our aim was to co-create a space (Schaefer *et al.* 2017) that places the Aboriginal voices so often overlooked in sporting literature, at the centre of our study, while highlighting their views within a socio-ecological framework.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) has become an important theory within the psychosocial, sport, and health sciences. At its core, the socio-ecological framework describes four main layers: individual (e.g. personal and biological factors), interpersonal (e.g. relational influences such as partners, parents, and friends), organisational (e.g. organisational policies, job descriptions, and use of space) and sociocultural layers (e.g. norms and cultural systems). Each of these layers embeds the individual within their social environment (Bronfenbrenner 1999). This is important for our research because coaching is a thoroughly social process (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) and socio-ecological models can help clarify how contextual social environments shape sports participation, physical activity, and the career choices of individuals (Nelson *et al.* 2010, LaVoi and Dutove 2012, McHugh *et al.* 2015). As a

result, the socio-ecological model allows researchers to both appreciate the intersectionality of different layers of influence and distinguish between those layers.

Ecological systems theory is an appropriate framework to underpin research with Aboriginal coaches because it views individual human behaviour, experiences and development in conjunction with external factors and environmental influences (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1999). Due to this holistic viewpoint, researchers have used models based on Bronfenbrenner's theory to explore Aboriginal Australian youth's perspectives about health (Nelson *et al.* 2010), coaching opportunities and career progression for female sport coaches (LaVoi and Dutove 2012), and Aboriginal Canadian peoples' meanings of health, physical activity, and community (see the Indigenous Ecological Model utilised in Lavallée and Lévesque 2013, McHugh *et al.* 2015). We used the socio-ecological model in this study to organise coaches' holistic experiences into the various layers of model so that sporting organisations can easily identify facilitators and barriers at each layer of influence. As such, the main purpose of this study was to explore factors that have facilitated or impeded Aboriginal Australian coaches' experiences with gaining entry into, or progressing in, coaching roles. The findings from this study may have implications for future coaches, athletes, and sporting organisations.

Methods

To better understand Aboriginal coaching experiences without wilfully reproducing colonial and paternalistic practices, we used a decolonising qualitative research framework (Darnell 2007, Nakata 2007, Maddison 2009). This is not, however, to suggest that our approach is invulnerable to critique – decolonising research processes are by their very nature works-in-progress (Smith 1999, Rossi and Rynne 2014) and our attempt to remove deliberate replication of colonial practices may concurrently mask involuntary ones.

Notwithstanding the ongoing development of this research framework, we devised and implemented a number of approaches with the intent of decolonising our research practices. These included: (1) privileging locally produced insights and knowledge (Zavala 2013) to establish clear coaching pathways for Aboriginal Australians by creating meaningful partnerships with coaches that went beyond the life of the interviews. This has resulted in the arrangement of a public forum² with Aboriginal coaches and concerned stakeholders as well as the creation of coaching workshops³ for Aboriginal participants that were the direct result of findings and recommendations from our coaching collaborators; (2) constant consultation (Nakata 2007) with Aboriginal colleagues when drafting the ethics application and throughout the data collection, data analysis and reporting from the project; (3) asking coaches about facilitators *and* barriers to their coaching pathways, to move us away from deficit approaches to Aboriginal research (where fieldworkers focus on failure, helplessness and then problem-solving, rather than co-constructing solutions); and (4) consistent with contemporary practices of how other non-Aboriginal researchers engage with Aboriginal interviewees (Kingsley *et al.* 2010), we practiced an open ended conversational style of interviewing to encourage story telling as a process of dialogue that was both culturally sensitive and reflexive. Finally, our thoughts and actions during the interview were strongly influenced by a willingness to engage in deep and respectful listening 'to appreciate how and why Indigenous people function in their own cultures and environments' (Stronach and Adair 2014, p. 123).

Recruitment

We received approval from the lead Author's University Ethics Committee prior to contacting participants. Our research team comprised of non-Aboriginal researchers who collaborated with Aboriginal Australian peoples to learn about Aboriginal sport coaching experiences. All authors have experience working or volunteering with Aboriginal sport programmes, Aboriginal education, culturally diverse groups, and sport coaching. We purposefully sampled (Patton 2015) Aboriginal Australian coaches who had a variety of experiences in sport coaching by contacting sport organisations via email for assistance

with recruiting Aboriginal coaches who would be willing to share their story with us. Sport organisations then passed our email on to potential participants across Australia, who then contacted members of the research team to participate in the study. Snowball sampling (Patton 2015) expanded the sample beyond the initial list of contacts, where existing participants shared the project with other participants.

Participants

In total, 28 coaches consented to participate in this study (see Table 1). Specifically, we conducted interviews with female ($n = 6$) and male ($n = 22$) coaches who were community level and high performance coaches from team and individual sports. The coaches came from various regions in Australia (urban, rural, and remote), and they also ranged in sport coaching experience – some were early career (1–5 years) and others were more seasoned (20+ years). Only three coaches had some experience in a full-time coaching role, while all except one coach had experience with a head-coaching role. Many were highly qualified at Australia's level two or three standard. Given our sampling procedures (i.e. contacting coaches through sport organisations and snowball sampling), we were able to attract a variety of sport coaches, which seemed appropriate given that so little is known about Aboriginal peoples experiences in sport coaching roles.

Table 1. Participant information.

Sport	Sex	Community/high performance (HP)	Qualifications	Years coaching
AFL	Male	Community (senior)	Level 1	9
AFL	Female	Community (junior)	Level 1	3
AFL	Male	Community and HP teams (junior)	Level 1	4
AFL	Male	HP (junior)	Level 3	5
Basketball and AFL	Male	HP (junior and senior)	Level 2 (basketball), Level 1 (AFL)	25
Boxing	Male	HP (senior)	Level 2	5
Boxing	Male	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 2	>45
Cricket	Male	HP (senior)	English Cricket Board Level 4, Cricket Australia Level 3	6
Cricket	Male	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 3 (Cricket and AFL)	~20
Football (soccer)	Male	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 2	5
Football (soccer)	Male	Community (junior and senior)	Not disclosed	~30
League	Male	Community and junior HP	Level 2	8
League	Male	Community and HP (junior)	Level 2	11
League	Male	Community and HP (junior)	Level 2	14
League	Male	Community and HP (junior)	Level 2	~25
League	Male	Community (junior)	Not disclosed	~8
Netball	Female	Community and HP (junior and senior)	None	6
Netball	Female	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 2	38
Netball	Female	Community (junior)	Level 2	16
Netball	Female	Community (junior)	None	1
Netball	Female	Community (junior)	Level 1	~5
Union	Male	Community and HP (senior)	Level 2	33
Union	Male	Community and HP (senior)	Level 3	20
Union	Male	Community and HP (senior)	Level 3	20
Union	Male	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 2	20
Union	Male	HP (senior)	Level 2	~20
Union	Male	Community and HP (junior and senior)	Level 3	~10
Track and Field	Male	Community (junior and senior)	Level 3	5

Data collection

Qualitative interviews have previously been used to study Aboriginal sport participation in settings across the world such as New Zealand (Hippotle 2008), Latin America (Acuña Delgado 2010), Taiwan (Yu and Bairner 2012), Australia (Stronach and Adair 2014), Canada (McHugh *et al.* 2015) and Nordic regions (Fahlén and Skille 2017). Interviews are often a preferred data gathering method used in Aboriginal sporting contexts because they support participants with sharing their own experiences and perceptions, thereby collecting rich data in the participants own words (Blodgett *et al.* 2011, Stronach and Adair 2014, McHugh *et al.* 2015). Additionally, the oral tradition of sharing cultural knowledge is very important to Aboriginal communities (Hoeber 2010), which makes qualitative interviewing a suitable choice for this study.

The first two authors and a higher degree research student conducted all the interviews. While our interviews were prepared using a semi-structured interview guide, our dialogue ended up being more conversational when gathering the coaches' perceptions about their experiences in sport coaching roles. Prior to the interview commencing, we held informal conversations with the coaches in order to build rapport. We also used this time to re-inform the coaches about who we are, where we are from, and why we are carrying out the research (Rossi *et al.* 2013).

The interview guide consisted of three main sections. The first section included introductory questions about the participants' background and athletic experiences with the aim of 'warming-up' the interviewee to feel comfortable about the interview process. For example, our opening dialogue was framed by asking participants to 'Tell us a little about your life growing up and initial experiences in sport' with probing questions about how coaches became involved in sport as an athlete and coach. These questions also enabled the researchers to learn important contextual features of each coach's story in relation to their sporting history and life experiences.

The second section included four main questions based on the tenets of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework (i.e. individual, interpersonal, organisational and sociocultural). We asked participants about people who significantly impacted on their decision to coach, as well as exploring any factors that helped or hindered their capacity to enter into, and progress within, coaching roles. For the individual section, we asked coaches about why they decided to coach and how they approached coaching athletes (e.g. 'What are your coaching beliefs and philosophies?'). Questions about the interpersonal and organisational factors sought information about whether any influential people or organisations had supported or hindered coaching opportunities (e.g. 'Which coach [or coaches] had the most influence on you while you were an athlete?'; 'Were there any organisations that helped [or hindered] your decision to coach?'). For the sociocultural factors, we asked if the coaches' perceived their cultural background to facilitate or obstruct their coaching experiences (e.g. 'In what ways, if any, has your cultural background shaped your coaching experiences?').

The final section gave coaches an opportunity to ask the researchers questions about the study and share any further ideas related to the study purpose. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, via Skype, or telephone due to the broad geographic localities of coaches across Australia. Interviews ranged from 45 to 120 min in length ($M = 60$ min) and were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

After saving the audio recorded interview transcripts in a QSR NVivo (Version 11) data management file, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines for thematic analysis and employed a similar analytic approach to previous socio-ecological driven research with Aboriginal communities (Nelson *et al.* 2010, Stronach and Adair 2014, McHugh *et al.* 2015). First, the third author read individual transcripts while making notes or memos alongside the data to gain an understanding of the coaches' responses. The next step was theoretically driven (Braun and Clarke 2013, Stronach and Adair 2014), and involved deductively organising the meaning units (i.e. segments of text, Tesch 1990) within the four main layers of the ecological model (i.e. individual, interpersonal, organisational, sociocultural) as either facilitators

(i.e. opportunities/supports) or barriers (i.e. reduced opportunity/obstructions) to coaching. We then looked for further patterns in the coded data within and across each layer of the ecological model to deepen our understanding of the coaches' experiences. This inductive process helped create sub-themes underneath the layers of the ecological model (main themes). In this sense, the socio-ecological model became a lens through which we could understand the factors influencing Aboriginal coaches' experiences. The final stage of analysis involved reviewing the existing sub-themes for significance of meaning, before reporting on the key ideas under the four main themes of the socio-ecological model in the results and discussion section.

Quality standards

Qualitative researchers have used a unique set of quality standards that can be applied to the temporal and situational context of each study (Smith and McGannon 2017). We followed the Smith *et al.* (2014) guidelines to ensure the work undertaken meets important quality standards (italicised below) and contributes to new knowledge that is deeply grounded in the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples. We attempted to achieve *coherence* and *rich rigour* by using the socio-ecological model to frame the data collection, analysis, and write up of the study. Utilising the model enabled us to understand how various parts of the coaches' stories 'fit together ... against existing theories' (Smith *et al.* 2014, p. 196). Furthermore, investigating the experiences of 28 Aboriginal coaches from Australia required a significant amount of time in the field, where we built relationship with the coaches, sought feedback on ideas and interpretations, before richer analysis and write up took place (*rich rigour, credibility*). Ultimately, the findings from this research aim to embed the coaches' stories in a way that provides readers with an opportunity to learn about, critique, and discuss, the experiences of the Aboriginal coaches in an Australian context (*dialogue as a space of debate and negotiation*).

Alongside a host of decolonising methods and approaches discussed earlier in this paper, our methodological approach was driven by respect for the agency and voice of our collaborating coaches. This involved a highly reflexive approach (Dei 2005, Nakata 2007, Rossi *et al.* 2013), where we received regular input and feedback from Aboriginal sports coaches in: (1) the construction of the project (e.g. ethics application, interview guide, and protocol for working within Aboriginal communities), (2) analysis of findings (e.g. we sought feedback from coaches regarding their individual interview transcripts before analysing the data; *credibility*), and (3) reporting of results (e.g. through our consent processes we informed coaches as to where we hoped to publish their stories in publicly available contexts [e.g. the media, a book proposal] and academic settings [e.g. conferences, journal articles]). Finally, we offered opportunity for further input or withdrawal from the research project at any time (none declined). Additionally, and in collaboration with the Aboriginal coaches who shared their stories with our research team, we held a public community forum (that was live streamed around the world) to ensure that various stakeholders (i.e. Aboriginal community members, sport organisations, government and academics) could share in their specific experiences, be a part of the conversation, and act on recommendations from the coaches themselves. This characterised the *sincerity* of the research team, and enabled a level of *transparency* at regular time points for participants to extend their perspectives, disagree with interpretations, and ultimately shape the final write up of the results.

Results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Aboriginal Australian people in sport coaching roles. Our conversations with 28 Aboriginal coaches highlighted numerous facilitators and barriers at each layer of the socio-ecological model. Presented in this section are quotations from the coaches themselves, as well as a discussion of pertinent literature relating to the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and sociocultural factors influencing Aboriginal sport coaching experiences. To maintain the anonymity of our coaches, we utilise culturally appropriate pseudonyms related to the

sport in which they coach. For example, Alan is a male AFL coach, Nikita is a female Netball coach and Roy is a male Rugby coach.

Individual facilitators and barriers

Individual level factors include aspects of a coach's personality, motivations, skills and aptitudes for coaching (Bronfenbrenner 1999, LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Coaches in this study spoke about a number of individual level themes as facilitators for forging a pathway into coaching, including a love of the game, and passion to remain involved in sport after playing. They also viewed their self-determination and personal resilience as important qualities in their journey as a coach. Most importantly, our coaches were strongly motivated by a desire to contribute to their community and their sport. Indeed, becoming a role model and leader for the Aboriginal community was frequently discussed as the main reason for becoming a coach, as Nadia and Fred's quotes demonstrate:

I like to empower young females to get up and do something. Let them know that they can do other stuff besides being a young mum or leaving school early, that sort of stuff, that generational stuff ... I sat down with a few young people and said 'We need to do something about this. We need to, do something for the disadvantaged females in our community'. And so I said 'Well I'm just going to go ahead now and try and put a project together to play [netball] in the Cairns comp, which I did (Nadia).

I think for me, I want to be one of those Indigenous role models that hopefully can make it at a professional level. I think if everyone can see that like 'you can make it', especially coming from [rural town removed] ... If young Indigenous males can see that I've done something, I'm able to go somewhere and do something with my career of choice then, you know, a lot of other kids should be able to as well (Fred).

The Aboriginal coaches' reasons for becoming a coach match the motivations shown consistently in the coaching literature (O'Connor and Bennie 2006, Stambulova *et al.* 2009). Somewhat different to previous research, participants in our study felt they had a particular responsibility to give back to their communities as a role model for future generations. This feature of coaches' responses appeared to go beyond what existing evidence suggests about why people from other communities decide to coach.

Despite the numerous facilitators coaches expressed in relation to their own coaching roles, several coaches' experienced individual level barriers. Some had periods where their careers were stalled by a waning interest in, or enjoyment of, coaching. At times, the pleasures of coaching were adversely affected by the coaches' confidence in their abilities or by shyness, which Nicole believed to be common amongst Aboriginal peoples:

I'm fine one-on-one but I think because I'm just really shy – a bit introverted and reserved – being able to really share my skills, I would benefit from having awareness around public speaking which I think is general for everyone across the [Aboriginal] community (Nicole).

We appreciate that it is both difficult and ethically problematic to make generalisations about Aboriginal people based on the experiences of individuals or particular groups or communities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2015); however this was a view expressed by a number of coaches in this study. Alongside references to cultural shame, low personal confidence and feelings of discomfort working in mainstream contexts, Nicole's comments about shyness suggest that individual factors can be interrelated with interpersonal and sociocultural layers of the socio-ecological model. This aligns with previous research, which identifies individual barriers as the result of experiences with marginalisation within a settler colonial society (Tynan and Briggs 2013). It should also be mentioned that the coaches who cited aspects of personality and natural ability as barriers were, nonetheless, successful coaches who had forged long and influential careers within and beyond their communities. So, while they experienced barriers at times or in some level of their careers as a result of personal attributes, they managed to overcome barriers to forge successful coaching careers. In order to understand this capacity for resilience and other individual facilitators we need to appreciate the embeddedness in all layers of the socio-ecological model including the interpersonal layer.

Interpersonal facilitators and barriers

The interpersonal level of the socio-ecological model includes social-relational influences with colleagues, family members, friends, and teammates (Bronfenbrenner 1999, LaVoi and Dutove 2012). The interpersonal level appeared to be of critical importance for the participants because they were, for the most part, deeply embedded in their social and kin networks. Many coaches spoke about the support and encouragement they received from parents, or broader networks, as having a positive impact on their resilience, confidence, work ethic/values, and drive to succeed in coaching roles:

Sport was central in our upbringing ... life for us was either going to watch siblings play sport or myself playing sport. It became part of who I was ... the one constant for me was my sport, and that gave me good grounding (Robbie).

[You feel] proud of who you are, proud of where you're from, and proud of what your people have done and accomplished over thousands and thousands of years to still be standing strong. That's the strength in looking back on your lineage and what our people have been through and still surviving ... is something that you're really proud of and that certainly plays a part [in coaching] (Ambrose).

Validation from those around them, particularly the parents of players, was an important factor in the retention of coaches, especially in unpaid roles. In fact, one of the most significant facilitators for the current group of Aboriginal coaches were strong mentoring relationships between current Aboriginal coaches and the next generations of Aboriginal coaches – what the North American literature refers to as grooming (Blodgett *et al.* 2008). Most important was that coaches wanted to give their players the kind of encouragement and support they had received from their mentors, and help foster pathways into coaching roles. Here is Nikita's perspective:

My focus now, it's getting Aboriginal women involved in the sport primarily as a lifestyle thing because I still think that all of the benefits we get out of sport are so desperately needed. But also looking now at how I can support other coaches to start the journey and helping them to make their pathways.

The grooming and mentoring of future coaches is seen as critical for ensuring ongoing sport programming and quality coach education within Aboriginal communities in Australia and Canada (Blodgett *et al.* 2008, Thomson *et al.* 2010). Research in boarder coaching contexts has also shown that formal coach mentoring assists in grooming a larger population of coaches, enables succession planning for passionate volunteer coaches, and helps establish coaching as legitimate career pathway (Bloom *et al.* 1998, Bennie 2011, Koh *et al.* 2014). Equally, Aboriginal mentors and role models need to be more visible within sport organisations to sustain and reproduce Aboriginal involvement in these organisations. Given that a coach's positive role modelling is highly influential on an athlete's decisions to later take up coaching roles (Blodgett *et al.* 2008, 2010), being surrounded by good coaches is an important recourse for aspiring coaches.

In terms of interpersonal barriers, many coaches spoke about the excessive time necessary to build a professional level-coaching career. Although coaches celebrated high levels of family and social support in their own childhood and early sporting careers, many found balancing family responsibilities with coaching commitments difficult once they became parents themselves. While time has consistently posed a barrier for people taking on, or continuing with coaching roles in many sporting contexts (O'Connor and Bennie 2006, LaVoi and Dutove 2012), what appears to be more unique to the Aboriginal context are cultural commitments. For instance, a number of the coaches suggested that their kinship and community obligations as respected leaders in their communities were barriers in the development of their careers. Nikita emphasised this in the following interview excerpt:

Time. I think this is something that's peculiar for a lot of Aboriginal sports coaches; we have tremendous community and family responsibility. For example, I have my two daughters living at home with me. My oldest daughter has two daughters, they all live at home with me ... we rear our kids in the extended family and community context ... I'm Chair of our Local Aboriginal Land Council ... I coach representative level ... I like to play ... That's been my load since I was in my early 20s.

These findings extend previous findings from research within Canadian Aboriginal communities, where family members were often constrained by secondary parenting roles – when relatives become responsible for looking after their extended family as well as their own children (Blodgett *et al.* 2008,

2010). Another seemingly unique interpersonal barrier for some of the present sample of Aboriginal coaches related to complicated interpersonal circumstances like lateral racism and 'tall poppy syndrome':

There's this word called 'lateral vibes', that's really prevalent in Aboriginal communities. It's about keeping people down. So it's that, 'tall poppy syndrome' in a way, that, 'why do you think you should be the coach?' That gets pushed around the community a lot ... you're sitting up there in a coaching role [and] 'how did you get it?' You have to stand up for yourself and, people are asking questions all the time. So it's not, racist in a way, but it's people that are trying to keep you down (Allistair).

These forms of interpersonal barriers represent conflicting community perceptions about Aboriginal success and may not be commonly recognised in the mainstream population. Most importantly, sporting organisations need to understand the community and family obligations that are expected of Aboriginal people who may be in, or are aspiring to take on coaching roles, to better accommodate their needs.

Interpersonal relationships were found to be an important facilitator within the socio-ecological model for the present sample of coaches. Specifically, they spoke about how their role models and mentors facilitated their pathways within sporting organisations. However, to better understand and respond to the barriers that some of our participants experienced at the interpersonal level, researchers, sporting organisations, and policy-makers need to be aware of organisational and cultural contexts. These ideas are explored further in the ensuing sections.

Organisational facilitators and barriers

Included within the organisational level of the socio-ecological model are sport organisation policies and professional practices, and access to formal mentoring networks, career advice and financial support (Bronfenbrenner 1999, LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Importantly, this layer appeared to be particularly influential in terms of facilitators and barriers for our coaches. For example, our coaches noted that clubs played an important facilitating role in the career development of coaches because our participants generally began coaching, and found pathways to higher level coaching, through roles at clubs or associations where they had played. Linking in with interpersonal facilitators, clubs provided the coaches in this study with access to more senior coaches and mentors who offered encouragement and advice about coaching. Indeed, coaches in the present study who enjoyed career support from their clubs felt rewarded and appreciated for the (unpaid) work they were putting into their teams. Hence, this was an organisational factor in retaining coaches. Many coaches also favourably mentioned the financial support received from peak bodies for accreditation. Similar to previous research, financial support helped incentivise participation and build capacity within Aboriginal communities (Blodgett *et al.* 2010, Rossi 2015).

According to the coaches in the present research, a number of sporting codes within Australia have established practices that appear to be more culturally inclusive or committed to celebrating their Aboriginal participants. From Nikita's perspective, this 'effort' has had a positive influence on coaching engagement and retention, as well as making Aboriginal players and coaches feel more valued and included:

At Netball [name removed], there's a big pillar in the middle of the foyer acknowledging the Traditional Owners and at all events now, there's a Welcome to Country. And at our events, our competition events, they fly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. So I think there is more effort to, symbolically at least, acknowledge and value Aboriginal people (Nikita).

Significantly, almost all participants were involved in coaching Aboriginal-specific teams or at Aboriginal-specific carnivals, which offered many of our coaches their first opportunity to coach teams competitively. These experiences were regarded as overwhelmingly positive, providing coaches with important career progressing experiences (such as coaching in representative or high-performance settings), and a sense of purpose and cultural pride:

For the last 20 years I've been the director of coaching for [Aboriginal sporting organisation name removed] which is the National [sport removed] program. It provided numerous opportunities to take teams to New Zealand and

to coach the National sides here in Australia so it's allowed me to build up a profile. They've pushed me forward and recommended me to develop my coaching through a level Three (Robbie).

So we have a [name of Aboriginal specific program removed] and I got asked to coach, obviously it's all Indigenous girls ... which was so much fun, having these young girls look up to you was a good feeling. And then I found out about the [name of Aboriginal specific program removed] program, so the next year, I went and got my Level 1 and then got offered the gig as an assistant coach which [was] something that I was so passionate about (Anna).

Aboriginal-specific coaching clinics and identified Aboriginal coaching positions ensure cultural safety and connection with other Aboriginal coaches. In a series of recent studies in Canada and Australia, such programmes provided culturally appropriate learning environments for increasing participation in rural Aboriginal communities (Schinke *et al.* 2007) and presented an opportunity to build healthy relationships, assert identity, as well as maintain cultural and familial links (Thomson *et al.* 2010, Stronach *et al.* 2016, Maxwell *et al.* 2017). Given these benefits, Aboriginal-specific programmes could further target the development of coaches to increase the visibility of Aboriginal success, and raise people's consciousness about Aboriginal peoples and their history.

At the organisational level, we found that many barriers (e.g. time, cost) could be applicable across various geographic and sporting contexts, whereas others were closely related to the Aboriginal identity of our participants. For example, coaches in this study indicated that continuing accreditation through coaching education was critical for their long term coaching career development. However, some coaches spoke about the inflexibility of coaching accreditation courses as a barrier to their development because courses were only run once a year and hard to gain entry into. They also tended to be expensive and often located in urban centres. Previous researchers have also noted subtler systemic organisational barriers for Aboriginal coaches, such as difficulties with the administrative processes, illiteracy, lack of financial remuneration, and high costs of accreditation (Schinke *et al.* 2007, Blodgett *et al.* 2008, Hoerber 2010, Stronach and Adair 2010, Tynan and Briggs 2013). These barriers exclude coaches living in non-metropolitan areas and those who cannot support themselves through these programmes financially, or do not have access to financial support from their organisations (Blodgett *et al.* 2008, 2010, Bennie *et al.* 2017). It appears as though there are some indirect barriers that continue to specifically burden Aboriginal coaching experiences.

Another interesting finding from our sample of coaches was the difference in the way that coaches spoke about the inclusivity of their sporting organisation. For some, coaching experiences were not stifled by their Aboriginal heritage given the access they had within Aboriginal specific coaching programmes. In certain codes; however, participants said that although their organisation publicly supported Reconciliation Action Plans⁴ (RAP), the aims of existing RAPs surreptitiously focused on increasing participation for players, not coaches. Additionally, some of our coaches felt they were routinely overlooked or deliberately excluded from high-level coaching positions because of their Aboriginality. Although some coaches acknowledged the efforts their sporting organisations had taken to recognise Aboriginal culture and heritage, they, nevertheless, felt routinely overlooked. For instance, while Nikita felt progress was being made to ensure Aboriginal coaches felt included in Netball, she also provided the following account about feelings of invisibility:

It was only because my besties [best friends] said, 'Why don't you coach one of our rep teams?' And I thought, 'Oh that might be nice, I'll have a go at that.' It wasn't the institution saying 'hey come and coach' whereas I think that is quite opposite to what happened to my [non-Aboriginal] counterparts. I know some of my [non-Aboriginal] colleagues a year or two after they retired they got jobs at the Institute of Sport. Nobody's ever asked me to work at the Institute of Sport.

Building on this concept, many of our rugby coaches spoke about a 'cultural ceiling'. This prevented them accessing higher level opportunities that were reserved for coaches within the inner sanctum of private schooled, white Anglo-Saxon, middle class males:

But there's a sifting out process or a cultural ceiling that prevents their further progression. I just think that a lot of Aboriginal people who want to be coaches, if they're not in the clique in the institutions that they're working for ... it goes back to this notion of a cultural ceiling; if they're not part of the sort of in-crowd and they're not part of the sort of power structures within sports organisations then, it's very difficult for them to establish long-term careers (Ricky).

These invisible forms of racism are problematic. Although sport organisations have begun to address these issues with the development of culturally relevant pedagogy, mandated cultural awareness training programmes as part of coach education (Schinke *et al.* 2007, Blodgett *et al.* 2010, Tynan and Briggs 2013), or updated RAPs (e.g. Milward *et al.* 2015), it is not clear how impactful such programmes have been for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal coaches. Therefore, further independent evaluation of these types of programmes and existing RAPs are needed.

In the present study, accounts of the facilitators and barriers at the organisational layer were particularly complex and sometimes contradictory. We found Aboriginal-specific coaching programmes, sporting events, and clubs and teams have provided most of our participants with key entry-level experience, introduced them to important mentoring and professional support networks, and played a significant role in their desire to pursue a coaching career. However, some coaches expressed reservations about the way Aboriginal-specific coaching programmes were perceived (i.e. viewed as tokenistic and having less value than their mainstream equivalents). Furthermore, they suggested that moving into coaching through an Aboriginal-specific programme or team might stifle coaching opportunities in other sport contexts. Negative perceptions of such programmes and achievements present a significant challenge for policy-makers and organisations because they relate to broader social values and attitudes. At the same time, sporting organisations can be agents of change in the way that they address and speak about Aboriginal people participating in their sport. Overall, our findings indicate that sporting organisations play a critical role in the development and continuation of Aboriginal coaching experiences.

Sociocultural facilitators and barriers

The final theme relates to the sociocultural layer, which includes the norms, systems of value, and cultural beliefs that influence the way we think, feel, and behave (Bronfenbrenner 1999, LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Some of the coaches made specific mention of a more inclusive sociocultural environment as general facilitator in their careers. They spoke about Australia being a less racist, more tolerant society than it was 20 years ago because cultural background generally matters less now to sporting organisations than it did in the past. For example, Allistair believed that coaches could be judged on their merit, rather than their Aboriginality:

I think we're in a day and age now where people will respect if you roll the sleeves up and do some really good stuff. I probably couldn't say that 20, 30, 40, or 50 years ago but I reckon [think] people now are willing to have an open mind about things and I don't think people worry about whether he's an Indigenous coach or not. If he can do a great job ... that's what you're judged on really.

Although the coaches in the present research attributed different levels of significance to the influence of class, several made reference to their own socio-economic background and values as a facilitator. One coach regarded his privileged upbringing as an advantage, whereas others felt that their working class backgrounds gave them an ability to connect to a wider range of people and was a positive influence on their coaching styles. Finally, the significance and role of sport within Aboriginal communities was also raised as a sociocultural facilitator for involvement in coaching roles, which echoes previous research with Aboriginal athletes (Campbell and Sonn 2009, Tatz 2009, Maxwell *et al.* 2017). For instance, Larry highlights the strong relationship between Aboriginal ways of sharing information and coaching:

... in our culture, it's about information you're sharing and story-telling. That's heavily in our Aboriginal culture. My cultural ways more or less compare with my sporting ways because I'm at that age now where I'm like an Elder in football. So it's only right that I'm passing information and experience down ... the same as what my Elders would do, in normal day living in community. It's always been the way Aboriginal culture is, so, I've just adapted it to the sporting way.

Although coaches generally regarded the sociocultural environment as more open-minded today than it was in the past, many were still aware of damaging negative cultural stereotypes about Aboriginal people that can affect coaching experiences. Some mentioned entrenched stereotypes about laziness and drug-use, while others indicated the persistence of sociocultural norms that see Aboriginal

people as naturally suited to physical rather than intellectual pursuits. For instance, Frank observed that Aboriginal people are often seen as excellent athletes but lacking in the skills to become a coach:

I gave back to the soccer community and got involved in coaching and administration of soccer to give back to the community and [for] the acceptance too because when you joined soccer clubs, ... people asked, 'Where are you from?' [and I'd say] 'I'm an Aboriginal', and they're quite surprised that an Aboriginal person has got the capacity and skills to actually be a president or a secretary or to get involved in that level because they don't see it often (Frank).

These perceptions reinforce findings from previous research with Aboriginal athletes (Adair and Stronach 2011, Evans *et al.* 2015) and coaches (Yu and Bairner 2012). For example, Yu and Bairner's (2012) research about Taiwanese Aboriginal coaching found that 'long-held stereotypes ... characterise Aborigines [*sic*] as lazy, lacking intelligence, and having a laidback attitude in relation to their future roles' (Yu and Bairner 2012, p. 698), and deep-seated public beliefs that '... Aborigines [*sic*] are not suitable for ... managerial positions, although they are excellent athletes with considerable physical prowess' (Yu and Bairner 2012, p. 699). These findings within the sociocultural layer of the socio-ecological model reinforce that while the various layers intersect, they are largely underpinned by social norms, values and perceptions, which produce both facilitating and impeding influences on coaching experiences. For example, on the one hand, cultural perceptions of Aboriginal people are changing and there is much greater public appreciation of the specific contribution that Aboriginal people make to sport. On the other hand, racialised representations of Aboriginal athletes continue to stymie opportunities for aspiring Aboriginal professional coaches (Yu and Bairner 2012, Apoifis *et al.* 2017). Until broader societal understanding of Aboriginal culture is achieved to form more inclusive practices and beliefs within the sporting context, Aboriginal coaches may continue to be held back from achieving long-term careers in sport coaching.

Recommendations, implications and limitations

This is one of the first studies to specifically explore the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in sport coaching roles. Indeed, much of the literature related to Aboriginal sport across the globe has focused on elite athletes and youth sport participants (e.g. Hokowhitu and Scherer 2008, Blodgett and Schinke 2015, Light and Evans 2017, Bruner *et al.* 2016, Stronach *et al.* 2016). The results from our interviews with 28 Aboriginal Australian sport coaches add to existing literature about Aboriginal sport participation by reporting on the various factors that have facilitated or impeded their coaching experiences. Additionally, our research provides some insights that could inform conversations between Aboriginal communities and organisational stakeholders to enhance opportunities for Aboriginal sport coaches. Some of the examples may include Aboriginal-specific coaching clinics that feed into mainstream opportunities, formal mentoring programmes, and promoting the achievements of current coaches.

The coaches in this study highlighted Aboriginal-specific coaching roles as being important for their career progression. Aboriginal-specific teams, programmes, or organisations (such as the Lloyd McDermott Rugby Programme⁵ and AFL Kick Start Carnival⁶) provided participants in this study with key entry-level experience, introduced them to important mentoring and professional support networks, and played a significant role in their desire to pursue a coaching career. As a result, these opportunities could feature in any programme or policy designed to increase the number of Aboriginal coaches in Australia. Fortunately, the sporting industry continues to address this need with links being forged between specific organisations, governing bodies, and universities to assist this process. For instance, since 2014, Athletics Australia has provided community/beginner-coaching accreditation for the 12 Aboriginal athletes that participated in the Indigenous Marathon Foundation programme (Taylor 2016). Similarly, Netball Australia, Netball NSW, Western Sydney University, UNSW, and Macquarie University recently partnered to deliver Foundation coaching accreditation alongside health promotion initiatives as part of a specific programme for Aboriginal coaches beginning their coaching journeys.⁷

Despite these positive initiatives, some coaches expressed concerns about the way Aboriginal-only coaching programmes might be perceived, and recommended that pathways need to be created beyond the often entry-level nature of Aboriginal-specific coaching roles to support Aboriginal

coaches achieve long-term coaching careers – be it breaking into the highest levels of their chosen sport or becoming inspiring role models for their communities. This presents a considerable challenge for policy makers and organisations seeking to increase opportunities for Aboriginal coaches, given that no Aboriginal coaches hold head coaching roles in Australia's current professional sport leagues.

Coaches in the present study also discussed the importance of having mentors and role models. Formal and informal mentoring networks are crucial for encouraging further interest and opportunity in coaching as a career pathway. Moreover, providing opportunities for coach mentorship could be as simple as creating support networks on a platform such as an Aboriginal Sport Association like the Aboriginal Sport Circle⁸ in Canada. This would enable coaches to access a network of people they can call on to discuss coaching or other aspects of life, as well as access educative and job opportunities for various roles throughout the sports industry. A specific networking site may also help to break down communication barriers between coaches, and provide a platform for informal mentoring that could enable long-term participation in coaching roles.

The sports industry, academics, and indeed the general public have a unique opportunity to think more broadly about the coach's role, and the long-term benefits of having Aboriginal people in various leadership positions in sport organisations (i.e. officiating, administration, management and governance). For instance, more Aboriginal people in leadership roles could positively influence the perceptions of broader populations by breaking down some of the preconceived stereotypes about Aboriginal 'deficits' that continue to stymie opportunities for Aboriginal populations (Adair and Stronach 2011, Tynan and Briggs 2013, Apoifis *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, Aboriginal coaches would play a significant role in deepening the sport industry's – and indeed wider society's – understanding of Aboriginal culture to develop more inclusive practices (Blodgett *et al.* 2008, Thomson *et al.* 2010, Tynan and Briggs 2013). Ultimately, having more Aboriginal coaches in coaching roles might serve to boost confidence within Aboriginal communities and provide a platform to share their success stories with the broader population that are largely absent from exiting public dialogue.

Limitations

Despite many positive implications from the present research, our study was limited to Aboriginal Australian coaches. While there is some advantage to carrying out interviews across various different sporting domains and across the nation, the findings may have limited contextual relevance to individual communities because Aboriginal people from urban, rural, and remote settings may hold different meanings of sport participation (McHugh *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, we chose not to frame our study with the Canadian derived Integrated Indigenous Ecological Model (Lavallée and Lévesque 2013), due to uncertainty surrounding its applicability within the Aboriginal Australian context. This could be considered a limitation of the present research but should not deter future researchers from using the Integrated Indigenous Ecological Model as a valuable starting point for studies based in Canada, or those which aim to 'test' the applicability of the model in other global contexts.

Another consideration is that most of the available research about Aboriginal peoples has focused on male sports, which is not surprising given that males occupy most full-time roles in professional sports. The inability to attract more female coaches across a diverse range of sports is a limitation of our study that could easily be addressed by specifically targeting female Aboriginal coaches in future research. Finally, research could be extended to include other targeted groups within the sports industry, by sourcing the perspectives of Aboriginal sport officials (i.e. umpires/referees), athlete leaders (e.g. team captains) and administrators/managers to capture a more holistic picture of Aboriginal sport experiences. Findings from this research may further inform specific development pathways into other sport related roles that have sustainable and long-term benefits for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored factors that have facilitated and impeded Aboriginal Australian coaching experiences. Although our findings provide preliminary understandings of Aboriginal peoples' coaching experiences, we recognise that this study only just begins to untangle the complexities associated with enhancing sport coaching opportunities for Aboriginal peoples. We hope that this research leads to further investigations into the varied geographical, historical, gendered and social contexts that influence Aboriginal sport participation.

Notes

1. When using the phrase Indigenous, Aboriginal, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we recognise the variances between First Nations populations within and across countries around the globe and that there is no official definition of 'Indigenous' peoples (United Nations, n.d.). We also acknowledge that 'Aboriginal people' is a colonial term that has been viewed as restrictive and potentially insufficient to wholly capture the multiplicity and uniqueness of Indigenous cultures in Australia. Finally, while the phrase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples links to apposite terminology within Australia, our coaches all identified as Aboriginal people from mainland Australia, rather than Torres Strait Islanders. For this reason, we use the term Aboriginal throughout this paper based on recommendations from the lead author's university:
http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/oatsiee/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_employment_and_engagement/workplace_relations.
2. https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/sports/home/news/featured_stories/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_sports_coaching_forum.
3. <http://nsw.netball.com.au/coaching/day-of-learning-for-future-indigenous-coaches/>.
4. A Reconciliation Action Plan is 'a framework for organisations to realise their vision for reconciliation.' Many sporting organisations have generated RAP documentation to implement and measure planned actions that build respectful relationships and create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations within Australia (all from <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/about/>). Here is an example: http://netball.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NetballAustralia_RAP.pdf.
5. <http://www.lloydmcdermott.com.au/>.
6. <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/programmes-projects?pid=1662>.
7. <http://nsw.netball.com.au/coaching/day-of-learning-for-future-indigenous-coaches/>.
8. <http://www.aboriginalsportcircle.ca/en/programmes/coaches.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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