

# Anishinaabekweg Dibaajimowinan (Stories) of Decolonization Through Running

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Indigenous women's perspectives on physical activity and the ways in which it fosters decolonization have yet to be considered from an Indigenous feminist perspective. Therefore, in this paper, we present four Anishinaabekweg (that is, Anishinaabeg women's) dibaajimowinan (personal stories) of physical activity, specifically running, and their views on its contribution to decolonization. This study used an Anishinaabeg research paradigm, storytelling, and Anishinaabeg informed thematic analysis. Findings from the dibaajimowinan revealed three themes: running as ceremony and healing; the significance of running as a group; and running for health and personal goals. The dibaajimowinan from the Anishinaabekweg runners show how decolonization through physical activity can occur, which is an important addition to the field of sociology of sport.

Almost every health indicator indicates that Indigenous peoples in Canada are overburdened with ill health (Reading, 2009). In particular, Indigenous women experience higher rates of physical inactivity and chronic diseases than non-Indigenous women and Indigenous men (Brown, McDonald, & Elliott, 2009; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011). The underlying causes of Indigenous women's disproportionate burden of ill health are directly related to the impacts of colonialism (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, & Hampton, 2004; Loppie Reading & Wein, 2009). While it is well documented that physical activity can improve health (Foulds, Bredin, & Warburton, 2011; Lavallée, 2007; Reiner, Niermann, Jekauc, & Woll, 2013), scholarly accounts of Indigenous women's own understandings of the impact of involvement in physical activity on their bodies and their experiences of colonialism are scarce.

Having volunteered as a fitness instructor for urban Indigenous community organizations in various communities across Canada for eight years, McGuire-Adams, who is Anishinaabe, (also known as the Ojibway, Algonquin, and Odawa people who reside in rural, reserve, and urban areas in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, and Minnesota, in addition to other global localities) witnessed how physical activity had a profound impact on her health and the health of participants in her classes. Importantly, she and other women participants began making connections between improved health and decolonization of their body. These insights prompted her, with Giles (a settler of English and Welsh heritage, to commence a program of research in this area.

In this paper, we employ Indigenous feminist theory to investigate how four Anishinaabeg women runners understand and resist the impacts of colonization on their bodies. First, we provide a review of literature on gender-based health differences between Indigenous women and men, Indigenous peoples' participation in sport and practices of physical activity, and the importance of land in decolonization processes. Second, we provide an overview of theoretical and methodological approaches that guided the data collection. Third, we present the three themes that emerged from the dibaajimowinan of the women: running as ceremony and

healing; the significance of running as a group; and running for health and personal goals. Finally, we discuss the importance and implications of our findings.

## Review of Literature

There are important gender-based health differences between Indigenous men and women. Indigenous women appear to be particularly vulnerable to ill health. For instance, First Nations women in Canada who live off-reserve are less likely to engage in physical activity and experience higher rates of ill health than their male counterparts (Browne, McDonald, & Elliott, 2009; Bruner & Chad, 2013; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007). Furthermore, First Nations people in Canada experience type 2 diabetes at a rate that is three to five times greater than the general Canadian population (Health Canada, 2006), with Aboriginal females having a greater prevalence of type 2 diabetes than Aboriginal males (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011). Findlay (2011) also found that while First Nations people living off reserve are more physically active than the non-Aboriginal population, they nonetheless experience poorer health, specifically regarding obesity and other chronic diseases. To that end, data from 2011 showed that Aboriginal women have higher inactivity rates (Bruner & Chad, 2013; Findlay, 2011), higher overweight and obesity (Bruner & Chad, 2013), and suffer from "poorer health than non-Aboriginal women in Canada . . . and more chronic diseases than Aboriginal men" (Bourassa et al., 2004, p. 23).

Findlay (2011) has argued that when key social determinants of health are addressed (e.g., poor housing and lower income), physical activity still does not correspond to improved health for First Nations people. Indeed, Bruner and Chad (2013) have noted that the sociocultural factors that influence physical activity have not been adequately researched from the perspectives of Indigenous women themselves. Their study, which focused on the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of physical activity among First Nations women, found that while participants believed physical activity is important for good health, lack of time, lack of

community opportunities, and environmental factors are barriers to them practicing physical activity.

Research concerning women's physical activity is extensive and has spanned multiple areas: participation in sport (Thompson, 2002); femininity ideology and sport (Roth & Bascow, 2004); physical activity and health (McDermott, 2010); bodies, gender, and health (Kuhlmann & Babitsch, 2002); women's physicality (McDermott, 1996, 2000); and the body, femininity, and disability (Inahara, 2009). While this research has broadened understandings of sport, physical activity, gender, and embodied practices, by in large, it has been conducted through a white, mainstream lens.

More recently, Indigenous and non-Indigenous sport, physical activity, and health scholars have brought much needed attention to Indigenous peoples' participation in sport and physical activity (Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006; Forsyth & Giles, 2013; Hall, 2002; Ferguson & Philipenko, 2016; Salamone, 2013; Giles, 2004; Tang & Jardine, 2016) and Indigenous women's participation in particular (Bruner & Chad, 2013; Coppola, Dumler, Letendre, & McHugh, 2016; Giles, 2004; Lavallée, 2008; McHugh, Coppola, & Sabiston, 2014; Paraschak & Forsyth, 2010). The ways in which physical activity and sport involvement might be used as a tool for decolonization has largely escaped scholarly attention, though the ways in which it has been used as a tool of colonization has received considerable attention.

While sport can replicate and is infused with colonial and nationalistic values that further the assimilative goals of Canada (Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006), it has also been used as a means of resistance. Within Indian Residential Schools, students subverted the outright assimilatory purpose of sport by taking up the physicality of it and using it as way to celebrate their athletic achievements (Bloom, 2000; Forsyth, 2013; Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006). Similarly, O'Bonsawin (2015) analyzed how Indigenous athletes faced systemic oppression when participating at the Olympics, especially in those moments when they show resistance to nationalistic values (e.g. Damien Hooper wearing a t-shirt featuring his Indigenous Australian flag when entering the boxing ring and Alywin Morris' raising an eagle feather while being presented his medal.) Indeed, sport has the paradoxical potential to oppress Indigenous bodies, while at the same time providing a space where personal empowerment can be achieved, which then may assist in resistance to and regeneration from the effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples' bodies (Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006; Hovey, Delormier, & McComber, 2014; Reitenburg et al., 2014). A central component to achieve regeneration is representing Indigenous peoples on the land (Coulthard, 2014; Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, & Coulthard, 2014), which can occur through remembering ancestral stories.

Ancestral stories provide Indigenous scholars with insights to help with restoring important connections to the land (Oliveira, 2014) and a pillar for Indigenous ways of being (Geniusz, 2009). Stories can "direct, inspire, and affirm ancient codes of ethics" (Simpson, 2014a, p. 8), which can then be applied in current understandings, places, and practices (Doerfler, Sinclair, & Stark, 2013; Geniusz, 2009). They also contribute to envisioning and creating realities that challenge the permanence of settler colonialism in Indigenous territories and promote decolonization (Jobin, 2016; Simpson, 2014).

## Decolonization

Decolonization is an important factor for creating well-being and personal transformation as Wilson (2004) clarified,

Decolonization becomes central to unravelling the long history of colonization and returning well-being to our people. . . . decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage. Decolonization is about empowerment – a belief that situations can be transformed, a belief and trust in our own peoples' values and abilities, and a willingness to make change (p. 71).

To this end, there has been much scholarly attention on how colonialism affects Indigenous minds (Wilson & Yellowbird, 2005), Indigenous values and the destruction of Indigenous community ethics (Alfred, 2005), and reconciliation (Coulthard, 2014). Yet, there has been a lack of attention on how decolonization can be applied to Indigenous bodies, especially from an Indigenous feminist lens.

Mihesuah's (2005) book, *Recovering our Ancestors' Gardens: Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness*, is a source that connects the effects of colonization to Indigenous bodies. Mihesuah (2005) advocated that Indigenous peoples return to ancestral ways of eating and exercising, including running, as a way to combat the negative effects of the colonial diet on Indigenous peoples. She encouraged Indigenous people's return to their ancestors' teachings regarding food and fitness to regenerate Indigenous peoples' health and wellbeing. Certainly, the processes of decolonization requires that Indigenous peoples consciously—or mindfully—reconnect to our respective Indigenous values, ethics, and teachings while simultaneously challenging the effects of colonialism in our lives and bodies. Recent literature that has focussed on decolonization for Indigenous peoples has been envisioned it in a variety of ways: healing (Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011); health promotion (Mundel & Chapman, 2010); embodied decolonization (Reitenburg et al., 2014), and community decolonization applied to chronic disease (Birch-McMichael, 2015; Hovey et al., 2014). Very little of it, however, has been conducted through an Indigenous feminist lens.

Decolonization processes are embodied experiences, which also regenerate community wellbeing. Reitenburg et al. (2014) explored how decolonization is embodied in Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The authors reflected on the how Indigenous bodies experience decolonization with regard to Indigenous methodologies: Indigenous knowledge as embodied knowledge; embodied decolonization through theatrical performance as physicality; decolonizing the body through Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge specific to dancing, drumming, singing and ceremony; and through revitalizing Maori birthing practices. Each example showcased, "the commitment to centering the body in the process of decolonization and indigenization along with an affirmation of bodily wisdom and experience as a critical component of Indigenous methodology" (Reitenburg et al., 2014, p. 77). In sum, decolonization processes involve Indigenous peoples supporting each other to overcome the negative ramifications of colonialism on their bodies, specifically regarding ill health. Further, Coppola et al. (2016) explained that by "focusing on Aboriginal peoples' positive experiences, it is possible to identify resources and strengths for promoting well-being" (p. 2). Paraschak (2013a) also emphasized the importance of looking to "existing strengths [that] are identified by individuals within a group or community" (p. 97) in order to then challenge poor health statistics.

Given Indigenous women's over-representation in statistics that indicate poor health, there is an urgent need to understand how Indigenous women themselves understand how they can foster decolonization through physical activity.

Given the noted gaps in the literature, this research study focused on the dibaajimowinan of Anishinaabekweg runners who maintain a high level of physical activity for the explicit purpose of fostering their health and wellbeing. The choice of Anishinaabekweg runners is deliberate. Historically, the Anishinaabeg had female and male runners called michitweg, who were messengers between communities and were highly respected (Rasmussen, 2003). The michitweg ran distances ranging between a dozen miles to over a hundred miles to reach communities through a system of woodland trails that created an "intertribal relay system" (Rasmussen, 2003, p. 14). The michitweg often took up a ceremonial role by being offered semaa (tobacco) and prayers, especially when a person in community was ill; the michitweg were summoned to run to other communities to contact healers. Similarly, the Iroquois Confederacy, including other Native American tribes, included running messengers who carried important messages and news to other communities (Milroy, 2013; Nabokov, 1981). The michitweg shows that there may be an ancestral element to understanding the importance of running. Using Indigenous feminist theory and an Anishinaabekweg research paradigm, we explore the ways in which four Anishinaabekweg runners relate their physical activity to their health and decolonization.

## Theoretical Framework

Suzack, Huhndorf, Perreault, and Barman (2010) have argued that feminism, especially in academia, remains white-centered; therefore, they stated that Indigenous feminist theory is needed to offer a space to conceptualize theories and practices specific to Indigenous community interests. Indigenous feminist theory has gained considerable momentum in the last two decades with the publication of edited volumes and special issue publications (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009; Green, 2005; Suzack et al., 2010). During this time, Indigenous feminisms began to be articulated through the examination of topics such as Anishinaabeg womanhood (Anderson, 2000; Laduke, 1997; Solomon, 1990); feminist and Indigenous approaches to decolonization (Green, 2005; Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; Mihesuah, 2003); and community, political, and legal strategies in addressing oppression (Monture-Angus, 1995, 1999; Ouellette, 2002; St. Denis, 2007; Simpson, 2011; Trask, 1996).

Suzack et al. (2010) have suggested that a "single, normative definition of Indigenous feminism remains impossible because Indigenous women's circumstances vary enormously throughout colonizing societies, where patriarchy dominates, and in Indigenous communities with distinct histories and cultural traditions" (p. 2). This statement is informative, as it reveals that there is no melting pot that results in a uniform, pan-Indigenous feminism. While there is no one monolithic definition of Indigenous feminist theory (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009), Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) explained that, broadly, it develops the understandings, practices, and connections between settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and heteropaternalism. Further, Indigenous feminist theory brings attention to the gendered process of settler colonialism through an intersectional analysis of gender, sexuality, race, Indigeneity, and nation. Intersectional analysis is needed to disrupt the continuance of settler colonialism in colonial nation states, which necessarily contains Indigenous ways of thinking/being in

order to create decolonial thinking and practices of social justice, society, and individual/community regeneration (Arvin et al., 2013; Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010). This speaks to the need to continue building an Indigenous feminist inquiry from Indigenous contexts; as Indigenous feminist scholars, we bring our unique experiences from within our Nations, our communities, and our families to then challenge colonialism, which then adds to the field of Indigenous feminist theory.

Indigenous women have all experienced colonization and the imposition of patriarchy, which Suzack et al. (2010) have attested, "transformed Indigenous societies by diminishing Indigenous women's power, status, and material circumstances" (p. 3). Further, Arvin et al. (2013) explained that they use the term "Native" feminist theory<sup>1</sup> instead of Indigenous feminist theory to denote that this decolonial work is not the sole responsibility of Indigenous peoples or Indigenous women or feminists; rather, it is the responsibility of all people who to seek to challenge settler colonialism to envision a decolonial future.

A central component to broadening feminist understandings of the work of decolonization is to look to the stories of Indigenous women who are enacting decolonization in their everyday practices. Certainly, there were many early critiques from Indigenous women scholars such as Jaimes and Halsey (1992) and Trask (1996) that feminism was too white, too academic, and not located in Indigenous language or community. However, it has become widely accepted that Indigenous feminist theory is a valuable tool to uncover how colonialism and patriarchal values has become imbedded within our traditions, teachings, values, and relationships (McGuire-Adams, 2017; Phillips, 2012). To this end, LaRocque (2007) explained that Indigenous women "must be both decolonizers and feminist" (p. 68) in order to uncover how colonialism has impacted our Indigenous ways of thinking and practices.

While Indigenous feminist theory has produced engaged and relevant knowledge on such issues pertaining to culture, activism, politics, for instance, the field has yet to consider physical activity pertaining to health and associated practices of decolonization. Notably, Anderson (2011) and Simpson (2011) clarified that decolonization for Indigenous women includes a remembering of our stories, to be then be applied to fostering wellbeing, healing, regenerate our connections to our lands. This study adds to Indigenous feminist theory and the sociology of sport by focusing on how Anishinaabekweg are experiencing decolonization through physical activity, specifically running.

## Methodology

While Indigenous methodologies have become popular ways to conduct research with Indigenous peoples, pan-Indigenous approaches lack grounding in any one particular Indigenous group's knowledge, land, language, and practices. As a result, we have chosen to use an Anishinaabeg research methodology. An Anishinaabeg research methodology employs principles of Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin (way of being) that are given to Anishinaabeg through our dibaajimowinan (personal stories) (Geniusz, 2009). Stories have long been used as teaching tools (King, 2003). As King (2003) explained, once we have heard a story, we then may choose to learn from it, and continue to share it, which signals the importance of stories in generating current and future perceptions about our life. Further, Anishinaabeg stories are "useful Anishinaabe methods of gathering knowledge when rooted in the Anishinaabe worldview" (Simpson, 2000, p. 181), and are thus a key component of the Anishinaabeg research paradigm employed within this research

(McGuire-Adams, 2018), which was developed based on Wilson's (2008) instructional framework for developing Indigenous research paradigms.

The components of an Anishinaabeg research paradigm (McGuire-Adams, 2018) are ontology—Inaadiziwin (Geniusz, 2009); epistemology—Biskaabiiyaang (Geniusz, 2009; Simpson, 2011); axiology—Niizhwaaswi kchtwaa kinomaadiwinan (Benton-Banai, 1988), and methodology—Wiisokotaatiwin (McGuire-Adams, 2018). McGuire-Adams pieced together Anishinaabeg gikendaasowin (knowledge) from Anishinaabeg scholars to create a space from which to engage in research that both centered Anishinaabeg inaadiziwin, and to foster reciprocal relationships with the research participants. For instance, inaadiziwin, which means the Anishinaabeg way of being, is represented by the dibaajimowinan from the participants; biskaabiiyang, which means returning to ourselves, is represented by the ancestral stories that guide the research and includes decolonization; niizhwaaswi kchtwaa kinomaadiwinan, which are the seven sacred gifts or seven grandfather teachings include: nbwakaawin (wisdom); zaagidwin (love); mnaadendimowin (respect); aakwade'ewin (bravery); gwekwaadiziwin (honesty); dbaadendziwin (humility); debwewin (truth), were enacted by McGuire-Adams' relationship with the research participants; and wiisokotaatiwin, which means gathering together for a purpose, fosters a sense of community within the research. By grounding the research within an Anishinaabeg research paradigm, an Anishinaabeg presence is built in academia and connects mindfully and spiritually to McGuire-Adams' role as an Anishinaabe researcher and also to her participants, communities, family, ancestors, manitous (spirits), and to Gitchimanitou (the Great Spirit).

## Methods

McGuire-Adams recruited seven Anishinaabekweg by word of mouth opportunities and key informant selection (Newman, 2010). Only four of the participants were runners; thus, in this paper we focus only on those participants. The research method of storytelling was used to guide the interviews (Kovach, 2009), and a list of open-ended questions was used to assist the women in sharing their dibaajimowinan. Anishinaabeg and Western research protocols were followed: offering of semaa, and McGuire-Adams' Anishinaabe name, clan, and community, and approval was secured from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa. As per their signed consent forms, and recognizing the importance of crediting expert knowledge, each participant is identified by her name and First Nation community.

Carrienne, a mother of two, is from Waaskinigaa or Birch Island, which is located on the northeastern shore of Lake Superior. She started running 10 milers and then advanced to half-marathons, marathons, and then completed an ultra-marathon. In addition to being a marathon runner, Carrienne is a fitness coach and runs multiple fitness programs in her community. Racheal is a mother of three who has been running for most of her adult life and has completed multiple marathons. She is from Sandy Lake First Nation and currently lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Maria is a mother of three from the Kitigan Zibi First Nation, and she has run multiple marathons. Further, Maria is also a certified Rebounding instructor and mentors beginner runners. Janelle is a mother of three from the Bois Fort Band of Chippewa in upper State Minnesota. She has been running marathons, 50 milers, and 100 milers for the past few years, and, also mentors beginner runners. The interviews were one to two hours in length. Three were conducted in person and one was conducted over Skype.

## Results

Anishinaabeg-informed thematic analysis (McGuire-Adams, 2018) was used to analyze the dibaajimowinan from the participants. Coupling thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) with the Anishinaabeg research paradigm, McGuire-Adams correspondingly sought spiritual guidance, through her spiritual practices and physical activity, and continually reflected upon the Anishinaabeg concepts included in the research paradigm to analyze the participants' dibaajimowinan. As McGuire-Adams engaged in the Anishinaabeg-informed analysis process three themes emerged: running as ceremony and healing, which signals the importance of running on the land; the significance of running as a group with other women that helps to inspire others; and running for health and personal goals.

### Running as Ceremony and Healing

The Anishinaabekweg participants told stories about how their running, specifically, was an act of healing and ceremony. For example, Carrienne explained that running marathons, for her, is comparable to completing a Sun Dance ceremony:

Running is my ceremony and when I [train for a marathon] it takes months—just like preparing for the Sundance—you have to prepare for what was going to happen. I endure an awful lot when I run; there's the heat or it's raining, or it's cold. I'm enduring that as I'm going through. As I start I'm offering my [prayers] and as I go I'm talking to the trees and the rocks and listening to what's around me and I'm constantly praying for people. I'm praying for those that can't run; I'm praying for those murdered and missing women . . . So at the finish line, I then feel really, really empowered because I've done my ceremony. I've taken my time to prepare and then I go through that journey . . . and they say it's the runners high, but it's not: it's the sense that I've done my ceremony.

Racheal, another marathon runner, explained that running helps her to heal by overcoming and releasing stress:

I found running cleared my head—like I can feel my heart again and feel everything negative [leave] through my breath and through my sweat. And sometimes I just ran so hard and fast I would end up crying at the end of my run. It is a way for me to release what [stressors] were going on . . . and I found myself connecting with the Creator.

Personal healing also resonated with why Maria chooses to run. She explained that when she does not run, she begins to feel down or depressed to the point that she “noticed my thoughts were negative and I didn't feel good about myself, then everything was becoming negative. But when I started exercising it all went away . . . I made exercise a priority because it affected my mentality.” Similarly, Janelle uses running as way address issues of depression and gain wholistic wellbeing. She explained,

I used to have to run to live; now I live to run. I have run since I was in junior high, but as an adult, I needed to get back to running just out of health reasons. I was struggling with depression the time, really bad depression, but was able to get off medication with just running and diet.

Carrienne, Racheal, Maria, and Janelle also use running as a means to connect with ceremony. Carrienne directs her thoughts,

prayers, and her physicality to those she wants to help. Racheal, Maria, and Janelle run, at times, to engage in a personal healing ceremony and to overcome negative feelings. Through their *di-baa-jimowinan*, the Anishinaabeg runners signaled the important healing aspects of running in their Anishinaabeg territories. All the women shared how their act of running enabled a spiritual connection with the land within their territories; for them, running cannot be separated from being on the land because running takes place, most often, outside. Carriane specifically mentioned how she connects to the land around her when she runs by listening to what is around her and making a connection to the trees and rocks. Racheal mentioned that she would often connect with the Creator when she ran for her personal healing in her community of Sandy Lake.

### Running as a Group With Other Women

Racheal shared that a group of her friends run together and they enter community running events under the team name I Am Team Anishinaabe. She shared that running as a group feels like a family:

[Running together] is pretty important. Right now [in December] we're all doing our own things, either going to the gym or going to Unleashed Fitness or Bootcamp. But by March/April we start running together once in a while on Saturday or Sunday mornings, early—we don't get to sleep in! We're just committed to try to run with each other at least once a week. It's like a family. Even though we're not blood related and we don't always have to talk to each other, [we] motivate each other to keep going or [see when] we need to take some time off.

Running together as a group provides motivation for the runners and creates a community of support. For instance, Janelle runs with other Anishinaabekweg in a group named Kwe Pack, where they support each other with running. The group started with five women and, over time, it grew to a core group of 25 women. In order to coordinate their running schedules, they created a closed group Facebook page that has upwards of 100 members. An essential component of Kwe Pack is supporting each other:

Essentially is started out with five of us and it really grew... we just really connected and kind of shared the same goal of wanting to be healthy role models for our children. And continue to be healthy for ourselves. It just occurred to me to be a domino effect, like one friend invited another friend, and we all just connected and we all got to be good friends. We all support each other, we provide information to each other, we push each other to do things we never thought we would.

The Kwe Pack members have gone onto run in races together including 5 km runs, full marathons, and ultra-marathons. An important element of storytelling in research, is to engage in a reciprocal sharing of stories (Wilson, 2008). As such, during the interview, McGuire-Adams shared the story of the *michitweg* with Janelle and her response indicated how the Kwe Pack connects with the term: "That is the first time I have heard of [*michitweg*], and it's really amazing how we are still doing this without knowing it. A lot of us don't know [about the *michitweg*], but we are just doing it 'cause it's so natural for us to do!" Maria also connected her motivation to exercise as being part of a group atmosphere:

When you are not motivated to do it on your own being part of a group and connecting with other Native people is really important for your mentality... It's much more than just exercise, it's much more than just "getting things out." It's having that connection with other Natives and feeling part of the Native community.

The Anishinaabekweg runners spoke about how their engagement in physical activity also empowered their families to become active. They all shared that their children, friends, partners, and/or family took up running or working out as a result of seeing them commit to running.

### Running for Personal Goals and Health

The Anishinaabeg runners shared that running means a great deal to them in terms of achieving personal goals and health. Carriane explained that a big part of her commitment to running comes from striving for the next race. Similarly, Racheal explained that planning and preparing of her next race is what keeps her committed to running; she carries a competitive spirit, which is not directed toward any other runner, but it enables her to improve her running completion times. Maria also explained that when she runs, her physical activity motivates her to achieve other life goals she sets for herself.

I can see how good and positively [running] affects you. For me with the distance running, I think about goals [while running] and you really think you can do anything and that's why I continue to do marathons, because I had these feelings that I could do anything... with my life goals.

In addition to setting and achieving specific running goals, the Anishinaabeg runners shared that they run for their health. Janelle provided her thoughts on how she has seen running help other Kwe Pack runners improve their health:

I have seen people in our group who were type 2 diabetic, or borderline diabetic, [or had] high blood pressure. And I've also seen [some people] use running in their recovery process (from alcohol) and that is really amazing. I didn't realize that until you are running with someone and they say, "did you know this about me?" And I am like, "Wow!" Because everyone has their own story and that is really amazing and powerful and that is how we hold each other up.

Further, as the Anishinaabeg runners are all mothers, they all explained that they run so their children may see them be healthy and active, thus setting a good example. Racheal explained,

Teaching [my] kids [about] a healthy active life is a big thing for me. Even though they're not following in my footsteps right now, my middle child would run with me once in a while or she would try to come to the gym with a couple times... she sees me [being active] is what I do, so yeah, [I] just trying to be active for my kids.

## Discussion

While Indigenous feminist theory engages in important intersectional analyses, the core argument of this paper is that physical activity as a process of decolonization is missing from Indigenous feminist analysis and the sociology of sport, which is where we

focus the discussion. This study makes a departure from viewing sport and physical activity as site of colonialism and instead makes a significant contribution to the field by connecting Anishinaabeg women's physical activity to decolonization, which also occurs from a strength and hope-based perspective (Paraschak, 2013b). As mentioned above, Indigenous peoples' poor health is a result of colonialism (Bourassa et al., 2004; Loppie Reading & Wein, 2009). The field of Indigenous health research has used a deficit-based approach extensively when analyzing the poor health experienced by Indigenous peoples. What is required, however, is a strengths-based perspective that focuses on what is working well for Indigenous peoples to then encourage hope in others (Paraschak, 2013b; Paraschak & Thompson, 2014). As decolonization requires a refusal of victimhood and a regeneration of Indigenous values and abilities (Wilson, 2004), the Anishinaabekweg in this study showcase a strengths-based resistance to the impacts of colonialism and are decolonizing by mindfully connecting to their physical activity to ceremony, healing, inspiring others, and achieving personal health and wellbeing.

Importantly, Indigenous feminist theorists clarify that the end goal of settler colonialism is to make Indigenous people disappear: without Indigenous people to contend with, the colonizers can finally claim full control over our lands (Arvin et al., 2013; Gunn Allen, 1986; Simpson, 2017). The dibaajimowinan from the Anishinaabekweg demonstrate how physical activity that is connected to territory is a process of healing, regeneration, and a reconnection to lands, and therefore, the Anishinaabekweg runners interviewed as part of this study are modern day michitweg or oshki-michitweg (new runners); the new messages they carry are health and wellbeing, as seen for example in the Kwe Pack. The Kwe Pack choose to run on their ancestral trails as doing so directly connects them to the ideals of their ancestors' vitality. In a media story, one of the members of Kwe Pack explained that when she runs on their ancestral trails, she can feel the ancestors with her because they are on the very same trail system that their ancestors also used (StandingCloud, 2015). Coulthard (2014) explained that an approach to resurgence from settler colonialism is to connect with our lands, and land based practices, either individually or collectively, which could "take the form of 'walking the land' in an effort to refamiliarize ourselves with landscapes and places that give our histories, languages, and cultures shape and content" (p. 171). Importantly, reconnecting to the land through land-based practices like running is an act of healing and decolonization for Indigenous peoples (Radu, House, & Pashagumskum, 2014). Anishinaabeg health and wellbeing is fundamentally connected to our territories; territories contain ancestral stories and are imbued with Anishinaabeg reciprocal relationships to all animate beings; territories are where Anishinaabeg identities, culture, teachings, and stories are found. This is why the research participants spoke about how they find healing while running and by reconnecting to their territories and, in so doing, the women create a community committed to health and wellbeing; the act of running on the land, thus, re-presents Anishinaabeg on the land, which also fosters personal decolonization through physical activity, and creates a community of support.

Findings from this study show that running creates a community of people directly engaged in supporting and inspiring one another in realizing their goals; more specifically, the group dimension of the Anishinaabeg women's running created a decolonial, Indigenous feminist space where Anishinaabekweg

fostered a love of themselves and each other, which created a community of support. Anishinaabeg, and other Indigenous women, have continually created communities of support for each other through visiting, for instance, which works in tandem with fostering their individual and collective strength (Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill & Wilson, 2008; Napoli, 2002). As a result of creating a community by running together, they practice decolonization by mindfully connecting their physicality to creating healthy and strong bodies. This finding indicates that by creating a community through physical activity may assist some women in overcoming the noted barriers (Bruner & Chad, 2013) in maintaining physical activity and foster decolonization.

Additionally, the Anishinaabekweg runners reported engage in running for the purpose of ceremony. While Coppola et al. (2016) discussed the link between cultural practices such as sundancing or powwow dancing to foster overall wellbeing of Indigenous women, for many people it is not easy to attend such ceremonies. By running, Anishinaabekweg create a space to engage in ceremony that fits within their everyday lives. By using physical activity as a way to connect with healing and ceremony (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013), they are generating a form of decolonization directed through physical activity, which is attentive to their personal practices of healing and connected to the wellbeing of their communities, and is connected to ancestral practices.

Running on trails fosters decolonization through physical activity as it directly connects Anishinaabeg to their ancestors, as their ancestors ran on these very same trails, as seen in the example of michitweg and oshki-michitweg. By Anishinaabeg engaging in decolonization through physical activity, which takes place on their lands, they exercise the important practice of resurgence by re-presencing their bodies on their land, and fosters community regeneration. As noted by the participants, such practices of resurgence reverberate to children and community as seen in the family of the research participants who were inspired to begin running, for instance.

Importantly, we recognize that running is not an activity that is available to all Indigenous women. Further, we acknowledge that not all Indigenous women runners connect their running to decolonization. What we argue, however, is that for some, running can be an important part of the decolonization process. Rather than focusing on deficit-based approaches through which sport and physical activity can promote and reaffirm colonialism, it is important to consider the ways that sport and physical activity promotes a strengths-based perspective (Paraschak & Thompson, 2014) through decolonization and resurgence.

## Conclusion

The Anishinaabeg runners' dibaajimowinan of decolonization through physical activity make significant contributions to understanding ways in which decolonization and the challenging settler colonialism can occur. As they support each other, achieve health and personal goals, and inspire others within their family and community in becoming physically active, they further challenges settler colonialism by not succumbing to chronic diseases or physical inactivity. Ultimately, the Anishinaabekweg commitment to decolonization through physical activity is an example of how personal decolonization through physical activity can be achieved in a way that is rooted in their self-identified needs, knowledge, and cultural practices.

## Glossary

Anishinaabekweg – Anishinaabeg women  
 Biskaabiyaang – returning to ourselves  
 Dibaajimowinan – personal stories/teachings  
 Gikendaasowin – knowledge  
 Gitchmanitou – Great Spirit  
 Inaadiziwin – Anishinaabeg way of being  
 Manitou – spirit  
 Michitweg – Anishinaabeg runners  
 Niizhwaaswi Kichtwaa Kinomaadiwinan – Seven Sacred/  
 Grandfather Teachings  
 Nbwaakaawin (wisdom);  
 Zaagidwin (love)  
 Mnaadendimowin (respect);  
 Aakwade'ewin (bravery)  
 Gwekwaadiziwin (honesty)  
 Dbaadendziwin (humility)  
 Debwewin (truth)  
 Oshki-michitweg – new Anishinaabeg runners  
 Semaa – tobacco  
 Wiisokotaatiwin – gathering together for a purpose

## Note

1. Throughout this paper, we have elected to use the term Indigenous feminist theory due to its dominant use within the literature, though we agree with Arvin et al.'s (2013) point.

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