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An ethnographic study of issues surrounding the provision of sport opportunities to young men from a western Canadian inner-city

Nicholas L. Holt*, Jay Scherer, Jordan Koch

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to examine issues surrounding the provision of sport opportunities to young men from inner-city areas of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. More specifically, the research question was: What are the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to young men from inner-city areas?
Design: Ethnography.
Methods: Data were collected via 15 months of participant observation and interviews with 12 youth workers who were responsible for the provision of various sport programs to young inner-city dwellers. Analysis was framed around personal, social, and structural issues.
Results: At a personal level sport provided young men with an outlet for overcoming boredom and a temporary reprieve from the conditions of their daily lives. At a social level sport provided opportunities for relationship building between the youth workers and the young men. However, enduring structural constraints associated with economic and social inequality and the lack of a coordinated approach to the delivery of services restricted the influence that sport could have in the lives of the young men.
Conclusion: This study provided some precise understandings of the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to members of specific populations in certain inner-city circumstances. Findings, therefore, have the potential to inform public health policy concerning the use of sport-for-development programming in such contexts.

Despite a lack of direct and robust evidence for the benefits of sport participation (Coakley, 2011; Holt & Jones, 2008; Smith & Waddington, 2004), there is a history of the implementation of sport programs by governmental and non-governmental organizations in many countries as corrective measures for a range of health, psychological, and social problems. Such 'sport-for-development' programs are popularly regarded as common sense neoliberal solutions to public issues as diverse as poverty, crime prevention, youth development, peace, risk reduction, and health promotion (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2010; Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Levermore, 2008). However, despite the ascendancy of these claims, research is needed to gain better understandings of the precise types of outcomes specific programs may produce, under what circumstances, and the mechanisms that produce or limit the attainment of such outcomes (Coalter, 2010; Levermore, 2008).

In order to identify outcomes and mechanisms associated with participation in sport programs it may be useful to distinguish between different types of programs. Coalter (2010) described *traditional* forms of sport as programs with an implicit assumption or explicit focus on the value of sport for promoting development. Participation in traditional sport programs has been associated with negative outcomes such as the misuse of alcohol (O'Brien, Blackie, & Hunter, 2005), engagement in delinquent behaviors (Begg, Langley, Moffit, & Marshall, 1996), and use of illegal drugs (Peretti-Watel et al., 2003). On the other hand, participation in traditional sport has been correlated with positive outcomes such as improved self-esteem, emotional regulation, problem-solving, goal attainment, social skills, and academic performance (e.g., Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Other types of sport-for-development programs have been classified as *sport plus* and *plus sport* (Coalter, 2010). *Sport plus* programs involve sports that are adapted and/or augmented with parallel programs to maximize their potential to achieve developmental objectives. *Plus sport* programs, on the other hand, use sport's popularity as a 'hook' to attract young people to education and training. *Sport plus* and *plus sport* programs can be viewed on a continuum and the differences between these programs are not

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: nick.holt@ualberta.ca (N.L. Holt).

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always clear cut. In the current study, for example, we examined a program that could best be classified as *sport plus*, in that it used sport to attract less affluent young men to social services provided by inner-city agencies. There remains a need to examine issues relating to the provision of sport-for-development programs because, although they are often rooted in enduring beliefs about the power of sport for building prosocial outcomes, there is little evidence to support these claims (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007, 2010). Moreover, for critics, such approaches are regularly articulated with neoliberal ideology that encourages a focus on individual personal development and success while "discounting social issues and the need for progressive change at a collective or community level" (Coakley, 2011, p. 308).

Midnight basketball programs in the US are a prime example of a neoliberal *sport plus* approach designed to inculcate values of discipline while keeping inner-city Black youths off the streets, all without addressing broader public issues of poverty and inequitable race relations. Some cities that initially embraced officially sanctioned midnight basketball leagues experienced sharper decreases in property crime rates than other US cities (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). In follow-up research, Wheelock and Hartmann (2007) further suggested that midnight basketball programs appeared to have positive influence on crime rates in addition to briefly shining a critical spotlight on issues of inequitable race relations in public debates. However, for these authors, the 'real' impact of these programs was more complex. Ironically, the media's coverage of midnight basketball may have ultimately contributed to the increased production of images of crime and, in turn, heightened a racialized moral panic that made prevention appear misguided and ineffective. These studies of midnight basketball reflect a key issue; that sport-for-development programs may produce specific positive and negative influences on some people in certain circumstances (Coalter, 2007), although they rarely move beyond a focus on personal troubles to "larger issues of social and structural change at the neighborhood and community levels" (Coakley, 2011, p. 316). Indeed, for critics, one the key reasons why these types of programs are so popular "is that it is much easier and, cheaper, to occupy the time of young people identified as 'at risk' than it is to deal with the real problems of poverty, impoverished neighborhoods, lack of role models, poor education, and other issues" (Coakley & Donnelly, 2002, p. 12). From this perspective, sport-for-development programs focused on personal development almost altogether ignore the immediate, pressing, and 'real time' social concerns that are encountered by 'high risk' populations in everyday living.

Related to this latter point, of particular relevance to the current research is the view that sport may play a role in offering avenues to health and personal development for low-income 'at risk' individuals by linking the disparate cultures of the inner-city with those of the broader mainstream population (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). A host of sport programs across Canada provide people from less affluent backgrounds with opportunities to have fun, exercise, and compete – opportunities they could not otherwise afford given the escalating cost of playing sport (Donnelly & Harvey, 2006). Despite their popularity, Coakley and Donnelly (2002) highlighted that the historical development of urban sport programs in Canada was regularly constituted by the instrumental goals of assimilation and social control to inculcate 'at risk' youth and new immigrants with middle-class values of self-discipline, respect for authority, and the virtues of fair play.

This study more specifically focused on the role of sport programs delivered to young males from inner-city areas from mental health perspectives. In the academic literature, the term mental health is used to refer to a high level of wellbeing and the absence of disease (Biddle & Mutrie, 2001), whereas mental illness is a term commonly used to refer to clinically diagnosed conditions (e.g., personality and mood disorders), often based on the classification system of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Several researchers have examined the role of various forms of physical activity and sport as a therapeutic treatment for individuals with mental illness. Involvement in physical activity/sport programs can provide individuals with mental illness important opportunities for social interactions that can improve self-esteem and create new meanings and senses of identity (Carless & Douglas, 2004; Faulkner, 2005). For example, Faulkner and Sparkes (1999) examined physical activity opportunities provided at an inner-city hostel for young people with a history of homelessness in London, England. Participants (who were individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia) received a 10-week exercise program that consisted of twice weekly 30 min sessions of moderate activity. Reported changes as a result of participating in the program included a reduction of thought disorder ('voices'), improved sleeping patterns, and improved behavior on the days when participants exercised. These benefits were thought to stem from the distraction from everyday activities provided by the exercise program, in addition to the new opportunities for social interactions the program offered, and improvements in participants' self-esteem.

Researchers have also sought to understand the experiences of men with mental illness in relation to sport participation. For example, Carless and Douglas (2008) used participant observation and interviews with 11 men (aged 24–43 years) who attended a vocational rehabilitation centre in the UK and participated in a weekly activity group. They identified three narratives that depicted the participants' experiences. An 'action' narrative captured the importance of sport in providing opportunities to engage in activities and having things to do. An 'achievement narrative' reflected the role of sport in providing opportunities for participants to simply accomplish things, thus nourishing a sense of success and confidence in their lives. Finally, a 'relationship narrative' referred to the social opportunities people developed through new social bonds with other program attendees and the program providers. Through sport, participants "were able, to a greater or lesser extent, to re-story their lives through reconstructing or sustaining a more positive, hopeful, and meaningful identity and sense of self independent of mental health culture" (p. 592). Together, these and other related studies (e.g., Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2010) have revealed important information about the potential benefits of sport for people with mental illness.

Individuals who grow up in less affluent/inner-city neighborhoods tend to fare worse in terms of education, physical and mental health, and employment than those from more advantaged neighborhoods (Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007). Young men from inner-city areas, in this respect, embody a range of 'hidden injuries' of social class, as well as physical ones stemming from an omnipresent culture of violence that plays a powerful role in shaping social relationships and their gendered identities (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Young men who live in violent or crime-prone inner-city neighborhoods often have greater contact with the criminal justice system and, unsurprisingly, these contacts are overwhelmingly negative, potentially leading to a distrust of social institutions and officials with power (Harding, 2010).

Although sport programs may offer a promising avenue for making connections with young men from inner-cities (McLaughlin et al., 1994), there are a number of caveats that need to be raised in association with this claim. For example, when these programs have been exclusively designed for boys and young men they can also become a distinctly gendered forum for the teaching of masculine virtues (e.g., strength, toughness, quiet fortitude, and fraternal loyalty). Subscription to such hegemonic masculinity can

have a powerful negative influence on men's health and health-related behavior (Connell, 1995). For example, young men may embrace perilous and often-violent behaviors that are sanctioned and, indeed, encouraged by the dominant norms of hegemonic masculinity associated with sport (Messner, 1992; Whitson, 1994). The competitive ethos of sport also reproduces a class-logic that rewards victors and may trigger feelings of inadequacy in those who are less competitive and confident with their bodies. Men may also frame obstacles in 'masculine ways' and place emphasis on idealized narratives of heroic struggle, achievement-orientation, and personal control (Gough, 2013; Grogan, 2008). Some men may, at the same time, conceal vulnerability and deny pain to avoid appearing weak and, in so doing, may avoid seeking help for health-related issues (Courtenay, 2000). This could be expressed, for example, by reticence in seeking traditional forms of psychiatric treatment for mental illness.

On the other hand, recent work has suggested that masculinity relative to health behaviors and lifestyle choices is more dynamic and fluid than previously understood (Gough, 2013; Smith, 2013). For example, some men may engage in traditionally masculine sports but subscribe to different ethical understandings of masculinity that are not centered on physical domination and aggressive competition (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Meanwhile, drinking alcohol in moderation in sport settings may provide rare moments of social and emotional support for many men who value the benefits of talking to friends in these instances. The concept of 'masculine capital,' then, may be used to help understand "why certain practices are eschewed or adopted by different individuals at different times" (Gough, 2013, p. 2). 'Masculine capital' can also be used to examine how young men compensate for non-masculine behavior with capital in other areas. For example, men who do not drink alcohol can boost their masculinity if they are good athletes (De Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Men can, therefore, feasibly incorporate healthy and unhealthy masculine behaviors within a complex and, at times, potentially contradictory masculine identity (Robertson, 2006). Setting these dynamic views of masculinity and health in the context of sport and the inner-city highlights the need to study the complex and potentially problematic *and/or* beneficial provision of sport programs for young men.

The current study was designed to add to the literature by providing some precise understandings about the perceived mechanisms and outcomes associated with sport programs for young men from inner-city areas of Edmonton, Alberta – a city with among the highest levels of social and economic inequality in Canada (Parkland Report, 2012). More specifically, the research question was: What are the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to young men from the inner-city? We used the term young men to refer to those aged approximately 18–35 years because this was the target age group of the programs we studied.

Method

Ethnography

We used an ethnographic approach both for the process and product of this research endeavor. Ethnography as a process involves seeking to understand the culture of a particular group or setting from the perspective of the group members (Wolcott, 1995). The group culture, therefore, can advance understandings of the behaviors, values, emotions, and mental states of group members (Krane & Baird, 2005). We followed more of a 'purist' approach to ethnographic methodology, rather than merely using some ethnographic methods, in order to attain a level of understanding of the cultural context we studied. We attempted to understand and reinterpret participants' interpretations of their actions, which involved creating partnerships with participants to pursue the purpose of this study (Holloway, 1997).

There were three members of the research team. In the broadest sense, we shared philosophical perspectives of ontological relativist and epistemological constructionism. That is, we approached this research with an internal-idealist ontological view that there is no singular reality and rather individuals' hold their own unique views based on personal cognitions. Epistemologically, we adopted a subjectivist-idiographic and constructionist view and assumed that we, as researchers, played an active role in interpreting how the participants made sense of their personal and social world (Sparkes, 1992). Our philosophical underpinnings were complex because we had different disciplinary perspectives. The lead author (NLH) was trained in sport/exercise psychology, while the other two authors (JS & JK) were trained in sport sociology. We shared views about ontological relativist and epistemological subjectivism, while the sociologists tended to 'push' for more critical perspectives at times. We also shared a belief that personal experience should be connected with broader social and structural issues, which reflects the classic sociological perspective of Wright Mills (1959) and the foundation of ecological psychological theories (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The commonalities, and to a lesser extent differences, in our philosophical and disciplinary perspectives shaped our use of literature, analytic interpretations, and construction of the realist tale we present as the product of this ethnography.

Procedure and setting

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a 15-month period that involved one member of the research team (JK) becoming a participant observer in a range of sport and recreation programs provided to individuals from inner-city Edmonton, most of whom were homeless or lived in publicly-subsidized group homes. He was initially involved in multiple settings and different sites within the distinct confines of the inner-city. Early in the fieldwork he joined a summer softball team comprised of players from various inner-city social agencies. This generated relationships with people from numerous organizations, ranging from a boxing club, a weekly drop-in recreational program at an inner-city shelter, and a weekly floor hockey (an adapted version of ice hockey played in a gymnasium) program. As time progressed, JK conducted most of his fieldwork at the drop-in recreational program (on Wednesday evenings) and the floor hockey program (on Friday afternoons). The floor hockey program became the main focus of the current paper but it was viewed within the wider context of sport/recreation programs provided to young men from the inner-city.

The floor hockey program was part of services provided by the city Mental Health Unit (MHU). It was led by a male mental health worker ("Blue" – a pseudonym) and supported by inner-city sport/recreation coordinators and youth workers at other social agencies. The program ran at a mental health hospital located on the outskirts of the city. Although the term mental health was used by youth workers, in our opinion, the term was more consistent with the academic definition of mental illness. Mental health, however, appeared to be the 'fashionable' term used within the health care and social services systems. Every Friday, Blue would drive a van around the city and pick-up players at pre-arranged locations. Occasionally, Blue would spot a familiar face on the street and persuade him to come along. Upon arrival at the hospital gym, the 'MHU group' were sometimes joined by patients who were in residential treatment programs at the hospital. However, the majority of the players were young men (aged about 18–35 years)

from the inner-city. Several floor hockey players also attended the recreational drop-in program on Wednesday evenings.

Recruitment and participants

Having established relationships with key gatekeepers through JK's initial activity in the field, we recruited participants for individual interviews. The sampling criteria for participants to be eligible for this study were that: (a) they worked in the inner-city and provided services for young people; and, (b) provided some form of sport and/or recreational opportunities to their clients. Interviews were conducted with 12 adults (who we refer to as 'youth workers'), four of whom were female. These individuals included mental health counselors, social workers, addictions counselors, other youth workers, and coaches. They ranged in age from 25 to 50 years old. Two females were Aboriginal and the other participants European–Canadian (White) Caucasians. The study procedures were approved by our university Research Ethics Board. All youth workers were given verbal and written explanations of the study and provided written informed consent.

Due to the informal nature of the floor hockey program (there was no registration procedure or record-keeping) and the reticence of many young men to be forthcoming with their personal stories, we are unable to provide firm details about their circumstances/demographics. There were normally about 15–20 young men who attended the games. There was a core group of about 10 players usually supplemented by occasional participants. As such, the ethnic/racial mix of the group varied from day-to-day, but most frequently about 60% of the players were European–Canadian (White) Caucasians, 30% Aboriginal (a testament to the complex and ongoing legacy of colonialism in Canada), and the remainder from other racial and ethnic groups. Occasionally, some individuals from Eastern Canada who had come to Alberta to work in the oil and gas industry but struggled to find/keep employment would attend. We were able to ascertain most of the young men faced issues including a range of mental illnesses; drug, solvent, and alcohol addictions; histories of personal and family turmoil; criminal behavior, convictions and imprisonment; and, occasionally, some gang connections.

Interviews

The majority of interviews with youth workers took place during the first eight months of the study. Interviews can be classified on a continuum from a set of highly structured and scripted questions posed in the same order to a completely informal conversation with no interview guide. Our interviews were conversational, which is a relatively unstructured and open-ended approach to interviewing and suitable for ethnographic fieldwork because it enables the fieldworker to react, respond, and discover issues that may have occurred in the field, of which she or he may not have prior knowledge (Patton, 2002). Conversational interviews therefore offer flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate in conversations with particular participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Using the conservational approach interviews were relatively free flowing and explored issues relevant to the participant and his/her work in the inner-city. The interviewer (JK) inevitably posed different questions to different youth workers depending on their particular role. Nonetheless, to provide some focus to the interviews, JK had a set of open-ended questions he could draw upon to help the youth workers 'open up' and talk about their experiences in ways that related to the purpose of our research. By way of example, the following list includes some of the more common open-ended questions that were, at some point or other, asked in most of the interviews: Could you describe some of the most positive and rewarding aspects of your job? Could you describe some of the most challenging aspects of your job? What role do you think your sport-related program/work plays in this neighborhood? What role do you think your sport-related program plays in the lives of people who attend? What are some of the challenges these people face in their lives? What aspects of the environment do you perceive facilitate or constrain your ability to deliver your program/do your work? What do you think the participants like (or dislike) about the program? As youth workers responded to these questions JK picked up on certain threads in a conversational manner. He used 'probe questions' for examples and details of feelings, impressions, and attitudes (see Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Participant observation

Participant observation involved JK's immersion in the ongoing social activities of the youth workers, the settings in which they worked, and with some of the young men themselves (Wolcott, 1995). Separate Research Ethics Board approval was gained for the observational part of this study which included a provision (due to the nature of the research setting) that oral instructions and approval could be used in lieu of written documentation. Program participants (i.e., the young men) were informed that JK worked at the university and was conducting research about how sport was being used in the inner-city and how these programs were being delivered. The key gatekeeper (i.e., Blue – the mental health counselor who provided the floor hockey program) was fully aware of the study. Blue attended every floor hockey session and was present to ensure all JK's observational work was acceptable. While we met the ethical standards required of us, it is highly unlikely that *all* of the participants in the floor hockey program knew that JK was a researcher and/or understood what that meant. On the other hand, the core group of players who attended every week came to know JK well. He played in every game and assisted Blue with some organizational duties (e.g., picking the teams). As the research progressed, JK increasingly became viewed as a youth worker or volunteer and, for some, a friend.

Participant observation began on June 2nd 2011 and, while the study is on-going, the last observation used in the current paper was from September 7th 2012. A total of 54 fieldwork entries were recorded. To create the fieldwork entries JK made initial notes soon after each session and then typed these notes into a coherent narrative depicting key events, conversations, and interactions. The typed entries were shared with the other two members of the research team. The research team met monthly to discuss and dissect the notes, identify issues that required more close attention, and plan ways in which the main findings would be framed and captured. As the fieldwork log grew, certain narrative threads were identified and these threads reflected the more specific focus of the current research as the observational lens narrowed over time. As Wolcott (1995) explained, the observation element of the participant observer role always faces the problem of what to look at, what to look for, "and the never-ending tension between taking a closer look at something versus taking a broader look at everything" (p. 96). Hence, we began by taking a broad look at many concepts and then, over time and through discussions with youth workers (Blue in particular) and among members of the research team, a narrower look at the specific issues presented in this study.

Data analysis

Quotations from interviews and extracts from the fieldwork journal served as units of data for analysis. Data were subjected to the description, analysis, and interpretation approach presented by

Wolcott (1994). Description is intended to address the question, 'What is going on here?' Analysis addresses the identification of essential features and patterned regularities in the data and the systematic description of interrelationships among them (i.e., how things work). Interpretation addresses questions of meanings and context: 'What does it all mean? What is to be made of it all?' Analysis did not follow a linear process but rather we engaged in description, analysis, and interpretation at various different points throughout the process of conducting this research.

For example, to *describe* and break down data basic content analysis techniques were used (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Phases of *analysis* and *interpretation* occurred during the monthly research team meetings. The team members read JK's new fieldwork entries and the interview transcripts as they became available prior to each meeting and then, as mentioned above, discussed and dissected the notes and planned ways in which the main findings would be framed and captured. For example, JK would be asked explain the key features and interrelationships that were emerging from the fieldnotes. Through these discussions we were able to establish a picture of how things worked in the setting and how individuals and concepts were connected. The researcher who led the writing of this study (NLH) documented these meetings by writing analytic memos on his printed copies of the fieldwork notes and interview transcripts.

Further interpretation to create the findings presented in this paper was conducted when NLH re-examined all interviews and journal entries to isolate key themes that would enable us to address the purpose of this research. This involved revisiting the content analysis and analytic memos to create a list of the most salient themes. At this point a broad ecological framework was used to organize the themes into categories. Ecological approaches frame individual development within social contexts (or 'ecologies') that can be more proximal (e.g., personal and social interactions) or distal (e.g., social structures and institutions) and can be used to identify elements at different levels of ecology and relationships between ecological levels and individual experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Hence, having inductively identified certain themes, NLH placed them within categories consistent with an ecological organization framework. For example, individual benefits of the sport program (e.g., as an outlet) was placed in the 'personal context' category whereas benefits related to relationships was placed in the 'social context' category. NLH then wrote the first draft of the results based on this ecological framework, which was subjected to extensive scrutiny and editing by the other researchers. Therefore, writing reflected the final stage of the interpretive analysis. Not only did the ecological framework provide a meaningful organization structure, it also proved a suitable means of catering to the psychological and sociological perspectives of the researchers. That is, it facilitated a psychological focus on personal and social levels of experience in conjunction with the sociological analysis of broader structural factors that influenced the personal circumstances of both the youth workers and the young men themselves.

Rigor and validity

In terms of judging the rigor and validity of this study, we adopt a relativist nonfoundational perspective. From a nonfoundational perspective criteria are characterizing traits that influence judgments about research, and these traits are subject to interpretation and reinterpretation as times and conditions change. Hence, the use of these characterizing traits depend on the context and the purposes of a particular study (Sparkes & Smith, 2009) and they can be thought of as a flexible list of features that characterize good research at a particular time and place (Smith & Deemer, 2000). The current study can be judged both in terms of the *process* of conducting the research and the ethnographic *product* presented.

The ethnographic *process* of this research may be evaluated with regards to the extent to which we conducted a methodologically rigourous study and the techniques used therein. For example, there was prolonged engagement in the field that facilitated the development of relationships and provided a means for understanding and contextualizing events and meanings over time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). Data produced by different collection techniques (i.e., interview and observation) were incorporated into the study as a means of providing multiple insights on emerging themes, perspectives, and interpretations. We maintained a sense of analytic balance (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) by working as a research team, having an 'insider' (JK) and 'outsiders' (NLH & JS) contribute to the analysis – particularly in terms of providing interpretations from various psychological and sociological perspectives. The research team meetings enabled us to act as 'critical friends' and sounding boards for each others' ideas and interpretations (Wolcott, 1995). By concurrently engaging in data collection and analysis we were able to ascertain we had reached a suitable level of data saturation that enabled us to capture the main themes of this study. Furthermore, we had extensive engagement with one of the key youth workers (Blue), who not only facilitated our research as a gatekeeper but also served as a sounding board for several interpretations we put forward. He also reviewed and evaluated the manuscript during its preparation.

The ethnographic *product* of this study is presented in the form of a realist tale. Following suggestions from previous work (e.g., Holt & Sparkes, 2001; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), readers may wish to consider some of the following questions of the text: Is sufficient evidence and description provided to enable the reader to judge the researchers' interpretations? Are there sufficient quotations from the youth workers? Are their perspectives and voices represented in a fair and balanced manner? Do our psychological and sociological interpretations portray a coherent narrative, depicting how different youth workers' perspectives fit together and relate to broader structural issues? Does the text have authenticity, briefly bringing the reader into the life of this inner-city setting and enabling her/him to come away with a better understanding of the youth workers, the floor hockey program, and how these people understood their world? It is clear how findings connect to previous research? Does this study offer a meaningful contribution to the literature?

Results

Personal context

The category of personal context is presented to reflect the most proximal features of the findings at an individual level and the issues that appeared to have the most immediate and obvious impact on the lives of the young men in the program from the youth workers' perspectives. These findings concern the benefits of sport as an outlet. We have also related these findings back to broader structural issues, which is intended to reflect how various levels of social ecology overlap and interact.

Sport as an outlet for young men

The youth workers believed the benefits of providing sport to young men from the inner-city were important, but nonetheless limited. Blue highlighted this when he remarked:

> They live in an inner-city where there's drugs and alcohol all over the place. If they're drunk they can't come [to floor hockey]… If they're high they don't come. So, like we have one guy, he's a sniffer [solvent abuser] and lots of times he'll quit

sniffing two days in advance so he can play hockey. Well that's a huge gain right? Two days. Because it [sniffing] kills everything.

In this case, Blue recognized that sport was not a wholesale solution for the client's solvent abuse problem and the broader structural issues that plague the inner-city. Still, from his position as a mental health counselor, he recognized that for a client to be clean for two days needed to be understood as a "huge gain."

Given that the benefits of sport were apparently quite limited, we asked Sandy (a social worker) whether providing sport programs simply might *not* be 'worth it,' especially in light of the lack of dedicated financial support for these types of social services and the broader issues of social and economic inequality. She said:

> No, I wouldn't say that at all. There [are] a couple that would come with us, who you know [because] you met [them]. And they said at the end of the summer they said, "I don't know what we're gonna do when you guys leave, because you're the reason we don't do crack during the day."

These small gains were, therefore, seen to be crucial by the youth workers, partly because they recognized that the 'inner worlds' of the young men who used these social services were restricted. Few of those men were aware of the types of opportunities that existed beyond a life of drink, drugs, and gangs simply because they lacked a broader social network. As one youth worker said, "They live in a small mental space. And they don't understand how much is out there."

There were two further aspects that emerged from our analysis that sport acted as an important outlet. The first aspect emphasized by the youth workers was the importance of sport in terms of temporarily overcoming boredom, a crucial factor that influenced the lives of the young men. An addictions counselor (Linda) told us:

> Boredom is a huge trigger for a lot of people or for a lot of youth I work with. It's like they're bored so they go out and drink. And it's just weird to me how it is easier to find alcohol than it is to pick up a basketball and shoot hoops. It's just weird…. They're bored. Let's say they don't have the money or their parents don't support them going into sports or something, well then they find friends who are into other things like drinking and drugs.

Similarly, a social worker (Sarah) explained:

> A lot of the boys, particularly boys, wanna get involved in sports, and they wanna take kick boxing and basketball or you know, hockey or, or soccer or any number of activities. They wanna get involved in activities and they also then will recognize they wanna sort of stay away from the friends who they get into trouble with.

Sandy recounted an activity she had conducted which was designed to include youth in programming decisions, as opposed to a more top-down model of decision making. Working with a group of young people, they were asked:

> … "what kind of sports would you want to do?"… The overwhelming response that we got [was] "just give us something to do" because boredom was huge. If you have nowhere to live and you have no job and really nothing going on, then that's when you go out in afternoons and vandalize and like, that's what they're even saying, they're like yeah "we get drunk at two, because there's nothing else to do." Like what would you do if you had nowhere to go? And that was kind of really eye opening for us, it's just simply out of boredom really a lot of the time with them.

It is important not to conflate boredom with laziness or idleness. Many of the individuals observed in this study were regularly involved in a range of pursuits necessary for their survival (e.g., attending various appointments, seeking out food and shelter, and chasing down economic opportunities – some of them illegal – in an environment where financial resources were scarce). While regular sporting activities on their own will not address the broader underlying structural issues of poverty and unemployment, these sporting activities were beneficial as a strategy through which the sheer banality of other everyday practices could be disrupted, at least temporarily. Of course, it is important to emphasize these young men lacked not only the required financial resources but also social capital in the form of a network of family, friends, and other contacts and the prerequisite cultural and economic capital required to participate in organized sport activities on a regular basis.

In addition to providing opportunities to relieve boredom, the second aspect of sport as an outlet was that it allowed the young men to briefly release energy and aggression. Sandy said:

> They've seen shit that no one ever wants to, anyone [should] have to see. And it brings up a lot of anger and frustration. You can get really invested in sports. So I think it would be a great way to sort of, without directly stating, OK "we're gonna talk about how you deal with your anger." Talking about it. You do it in the context of something and then they can later maybe apply that to what they're going through and other parts. And I mean just the stress relief of playing a game is so therapeutic for them.

In one of the conversations recorded in the fieldwork notes, Blue emphasized the importance of sport as a safe site for cathartic release for young men who have to consistently survive in an extraordinarily violent social world:

> The street is [a] hard place for these guys. The inner city is hard living. Most of these guys are surrounded by violence and they have hot tempers. Sometimes this temper gets them into a lot of trouble. They react poorly to something in the street and they get hurt. Floor hockey gives them a chance to encounter bumping [physical contact] and aggression, but in a place where no overt aggression is tolerated. It's a safe way to learn how to react to things better when they don't go your way.

Blue was acutely aware that floor hockey involved some physical contact and, therefore, raised potential issues that needed to be carefully considered and monitored. When we followed up on this point during his interview, Blue further explained:

> …The goal is not just to go out and play hockey, the goals are, are several. One, it's an aggressive sport, even though I say no contact I try not to notice mild contact… So what I'm trying to teach is aggression control… all the years I've been playing I think we've had one or two fights, and none of them amounted to a whole lot. I mean people have had ruffled feathers a few times and got close but, but again it's about controlling your temper…[My job is] to keep things down to a dull roar and keep people so that they're mindful of what they're doing with their bodies, so that they don't forget themselves and get too aggressive.

Blue had made a calculated choice not to eliminate physical contact altogether from the floor hockey matches. Meanwhile, he consciously chose to emphasize a philosophy of non-violence and sought to use certain incidents as opportunities to teach and mentor young men who have sometimes come to embrace violence as a necessary and natural extension of their living conditions. In so doing, Blue tried to help these men more effectively regulate their expressions of violence in a controlled setting and, eventually, on the proverbial 'inner city streets.' Such decisions around the

structure of sporting activities may, in some respects, appear to be banal but they are, in fact, extraordinarily difficult and complex. For example, on the one hand, some of the young men grasped and enjoyed the roughness of these matches and took pride in using their bodies to display a combination of skill and force. At the same time the creation of these types of distinctly gendered and competitive spaces—spaces that almost exclusively precluded the presence of women but also other young men who may not excel at sport or who may wish to avoid sports with physical contact altogether—may make it difficult to fully address the interrelated issues of violence and masculinity in men's lives and may, unintentionally, work to further normalize these practices. Whereas these sporting activities may offer limited and specific benefits, they may also potentially reproduce some problematic conditions and may contribute to issues of social exclusion.

Such critiques, however, must take into account the relatively privileged position in which they are rooted. For a host of reasons, hockey is a popular and relatable physical cultural practice for the young men. We heard countless examples of the relatively aggressive context of everyday living in inner-city Edmonton, which we thought inevitably contributed to the production and normalization of certain genres and gestures of physicality that enabled survival in this community. That floor hockey embraced a degree of aggression, therefore, may have rendered it a more salient physical cultural practice than other, less aggressive activities. Hockey is also Canada's most widely celebrated sporting pastime that most Canadians are at least vaguely familiar with and have practiced (even on the street) at some point in their lives. On a level of praxis, then, the raw physicality and genres of masculinity celebrated in Canadian hockey cultures may be a necessary 'hook' that *brings the young men into* the city's MHU each week. This, in turn, provided Blue with a key entry point into their lives and enabled him to offer counsel, support, and potentially significant interventions to 'at risk' populations, including his philosophical emphasis on non-violence.

Social context

The social context category reflects social and inter-personal interactions that characterized the youth workers' perspectives. This is more 'distal' than the immediate personal benefits an individual may acquire. There is a sense of reciprocity here in that social relationships are influenced by individuals while individuals are also influenced by social relationships. Furthermore, as with the category of personal context, we tried to frame the category of social context back to broader structural factors to reflect how various levels of social ecology overlap and interact.

Opportunities for relationship building and mentoring

The sport programs provided an important social context that regularly brought together young inner-city dwellers for fun and pleasure; a context that, incidentally, created new opportunities and spaces for youth workers to develop relationships with the young men. For example, one youth worker (Eloise) described the importance of these types of sport settings – on this occasion a casual and non-competitive activity – for authority figures in developing rapport with young men from the inner-city who regularly sought to distance themselves from parents, teachers and police:

> We were just shooting hoops, him [client] and I, and he started telling me about how he ended up where he was at… I think he was selling drugs. [He was] telling me about his mom and dad and the influence they had on him. Um and then his interest in basketball and how he was into basketball.

In this case, the sporting activity had clearly provided a context for the young man to 'open up' to Eloise and share parts of his personal/family history as well as his passion for basketball. These types of inter-personal connections can facilitate trust and, potentially, the establishment of more enduring relationships and social networks. Others viewed sport very specifically as a means of developing relationships with the young men. Bob (a coach) said:

> So the goal of it is to build a relationship with the youth and then through that relationship encourage them to do something more positive than what they're doing now. Whether it's, you know, stop using or drugs or start looking for a job or stop hanging out with that gang or whatever the different things are they might be going through.

These consensual and informal relationship building opportunities were important because, as Sandy told us, they afforded incredibly rare and powerful moments:

> And like there's a lot of healing that needs to be done with the inner-city youths. And I think sports are a good way to kind of build relationships with them and if they could somehow be infiltrated with some sort of healing process. Like, if you could debrief after a game and compare some of the things that you feel when you're play sports, like you can get really aggressive and you can get really pissed off at someone on the other team and it, so if you could debrief after, and just say like, "so what made you mad and like how did you deal with it? How does that relate to other things in your life?" There's a huge gap and it's something that's really missing in the inner-city… unless they're going to treatment. And a lot of them just have the stigma about going to treatment.

Blue further expanded on the role of sport and its potential value in developing relationships. As mentioned previously, every Friday he drove around the inner-city in a van collecting young men to take them to floor hockey. The van rides and games provided him with opportunities to make connections with many young men. Blue explained:

> Relationships are huge, 'cause the kids won't come and see me [if it's just] a name on the wall in the Mental Health Unit unless they know me, right? I mean when I came to find you in the [inner-city shelter] just before this interview, um that kid whose name I don't remember, I met him last week at hockey for the first time. And now he's chatting with me like we're buddies and he's coming to hockey again today. I'll know the name by the end of the day. So then if we start running into problems, well they probably *are* having problems, but if they happen to have any they can come to me, the guy, instead of me the worker. And hopefully we can connect them with the mental health system if that's what they need, or whatever, right? It's just a way of breaking the ice with the youth.

Within this context of creating relationships, Blue outlined how he seized opportunities that arose, reflecting the notion of debriefing to which Sandy had referred. Blue explained:

> So I try during the sports to watch and so that I can remember stuff about them, where they did things right. It also gives me, when I'm travelling [i.e., the van ride to and from games], it is kind of a group session where I can discuss with them things that are going on and, and, and I mean most of these guys know each other. And so they're all discussing what's going on too. So then that gives me another avenue to hopefully help the person moderate their life in some healthier choices.

For Blue, then, it was not only the floor hockey matches that provided these important relationship building opportunities, but also the relaxed and convivial atmosphere of the van that emerged as a therapeutic space where these young men could talk, joke, laugh, and anticipate the upcoming floor hockey game. We also came to understand the significance of the van as akin to a psychologist's couch (or, as Blue said, "a group therapy session") for many of the young men who, as noted above, may be distrustful of authority figures, social institutions and the idea of formal counseling. Indeed, the following exchange from JK's fieldwork notes demonstrated how Blue embraced the opportunity to engage with the young men during the van rides:

Richie rides in the seat behind Blue with me to his side.

"I'm glad I came Blue," he says.

"Me too Richie," says Blue. "Make sure you get to the co-op on time next week."

"I don't know Blue," says Richie. "I hear there's a warrant out for my arrest."

"What happened?" Asks Blue.

"Well, they say I missed a court date, but I was there. I just didn't get a chance to talk with anybody," says Richie (articulating himself in a tone that suggests there is much more to this story than meets the eye).

"Is there anybody to corroborate your story Richie?" Asks Blue.

"What?" Says Richie.

"Can you prove it?"

"Well, no," says Richie apologetically.

"Well," sighs Blue "you know what you got to do then."

Blue and Richie have a calm conversation about what it will look like for Richie to go back to jail. Blue says, "You need to get your needle beforehand Richie, because you won't be able to access that for a while in there."

"I know. I will," says Richie. "I don't want to go back."

In this case Blue's connection with Richie had clearly not curtailed all of the young man's activities; nor could Blue directly address the structural issues at the root of Richie's personal issues. However, the van ride provided an important context for Blue to offer Richie moral support and counsel that may otherwise not have occurred, which may potentially help to *reduce the harm* that would be caused if Richie did not turn himself in. These moments, we would suggest, are especially important for the young men in our study who were often stoic and disinclined to openly discuss their fears, insecurities, doubts, and feelings with authority figures. Blue embraced his role as a male mentor and confidant. The intimacy and bond that Blue shared with these men was also a result of the fact that he has been in his position as a mental health worker for over fifteen years and running the floor hockey program for a decade. It is precisely the rarity of such a long-term commitment to working in the inner-city as a mental health worker coupled with much broader economic and social inequalities, however, that point to the significant structural issues that may derail sport and recreation programs.

Related to this latter point, over the course of JK's fieldwork there was a turnover of eight youth workers. We learned that low wages combined with a stressful work environment contributed to this high staff turnover and essentially 'robbed' the inner-city of the required human and economic capital to run and sustain sport and recreation programming and other much-needed social services. We also came to understand these developments fueled a cycle of abandonment to which the young men had been exposed throughout their lives, both in terms of their brief contacts with the limited social services available to them and their fleeting relationships with those youth workers who moved on to new positions.

Structural context

The structural context category refers to the broadest, most distal issues that influenced the extent to which certain objectives could be achieved. It is intended to reflect some of the enduring political-economic barriers and constraints that remain in the neoliberal era, and the need for a coordinated level of social programming to more fully address some of these barriers/constraints.

Enduring constraints

Despite the potential benefits described previously, as we have alluded to throughout the results, all of the youth workers were well aware that the personal issues facing the young men could not be addressed simply through the presence of sport-for-development programs, and that structural barriers to a healthier lifestyle could not easily be overcome because they were so pervasive and institutionalized. A host of issues surrounding economic and social inequality were noted by Sarah:

> [Programming] doesn't take into account fetal alcohol, it doesn't take into account the fact that if you're born poor and don't have any chances there's nobody to fund you… Nobody there to encourage you in school because they don't see the importance of school. It's tough, right? It takes a lot to raise a kid. [There is] lots of love but there's no money. It's tough.

Dave, the manager of an inner-city shelter, similarly described the challenge of providing sport programs for young men who have grown up under extraordinarily difficult circumstances and have ongoing substance abuse problems and other personal issues that remain connected to a host of social structures. He said, "you're addicted because of abuse as a child, because of any of one million reasons. It's hard to think beyond your next toke or your next injection, or your next pill, or whatever it is you're addicted to… So competing with drugs is tough eh?"

As a result of these structural issues, many young men faced enormous barriers that prevented them from playing sport let alone making substantive and enduring changes in their lives. An issue repeatedly raised by the social workers was that of social class and the sheer fact that all of these young men simply had limited access to financial and material resources, let alone basic necessities such as healthy food. As Blue reflected:

> I mean how can you play hockey, how can you take part in organized sports if you can't buy the, the expensive shoes, if you can't, right? If your family can't afford to eat properly at Christmas let alone buy you stuff that means you're not gonna get teased…

Similarly, Eloise said "in regards to like sports and all that sort of thing too it was really hard…it was challenging for some of the youth to kinda get that going because of just like pragmatic things like running shoes." Blue provided shoes, sticks, and other sporting gear for the young men who play in the weekly floor hockey matches, a modest example of how a systemic barrier to participation in sport can be overcome, if only briefly. Pat, meanwhile, noted the accumulated impact of social and economic inequality in the lives of the young men:

> They're just at a point in their life where they're just not motivated to do anything. So they may wanna do something but it's super hard to make changes when they're totally entrenched in

> the lifestyle. It's not that easy to walk away from your friends and say "I'm not gonna hang out with you guys anymore, I'm gonna to join a basketball team."

As a result of these issues, it appeared that some young men refused to even contemplate making significant changes that might improve their lives. Sandy provided an interesting perspective along the lines of social class and identity for young men who often lack networks of active friends, family and other contacts. She said:

> There's fears around leaving the inner city… Like there's so, so much hesitation and I could understand where they're coming from… so, they would say like, oh "we don't wanna go play sports with some rich kids" and that sort of thing.

These sentiments suggested some young men were hesitant to pursue sport opportunities with individuals from other class backgrounds, which limited the potential 'bridging' function of sport-for-development programs. While these programs may, indeed, bring together youth of similar class backgrounds and circumstances, there remain significant barriers that preclude the establishment of connections across structural and identity categories. Yet, as we noted earlier, for the young men in our study, the lack of interest in pursuing other relationships did not stem from a sense of laziness but rather an embodied understanding of what is, and is not, possible and where their physical bodies 'symbolically' belong.

Need for a coordinated approach

Chronic underfunding was, in our view, one of the most significant barriers to sustainable social change facing this community. In relation to this barrier, the youth workers shared quite a clear and common view of ways to move forward and provide more meaningful sport opportunities and broader structural changes to address income and social inequality. Fundamentally, this involved pursuing a long-term, well-funded, coordinated, and collective approach that coordinated the different levels and types of services that could be provided within an inner-city setting. Pat captured the views of many youth workers who were highly critical of the bureaucratic obstacles and power relations that stood in the way of addressing the numerous complex public issues and social problems stemming from economic and social inequality:

> A lot of these programs are very core specific, we're fixing X, this is what we're fixing, it's X, so health, so [name of non-profit that funds sport participation], we want kids to play sports and that's good and I like that, but could it also translate then to improving the health of the child or. … .by proxy, right, playing sports, are healthier, his mental support. What about uh diet, you know we could, we could broaden that up. It's one thing to get the kid to play hockey twice a week then he goes home and eats shit. They could do better… I found there was a lot of duplication and it would be nice for us and from a policy perspective it would be great to have a single call and kids would come through and depending on the level of criminality or the level of poverty or the level of, you know, disenfranchisement, or whatever. Like mental health… 9 times out of 10 he can have a substance abuse issue [and] possibly a mental health issue. My concern is that he falls into one category, so mental health, and he never gets out of the mental health side, knowing that there's substance abuse on this side and abuse or, you know, poverty or maybe he's overweight, maybe there's social issues, whatever it was, so he falls [out of the system].

Eloise, too, shared a critical view of many traditional sport-for-development programs and noted that, "in order for these kids to participate, is that we have to piece together a whole, there was a whole bunch of, a number of transactions that had to occur… It's much more complex, you know, for us to figure out and for an organization to, to make a transaction." At the broadest level, all of the youth workers recognized the challenges facing less affluent young men required more than informing them about life skills. Instead, they thought solutions to such public problems required collective decisions to address poverty, inequality, and the uses of urban space in the inner city that may be contested by various interest groups. These broader issues – and sport-for-development programs themselves – always require judgments about social and political priorities and these judgments revolve around questions of power and privilege. Indeed, as one of our youth workers emphasized, "Sport is great and it's one thing, but it's only a part of the equation."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine issues surrounding the provision of sport opportunities to young men from inner-city areas of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. We found that the *sport plus* type of program we focused on was viewed as an outlet with limited, but specific benefits. Our findings also served to highlight the limits of sport-for-development programs in providing substantive and long-lasting changes to the lives of the young men we studied. The findings, arguably, add to the literature by providing precise understandings of the role of *sport plus* programs in this context and some of the specific mechanisms through which such programs may foster and limit development.

Benefits of sport were in terms of providing an outlet for temporarily overcoming boredom and releasing aggression. These opportunities provided young men with a brief reprieve from their mundane daily activities. In their study of institutionalized individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia, Faulkner and Sparkes (1999) found that the benefits arising from the provision of an exercise program were, in part, due to the distraction that it offered from normal activities. Carless and Douglas (2008) also found that men with mental illness benefitted from sport simply because it gave them something to do. Providing meaningful physical activities in which young men can participate, thus, seems to be important in breaking the cycle of boredom that is a large part of life in the inner-city.

The role of the floor hockey program as a brief outlet for controlled aggression was also important but complex due to the nature of competitive sport and dominant understandings of masculinity. We found the young men policed their own behavior (under Blue's watchful supervision) and, although issues and disagreements rarely escalated to violence, there was no shortage of masculine posturing and bravado. These physical deployments may be particularly salient for men from less affluent class backgrounds as they stake their public claims to masculinity (Connell, 1995). Thus, while sport settings may encourage both the development of skill and displays of confidence that have the potential to raise levels of self-esteem and self-confidence (Carless & Douglas, 2004; Faulkner, 2005; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999), these hierarchical settings may also trigger feelings of inadequacy. For example, some young men were hesitant to leave the inner-city and engage in sport activities and relationships with individuals from other class backgrounds. From our observations the hesitation to pursue sport and relationships with individuals from other class backgrounds did not stem from 'laziness,' but from an embodied sense of social class and all of its associated 'hidden injuries' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). These embodied dispositions (i.e., command of language, body, or sense of humor) set limits on their understandings of what was possible and where one symbolically belongs (and does not belong) in sport settings and a broader social context.

Findings showed sport provided valuable opportunities for youth workers to develop important relationships with the young men who were often distrustful of authority figures and social institutions, which may be exacerbated by masculine constructions associated with concerns about demonstrating weakness by seeking help (Courtenay, 2000). The counseling literature has traditionally highlighted the importance of client–counselor relationships (e.g., Okun, 1987). Although the majority of research refers to 'classic' therapeutic settings rather than opportunities that arise from playing sport or taking a van ride, Sexton and Whiston (1994) have noted that the client–counselor relationship remains the main mechanism associated with positive therapeutic results. Several youth workers addressed the importance of relationships, but our extensive involvement with Blue provided some of the most insightful examples of the significance of these sport settings. In this way the sport program – and in particular the selection of floor hockey and tolerance for limited levels of physical contact – provided an example of the ways in which masculine capital can be used for the promotion of health behaviors (cf. De Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Smith, 2013). Over the long term, these relationships are likely crucial, and our findings suggest that sport provided some valuable avenues for connecting with the young men in ways that may not be achieved through more traditional therapeutic approaches that may be associated with a certain stigma, especially related to masculinity.

We also emphasized the significance of systemic structural barriers associated with social and economic inequality that continued to restrict the extent to which providing sport could have an influence on the young men's lives. Similarly, in studies examining the benefits and challenges associated with sport participation based on interviews with low-income parents (Holt, Tink, Kingsley, & Scherer, 2011) and inner-city youth workers (Holt et al., 2009) these participants reported several remaining barriers and constraints restricted the extent to which children and youth could engage in sport and gain sustained developmental benefits. In using an ecological perspective, we were also able to look across different contexts and identified the need for a coordinated approach that focused on much broader issues and social problems associated with inequality. Our findings support Hartmann and Kwauk's (2011) view that "participation in sport may be a useful mechanism for development, but it alone is not sufficient to engender social change" (p. 290) and Holt et al.'s (2009) contention that programs should "span several domains of healthy development as opposed to focusing solely on unidimensional programming" (p. 1027).

Strengths of this study were that it was conducted over an extended period of time and involved interviews and participant observation. Such extensive involvement was a critical component in the success of this research and our understanding of the complexities of the context. As our project enters its final year we will conduct formal interviews with the young men themselves but have to be careful to avoid alienating them from the sport programs and/or compromising the integrity of JK's relationships in the field. Given the focus of the current paper we were able to achieve our aims in the absence of formal interviews with the young men. By providing the perspectives of youth workers our work complements other research that has obtained 'at risk' young men's perspectives of the potential role of sport and physical activity in their lives (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2008; Faulkner & Sparkes, 1999). Nonetheless, obtaining the young men's views of programs remains an issue we must address as our research progresses. There were also issues relating to gender we did not explore, particularly between the female youth workers and the young men, as well as race/ethnicity intersections between the youth workers and young men and within the group of young men themselves. These are important issues for future research in order to further identify some of the processes and mechanisms that may lead to certain outcomes.

In summary, this study added to the literature by providing some precise understanding of the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to members of specific populations in particular inner-city circumstances. We depicted some of the mechanisms by which youth workers' thought young men could gain benefits via their participation (i.e., through the program as an outlet and via providing opportunities for relationship building). These benefits related to ways in which men may incorporate healthy and unhealthy masculine behaviors within a masculine identity. However, we also identified some of the enduring structural constraints that limited the extent to which larger benefits can be realized. This supports the view that such *sport plus* programs may be necessary but not sufficient for the achievement of certain broader outcomes (Coalter, 2010; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Holt et al., 2009). For instance, it produced personal and social level benefits but more comprehensive programming and collective approaches were needed to achieve long-lasting benefits for participants and structural changes. Nonetheless, we highlighted some social processes and mechanisms that may lead to desired outcomes for some participants in certain circumstances. This study also provided an understanding of how sport might facilitate the work of youth workers and the specific role they may play within the broader framework of social services offered to young men from the inner-city. The findings may inform public policy by identifying some particular uses of sport within a system of social services, and highlight what sport programs may and may not be able to achieve. Such precise understandings of sport programs is required if they are to provide avenues to health.

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