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To cite this article: Tracey Gale, Oli Meredith, Kelsey Richards, Chelsea Litchfield, Rylee A. Dionigi, Jaquelyn Osborne, Marissa Olsen & Ruth Crawford (03 Mar 2026): First Nations women's experiences of sport and physical activity in rural and regional Australia: community, family and wellbeing, Annals of Leisure Research, DOI: [10.1080/11745398.2026.2638214](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2026.2638214)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2026.2638214>



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Published online: 03 Mar 2026.



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First Nations women's experiences of sport and physical activity in rural and regional Australia: community, family and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

First Nations women's experiences of sport and physical activity in rural and regional Australia, and perceived impacts on health and wellbeing, were examined within an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected across two anonymous, online, open-ended surveys, between mid-2020 to mid-2021, from 15 First Nations women aged 20–63 years ($M = 40.5$ years). The study applied a novel theoretical framework which combined a strengths-based, decolonised approach, and an integrative theory of belonging. Through sport and physical activity engagement, these First Nations women reported meaningful social and family connections and a strong sense of community and belonging, which enhanced perceived overall health and wellbeing for their families, communities, and selves. These findings highlight the importance of moving beyond individualistic ideas of leisure and health to be inclusive of First Nations peoples. Future health, leisure and wellbeing definitions need to include diverse perspectives to ensure cultural safety and collective thriving.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 October 2025
Accepted 23 February 2026



KEYWORDS

Belonging; cultural safety; decolonised approach; exercise; indigenous health; strengths-based research; qualitative; remote

Introduction

The oldest living cultures in the world, First Nations¹ Australians, have been engaged in sport and physical activity for millennia (May et al. 2020). The sagacious ways in which caring for land and physical activity were seamlessly entwined in First Nations' cultures contributed to better health outcomes for Australian First Nations peoples than for the colonisers from the Kingdom of Great Britain at the time of their arrival in 1788 (Ahmed, Zuk, and Tsuji 2021, 1). While the health, leisure and wellbeing of non-Indigenous Australians have improved considerably since arriving in Australia, the legacy of colonisation has interfered with First Nations peoples' ways of life so much so that First Nations health outcomes have moved in the opposite direction to the detriment of health (Dudgeon, Milroy, and Walker, 2014; Maxwell et al. 2022).

Colonisation brought diseases and disruption – and in some instances, decimation of languages, rituals, traditional practices of food collection and production, and cultural and social activities connected with physical activity and sports. Australian First Nations peoples face significant health and social inequities and have a life expectancy of around nine years less than non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). First Nations peoples are more likely to develop a preventable chronic condition such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Sushames, van Uffelen, and Gebel 2016, 2) than their non-Indigenous counterparts. While colonisation, discrimination and dis-possession suffered by First Nations Australians affects today's physical activity rates of First Nations communities (Dahlberg et al. 2018, 1; Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019, 8), additional barriers to participation include 'cultural insensitivity, economic disparities, distances to programmes, poor facilities, restrictive or under-funded programmes and systemic racism' (Ferguson et al. 2019, 2). As a result, adult First Nations Australians now not only have poorer health outcomes, but are also less likely to be physically active, compared to non-Indigenous Australians (ABS 2023). Additionally, Australians

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living in regional or rural areas have poorer health outcomes than Australians living in the cities (ABS 2025). This observation highlights the importance of giving voice to the experiences of First Nations women across rural and regional Australia. Further, it is critical to centre First Nations' knowledges and recognise the cultural dimensions of health and physical activity in relation to the perceived impact and meanings on First Nations' women's health and wellbeing.²

Despite a broad appreciation of the importance of physical activity, leisure and sport to health by government, researchers and the wider population, the Eurocentric approach and dominant biomedical discourses applied in such contexts often measure the health of First Nations communities against 'norms' commonly used to determine the health status of non-Indigenous communities (Verbunt et al. 2021, 2). Health research on First Nations peoples largely focuses on risk behaviours and problems (Bryant et al. 2021), constructing First Nations peoples in a narrative of deficiency. The deficit model is closely linked to dominant social determinants of health, which position First Nations peoples as inadequate or in deficit in comparison to the non-Indigenous population (Verbunt et al. 2021). This deficit 'mode of thinking' (Fforde et al. 2013, 162), espousing notions of negativity and failure, impacts the lives of First Nations peoples, particularly when First Nations peoples themselves are seen as 'the problem' (Fogarty et al. 2018, xi). The Eurocentric approach fails to encompass First Nations' holistic views of health and wellbeing. Two intertwined considerations that repeatedly arise when exploring notions of health in First Nations populations are the importance of sport and physical activity to community and wellbeing. These latter two concepts are often in tension with the dominant Western, individualistic, biomedical approach to personal responsibility for health, leisure and wellbeing through participation in sport and physical activity (Dahlberg et al. 2018; Maxwell et al. 2022). The current study examines the experiences of sport and physical activity reported by First Nations women in the context of these conflicting discourses of health, leisure and wellbeing.

Review of literature

The role of community in health and wellbeing

From a First Nations perspective, 'community' is acknowledged as an intricate concept 'incorporating cultural groups, geographic groups or groups and organisations sharing common interests' (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] 2018, 2). Communities are not always centred around location or geographical presence and can include disconnected or separate groups, and they can be across families of First Nations peoples. 'Community' can also refer to a 'shared view' amongst First Nations peoples (NHMRC 2018, 2).

Wellbeing is strongly linked to community in First Nations cultures. While the World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellbeing as how people think, feel, cope, emotive and participate in everyday life (2025a), in First Nations communities, the term wellbeing encompasses the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, cultural and ecological wellbeing of a person (Macniven et al. 2023; Verbunt et al. 2021). Physical wellbeing is described by First Nations peoples as participating 'fully in life' (Butler et al. 2019, 152). Eurocentric biomedical models of health and wellbeing, such as the WHO's definition of wellbeing and social determinants of health (2025b), do not consider factors such as spiritual and cultural wellbeing, nor land, environment, relationships and community in the manner that First Nations perspectives do. 'Leisure', in and of itself, is also a westernised concept intertwined with European industrialisation, which is essentially individual in nature and which comprises activities not related to maintaining basic needs (Veal, Darcy, and Lynch 2013). First Nations cultures, historically, managed their lives in less demarcated blocks, and in fact, any activities vaguely related to the idea of leisure were community-based and seamlessly intertwined with all other activities of life (Veal, Darcy, and Lynch 2013, 408–409).

While acknowledging the diversity of First Nations cultures, Butler et al. (2019, 148) note that beliefs about community have been 'uniformly expressed' with community being central to wellbeing for First Nations Australians. Systematic research indicates that sport and physical activity participation is community-driven in First Nations populations (Dahlberg et al. 2018, 1). Ferguson et al. (2019, 2) explain that sport can often foster a sense of community and belonging in First Nations communities, with First Nations communities preferring to partake in activities with family and friends rather than participate in individual physical activities.

Belonging to and fitting into a community is paramount for the wellbeing of First Nations peoples, yet documents that clearly identify the perceived value of physical activity to wellbeing for First Nations communities are scarce (Butler et al. 2019, 148–152), despite a wider understanding of the place of physical activity in improving health and wellbeing (Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019, 6). Literature exploring the needs or lived experiences of First Nations people, particularly women, in sporting spaces is similarly limited (Ferguson et al. 2019, 2; Maxwell et al. 2017). Research indicates that rates of physical activity participation for First Nations women are significantly lower than those of other population groups (Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019, 6), with First Nations women ‘more likely to report their general health as fair or poor, and they are only half as likely to assess their health as excellent or very good’ (Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019, 6). Ferguson et al.’s study of Indigenous Canadian women showed that First Nations women face barriers to sport and physical activity participation in the form of a lack of respect, influence and opportunity, with very few women in decision-making positions (2019, 2).

First nations women and sport, health, shame, family, community and wellbeing

As mentioned above, for Australian First Nations communities, physical activity is understood as a collective, relational practice rather than an individual pursuit. Western discourses that frame physical activity as a matter of personal responsibility are misaligned with First Nations notions of collective well-being. As such, as Dahlberg et al. (2018, 5–6) note, shame may arise when physical activity occurs apart from the family or community. This is not because it is inherently shameful but because it reflects Western individualism rather than relational wellbeing. For many First Nations women, therefore, caring for family and kin remains central to health, which makes family-orientated and community-based sport often preferential to individual pursuits (Dahlberg et al. 2018). As stated by Butler et al. (2019, 152), the wellbeing of the community is paramount for First Nations peoples.

The needs of women in First Nations rural and regional communities may differ from the needs of other population groups due to constraints that First Nations women face. Despite recent research on First Nations women and participation in sport (e.g. Maxwell et al. 2017, 2022; Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019; Sus-hames, van Uffelen, and Gebel 2016), the physical activity experiences of First Nations women in rural and regional Australia remain unexplored. Moreover, the contemporary sporting system has been described as patriarchal, continuing to marginalise First Nations women and girls (Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019). In contrast, a strengths-based approach – such as the approach taken in this study – centres First Nations women’s voices, promoting agency, self-determination and First Nation health sovereignty in relation to leisure, sport, physical activity, health and well-being (Ferguson et al. 2019; Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019).

Theoretical framework

Strengths-based approach

Strengths-based approaches move beyond traditional problem-focused frameworks, offering alternative ways to discuss and address issues (Fogarty et al. 2018). Research suggests strengths-based approaches can help shift narratives around First Nations health and identify new strategies for improving health outcomes (Bulloch, Fogarty, and Bellchambers 2019; Fogarty et al. 2018). These approaches emphasise collaboration, empowerment and support for communities to achieve positive goals (Bulloch, Fogarty, and Bellchambers 2019, 45).

As research into physical activity and sport in First Nations communities evolves, social determinants of health are increasingly complemented by a strengths-based perspective that emphasises cultural determinants, which better reflect First Nations health and wellbeing (Verbunt et al. 2021). Physical activity is understood within the broader context of family and connections (Dahlberg et al. 2018). Health promotion by non-Indigenous practitioners is most effective when it responds to First Nations women’s priorities and supports their control over health and well-being, acknowledging the ongoing impacts of colonisation (Maxwell et al. 2022). The current study builds on this strengths-based approach.

Decolonised approach

Adopting a strengths-based perspective to examine the experiences of regional and rural First Nations women requires a decolonised research approach. Such an approach supports a reclamation and recognition of First Nations ways of knowing and being which were 'submerged, hidden or driven underground' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 69). This approach is considered culturally safe and appropriate, ensuring research is conducted respectfully, ethically and usefully, while privileging First Nations' presence, resilience and continuing cultures (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). In line with this, the current study adopts this decolonised approach by aligning with a strengths-based perspective, and using a qualitative design, to centralise the first-hand stories and experiences of First Nations women in rural and regional Australia. Within this broader framework, we use an integrative theory of belonging (Allen et al. 2021), thereby adding a cultural and sociological lens to this theory, which is yet to be applied to explain First Nations women's experiences. While this theoretical framework of belonging did not dictate our findings, its relevance became apparent during data analysis.

Integrative theory of belonging

A sense of belonging, connection, and community is important to the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations women. These feelings are linked to experiences of systemic oppression, internalised shame surrounding individual health, and prevailing deficit-based models of wellbeing (Dahlberg et al. 2018; Dudgeon, Milroy, and Walker, 2014; Fforde et al. 2013). The integrative theory of belonging has roots in educational psychology and posits that feelings of belonging and sense of community manifest when individuals foster belonging, are motivated to belong, and are given opportunities to connect with others, thereby enhancing health and wellbeing (Allen et al. 2021). Within this framework, opportunities for belonging are defined as access to groups, people, places, times, and spaces that support *belonging* (Allen et al. 2021). However, safe, inclusive sporting and leisure environments remain scarce for individuals from minority backgrounds, particularly women (Taylor 2013). Even when such opportunities are available, there must also be a personal need or desire to connect, and individuals must feel safe and welcome in seeking out like-minded others (Allen et al. 2021). For First Nations women in rural and regional areas, this need to socially connect is tied to community and family, and these needs are often met through participation in local sport and physical activity.

There is limited research on belonging and community impacts on wellbeing in sports and leisure research (Allen et al. 2021), particularly among women of colour in rural or remote areas of Australia (redacted for the review process). Moreover, when analysing belonging within an integrative framework, one must examine the effects of broader socio-cultural factors (Allen et al. 2021), making it necessary to consider the impacts of colonisation and dominant Eurocentric understandings of health, leisure and wellbeing on First Nations women's experiences of belonging. For example, Taylor (2013) found that, for women from cultural minorities, 'leisure has assumed a continuum of roles in relation to cultural diversity ranging from suppression to celebration of difference' (535). Mansfield, Daykin, and Kay (2020, 3–4) argued that 'leisure forms and practices afford people wellbeing experiences created in time and space and in connection with the cultural and physical environment and embodied and sensual experiences that characterise them.' In applying the integrative theory of belonging through a decolonised, strengths-based lens, we examined how First Nations women experience and engage in sports and physical activity, with regards to women developing skills, self-determination, and opportunities to foster connection with others, their families, and communities, and how this impacts their overall wellbeing (as defined and experienced by the women in this study).

Methodology and methods

Research design and researcher positionality

This qualitative research project is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which allows the participants to share their perspectives, lived experiences and socially constructed realities (Patton 2015). This research

design aligns with our strengths-based, decolonised approach. Qualitative research enables the study of how people and groups construct meaning (Patton 2015), while interpretivism accepts that there are various ways to interpret the meanings, stories and lives of those who are being researched (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). According to Rehman and Alharthi (2016), the broad 'goal of interpretive research is not to discover universal, context and value-free knowledge and truth but to try to understand the interpretations of individuals about the social phenomena they interact with' (55). As such, the findings of this study include the lived experiences and realities of First Nations-identified women participants from their own frames of reference. This study does not generalise to all women or First Nations identified individuals in sport or physical activity across regional, rural or remote Australia.

The lead author of the research is a proud Wiradjuri woman and First Nations Australian. The other authors are non-Indigenous Australians. Authors of this study identified as either women or non-binary and either lesbian, pansexual or heterosexual. All authors lived in either regional, rural or remote geographical locations around Australia at the time of the research. The authors range from early career to senior researchers, and all have expertise in qualitative research related to physical activity, sport, leisure, health and/or wellbeing.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected across two prior studies³ between mid-2020 and mid-2021 via two online surveys. The Survey Monkey platform was used to gather responses and to ensure participant anonymity. Participants were asked both closed and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions elicited demographic information, including identity, location, age and perceived health status. The open-ended questions centred around access to physical activity and sport, inclusion and exclusion, wellbeing, and the reported impact of physical activity and/or sport on social, emotional and physical health.

Purposive sampling (Patton 2015) was used to recruit specific participants who met the criteria for involvement in both studies. In this case, the participants were Australian adults from regional, rural and remote areas. Snowball sampling was also used in the recruitment of participants (Patton 2015), as participants of the study were invited to share information about the study and/or nominate eligible others to participate. The participants for the current study, drawn from both initial studies, were those who self-identified as 18 years of age or over, women and First Nations. The responses from the 15 participants who met these criteria constitute the data that were analysed in the current study.

Data from the open-ended questions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2019, 2022), which considers the subjective experiences of the researcher/s throughout the data analysis process. Often, the researchers' experiences and prior knowledge are helpful in developing initial themes through the psychological and sociological interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke 2019). Braun and Clarke (2022) identify six stages that are commonly used in the thematic analysis process: familiarising oneself with the dataset; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up/reporting. All authors contributed to the data analysis process.

The first stage of analysis required researchers to become familiar with the overall data set and understand how the perspectives of the 15 participants in this study were situated amongst the larger data sets across both prior studies from which the current data was drawn. As the surveys were completed anonymously, there was no option to validate data with individual participants. The initial coding work occurred through the researchers analysing individual responses from the 15 women to set survey questions and identifying similar experiences that participants had encountered. From there, initial themes were generated that broadly focused on the women's experiences of belonging and connection with a range of individuals, family members and communities in sport and physical activity. These initial themes were discussed among the research team, and it became apparent that the integrative theory of belonging, within a strengths-based, decolonised approach, was an effective and novel framework for interpreting the findings. Further analysis, refining and reviewing of data resulted in the final themes: 'Importance of communities, family and social connections to wellbeing'; 'Friendships, belonging and wellbeing' (sub-theme: 'Communities and wellbeing') and; 'Family, sport and wellbeing' (sub-themes: 'Watching and participating in sport and physical activity with family' and; 'Supporting and celebrating their children who participate in sport and

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Participant (Initial Studies 1 or 2)	Age	Self-identified cultural background	Education	Self-identified sexuality	Self-identified relationship and family status
Kat (1)	55	Aboriginal	Year 11	Heterosexual	Single with children
Tammy (1)	55	Aboriginal	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	Marital and child status not specified
Jane (1)	45	Aboriginal	Secondary school	Straight	Single with children
Emma (1)	42	Aboriginal Australian	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	Married and child status not specified
Lucy (1)	35	Indigenous Australian	Post grad	Heterosexual	Married with children
Vanessa (1)	63	Aboriginal	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	Married with children
Lianna (1)	21	Aboriginal	Secondary School	Heterosexual	In a relationship with no children
Jackie (1)	23	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Secondary School	Heterosexual	Partnered with no children
Linda (2)	38	Aboriginal	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	Single with children
Chloe (2)	32	Indigenous	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	Single with no children
Kyah (2)	20	Aboriginal	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	De facto with no children
Sally (2)	60	Australian with an Aboriginal grandfather	Secondary School	Heterosexual	Married with no children
Sam (2)	33	Aboriginal/Irish	Tertiary Educated	Heterosexual	De facto with children
Mary (2)	35	Aboriginal	Post grad	Heterosexual	Married with children
Ellen (2)	33	Aboriginal	Secondary School	Heterosexual	De facto with children

physical activity'). These themes are detailed in the Findings section through reported individual experiences and meanings related to sport and physically active leisure in rural and regional communities across Australia.

Participants

The 15 self-identified First Nations women and the findings for this specific study were derived from two separate wider studies. Study one examined the impact of physical activity and sport in regional, rural and remote areas in Australia ($N = 144$), while study two investigated the disruptions with sports participants during the COVID-19 lockdowns⁴ in regional New South Wales, Australia ($n = 201$). All participants from both initial studies who met the inclusion criteria for the current study ($n = 7$ Study 1; $n = 8$ Study 2) were included. Overall, both initial studies took an exploratory qualitative (interpretivist) approach to investigate the perspectives and lived experiences of people who engaged in physical activity and sport in regional, remote and rural Australia (redacted for the review process). The characteristics of the participants in the current study are detailed in Table 1. Both initial studies were approved by the authors' Institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (Study 1 – Protocol Number H20317 and Study 2 – Protocol Number H20144). Informed consent was obtained from the participants for both initial studies at the time they elected to take part in the research.

All 15 participants identified as 'women' from rural and regional areas, and they ranged in age from 20 to 63 years (mean age of 40.5 years). All women identified as heterosexual,⁵ eight had children, and nine women had tertiary or post graduate qualifications. All except one woman (due to arthritis) reported being engaged in a variety of physical activities and/or sports, in particular team sports such as soccer, touch football/Oztag, and rugby league, along with individual activities such as walking, cycling and gym workouts. Other group activities noted by the women were dragon boating, golf and hockey. Additionally, several of the women were involved in other roles in sport, including coaching roles (in soccer, touch football and rugby league), sports management roles, and as spectators (predominately for their children's sporting activities). Therefore, this group of women are, overall, actively involved in many levels and different leisure contexts of sport and physical activity in their locality.

Findings

The current study examines the experiences of sport and physical activity reported by First Nations women in the context of these conflicting discourses of health, leisure and wellbeing.

Importance of communities, family and social connections to wellbeing through sport and physical activity experiences

Involvement in sport and physical activity was of great importance to First Nations women in this study, with most women being involved in a team sport. For many, this involvement also supported connections to family, community and place: elements tied closely to First Nations identities and notions of well-being. When walking, women said they liked to walk with others, such as with friends and children. The community connections gained through physical activity and sport were important overall to First Nations women. Only one woman Kat, (55)⁶ did not participate in any form of physical activity due to a reported health concern (arthritis); however, she explained that she watched her children's sport regularly, the latter being another type of engagement in sport, highlighting her connection with family, and the role sport plays in providing a medium to build this sense of belonging, including culturally grounded relationships with kin and community.

The First Nations women explained that they engaged in physical activity and sport for a variety of reasons, but predominantly, this engagement was important to them because of the social contact with family, friends and the local community that was enabled through physical activity or sport. These opportunities for, and perceptions of, belonging were intertwined with feelings of holistic wellbeing. For several women, these feelings also resonated with understandings of wellbeing that emphasise connections to family, community, and Country as part of their everyday lives. That is, First Nations women made clear links between sports involvement and wellbeing within the context of social connections and community. For example, Linda (38) said involvement in sport was 'essential to wellbeing' and should be 'compulsory, and free or funded [similar to] medications'. Similarly, Kyah (20) linked physical activity to her mental, physical and social wellbeing, in that 'without it I feel depressed, gain weight and don't socialise with people at all'. Sam (33) extended the personal wellbeing impact to the wellbeing of her family, stating that it is 'also important for the health of our family'.

Other reported health and wellbeing benefits of sport and exercise engagement included improved strength (Emma, 42) and being drug free (Jane, 45). Jane (45) clearly articulated a perceived benefit of being physically active in helping to curb her drug use in that she had 'been a drug user for over 20 yrs but I have been drug-free for 45 weeks'. Several First Nations women also identified that the mental wellbeing benefits of sport were a strong motivator to be active (e.g. Jane, 45; Emma, 42; Lucy, 35; and Vanessa, 63). Emma (42) and Lucy (35) further explained that being active contributed to having a clear mind and stress relief. Such clarity and stress relief were often linked to feeling more grounded in themselves and their relationships with others. For most of the women, the mental wellbeing benefits and social connections reported in relation to being active were intertwined, for example:

There are absolutely mental health benefits that I achieve from participating in sport and physical activity and that is one of the main reasons I make time to participate. I participate for fitness but more so these days I participate as a form of stress relief, escapism, socialisation and to have a clearer mind. (Lucy, 35)

For some women, the social contact experienced through sport or physical activity had been an antidote to negative feelings of wellbeing, such as social isolation. For others, it was the only social contact that they experienced, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020/2021 in Australia. For instance, Emma (42) noted that sport allowed her to 'interact with others [and] get out of the house'. Similarly, although not necessarily linked to the lockdowns, Linda (38) explained that [sport] is her '... only social connection ... As a single parent working and studying, sport is [her only] social and physical outlet'. The types of social contact varied, including socialising or chatting with others before or after physical activity, or simply watching sport on television with significant others, such as family and/or friends. Vanessa (63) explained that she would 'meet ppl' (*sic*) at the gym and talk before and after class, while Mary (35) would 'watch' sports with others 'at home or at the pub, or at the game'. Kat

(55) explained that 'talking [to] and meeting new people' in sporting environments allowed her to feel 'confident' about being herself. Similarly, Jackie (23) wrote that the 'social connection' associated with physical activity was a benefit for her wellbeing, alongside the physical and social benefits of 'fitness and fun', and Lucy (35) enjoyed spending time with 'like-minded people who enjoy adult time and physical activities'.

More specifically, these opportunities for belonging and experiences of social contact or connections allowed the participants to engage in new friendships with fellow sports participants, reinforce family connections, and provide a connection to their local communities. These multiple layers of belonging, alongside the women's perceived benefits to individual and community wellbeing, are described through the following themes.

Friendships, belonging and wellbeing

Creating and sustaining meaningful friendships, and the associated feelings of personal and social wellbeing, was seen as an important benefit of participating in sport and physical activity. For many women, 'friendship', 'camaraderie' and 'social connections' were (among) the most important perceived benefit to this participation. Chloe (32) explained that she had gained 'great and lasting friendships' from participating in physical activity and sport. These friendships supported a sense of belonging aligned with the women's community belonging. Similarly, Sally (60) said that she benefitted from the 'camaraderie' and 'friendships' that she has in sport, and Jane (45) detailed 'new friends', but also 'new lifestyle choices' as benefits from making social connections through her physical activity and sport engagement. Sam (33) explained that she was able to extend her own community by playing sport with, and making friends from, people whose children attended different schools in the area. This connection pushed her outside of her comfort zone and helped her learn 'how to be assertive', 'leadership' and 'how to be a team player'. Her description also highlights how sport helped her strengthen connections across different community networks. Lastly, Kyah (20) described how sport was the common denominator in her lasting friendships, in the sense that she had either 'played a sport with them or am playing or coaching a sport with them right now'.

The cessation of many sporting events during the global COVID-19 pandemic (which was happening when the data were collected for Study 2) amplified the value and importance of these friendships as part of sport to a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Mary (35) described her realisation of just how much her teammates and training meant to her: 'I missed my teammates and training soooooo (*sic*) much – more than I thought'. Sam (33) also described the negative effects of not being able to play sport during the COVID-19 pandemic for her daughter, 'as this was a way to catch up with friends out of school and also make new friends'. Sam (33) said that sport helped her daughter raise her confidence and facilitated a connection with her mother. For Sam and her daughter, these shared sporting spaces supported intergenerational relationships often central to identity and well-being for First Nations communities. Kyah (20) also described the negative impacts on her wellbeing when unable to participate in sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, in that she felt depressed and did not socialise with others during this period. Kyah actively sought to maintain those connections in place of real-life contact by using text 'messenger in our group chat'. Illustrating the importance in staying connected to her community, even when physical gathering places were closed.

Communities and wellbeing

Along with forming social connections, a sense of belonging and wellbeing with team-mates, and new friends through physical activity and sport, several women also spoke about the connections that these activities provide with community members. These opportunities allowed the women to connect with local communities, wider communities, and First Nations-identified communities. Ellen (33) explained that she feels a 'sense of community' when she connects with others through her sports and physical activity participation. Similarly, Lianna (21) said that through her participation in sport, she was able to 'create new friends and connect with local community', with particular emphasis on her cultural identity and community wellbeing. Her emphasis on cultural identity highlights how sport can function as a place for maintaining and renewing community ties.

Lianna (21) explained that sport is a means to connect and reconnect with community over different points in time, essentially, a meeting place for First Nations people to come together. For instance, Lianna said that 'sporting events have been a huge part of my life since I was a child. Attending sporting events allowed me to meet up with family and friends and other people in my community (Aboriginal and wider community). She described sport, specifically rugby league competitions, as a meeting place for strengthening Aboriginal community relationships:

I have been involved in Rugby league which connected me to my Aboriginal community. From a personal perspective, league has been a sport where communities can connect, in ways such as the Koori Knockout. Attending these events as a young child, rugby league became connected to my personal and cultural identity. (Lianna, 21)

Her account emphasises the role of sporting events as important cultural gatherings supporting identity, continuity and belonging.

While a minority of women specifically discussed the broader First Nations community, all First Nations women highlighted the importance of family and kin relationships – core aspects of First Nations world views – in shaping their sporting and physical activity engagement, described in the next section.

Family and kin, sport and wellbeing

Family relationships emerged as core to First Nation women's wellbeing with women in this study linking their involvement in sport and physical activity with family. There are two main ways in which connections between family, sport and wellbeing were described by the women: (1) watching and participating in sport and physical activity with family and kin, and (2) supporting and celebrating their children who regularly participate in sport and physical activity.

Watching and participating in sport and physical activity with family and kin

Often, the women described their participation in sport and physical activity as something done with, or alongside, their family members. This included walks and bike rides with family (Sam, 33; Emma, 42), attending the gym or doing home workouts with family members, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Kyah, 20; Ellen, 33), as well as playing sports in the backyard with their children (Mary, 35). Mary (35) described a lifetime of sports participation from a very young age with family traditions: '5 years old, first played hockey [be]cause my older sister did, but come from sports loving family. Also played soccer, little athletics, netball, swimming and touch football.'

Similarly, Sam (33) framed sport and physical activity as being important to her family unit in a more general sense, such as for their overall health and wellbeing. She explained that the pandemic resulted in lost family connections due to sport not being played. For Sam, being active and participating in sport was also important for her daughter's wellbeing and confidence, as well as social and family connections, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic when schools and sporting events were closed or postponed. The loss of connection underscored how sport functioned as a key relational space for her family:

For my daughter she has felt extremely isolated as this was a way to catch up with friends out of school and also make new friends. She also enjoys playing and it gives her confidence when she is good at something and getting praised and also connected to her mum as she was good as well. (Sam, 33)

To combat these lost connections that were typically found in physical sport, some First Nations women discussed the importance of 'watching' sports together with family and community, and the associated social benefits of such activities. For instance, Kyah (20) explained that she 'rarely view[s] sport on [her] own as [her] family, friends and partner all enjoy watching the same sports on TV'. She further described this social connection, by explaining that watching seasonal sport more generally was important and having 'big family gatherings when the Olympics are on' (Kyah, 20). These opportunities, feelings and motivations to belong with family positively impacted their family and personal wellbeing and gatherings around sport reinforced family ties and cultural practices of coming together around shared activities. Alongside participating in sport and physical activity and watching sports with family members, over half of the First Nations women in this study mentioned that they spent time supporting and celebrating their children's sporting participation.

Supporting and celebrating their children who participate in sport and physical activity

Eight of the women reported having children for whom they care or have raised. There were varying ways in which the women described their involvement in their children's sporting experiences, as well as the impact that sport had on their children's lives and wellbeing. Many of the women who mentioned they have children celebrated the involvement of their children in sport and physical activity and described the pride they experienced in supporting them in their endeavours. Sam (33) identified as a 'spectator at [her] children's sports'. Kat (55) explained that she '... followed all [her] children in their sporting events/matches'. Lucy (35) expressed enjoyment watching her children participate in sports, and Jane (45) explained that she 'gives support loudly' and is very supportive of her 'kids and the teams they play for'. These supportive roles to family members in sport strengthened First Nations women's sense of identity and belonging within community, which contributed to their reported personal, social and family wellbeing.

Several of the women talked about their children's involvement in sports and physical activity in the context of their own sports participation. In essence, they supported and encouraged their children to be active, due to their own experiences. Jane (45) described herself as once being 'a very active person in many sports', including being a part of an Australian netball squad. She further explained that she has a child who is an 'Australian champ in boxing' and another who plays in a First Nations basketball squad for remote areas, reinforcing cultural connection across generations (Jane, 45). Kat (55) explained that when she was younger, she was 'a sporty and energetic woman ... and played heaps of sports', and she has six children (all adults now) who have been local, regional and state representatives across various sports. Connections are also made between the mothers who are supporting their children in sport, as Lucy (35) described how she participated in a netball team with women who are also mothers. Participating with other mothers created culturally resonant networks of mutual support with community members in a similar familial position as her in her First Nations family.

Some of the women who are parents or carers also described the challenges they have faced through having a family and being physically active. For example, Tammy (55) explained that her 'caring role slows [her] down a lot', when asked about the impact on her mental and emotional health and the tension she faces with sport and parenting. Lucy (35) identified that although she and her children play sport, 'it is often tricky to juggle sport with family'. Jane (45) also described participating in sport as a child and then later 'as years went on I had kids and put them ... [in] ... many sports', ahead of her own participation. Her reflections also pointed to structural inequities affecting well-being in rural First Nations communities: 'I believe my kids don't get the same as kids from [the] city'. As stated above, Sam (33) also shared insights into the challenges faced during COVID-19 pandemic, with the loss of family, friends and social connections for her and her daughter when sport was cancelled. Ultimately, the women's participation in sport and physical activity supported social and family connections, fostered a sense of community and belonging, and was closely intertwined with their overall wellbeing. These findings reflect relational values central to many First Nations' worldviews as well as to the well-being of their children.

Discussion

This research shares the reported experiences of First Nations women involved in sport and physical activity across rural and regional Australia. Through sport and/or physical activity engagement, these women experienced meaningful social and family connections, and a strong sense of community and belonging, which reportedly contributed to enhanced overall wellbeing for themselves, their children and/or family members, friends and communities. These experiences were examined using the integrative theory of belonging, a strengths-based approach, and a decolonising perspective to promote positivity and cultural alignment to First Nations' ways of knowing, being and doing. Strengths-based approaches are being progressively recognised as ways to interrupt and dismantle the traditional and lingering influences of deficit discourses and deficit ways of thinking (Brough, Bond, and Hunt 2004; Fogarty et al. 2018). By focusing on the good and strengths, rather than the stereotypical assumptions and expectations about First Nations peoples, particularly those negative stereotypes inextricably linked to colonial ideologies such as laziness, substance abuse issues and welfare dependency (Stoneham, Jodie Goodman, and Daube 2014),

the latter become subordinate, thus allowing a celebration of First Nations self-determination and agency to shine through (Bryant et al. 2021; Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019), as it did for the women in the current study.

First nations women and the importance of connection

Through the analysis stage of the study, it was found that 60% of the women had tertiary qualifications and above.⁷ This statistic, and the subsequent data collected, may not be reflective of the broader First Nations populations' experiences in physical activity and sport (of women in regional and rural Australia, in particular). Yet, our findings provide insight into the participation and engagement habits of this particular group of women. Our study revealed the overwhelming importance of community, family and wellbeing to First Nations women's experiences in sport and physical activity. The women described multiple benefits for themselves and their families through the participation or engagement in sport and physical activity. One of the benefits described by the women was the connection that sport and physical activity enabled either through friendships, family or the local community.

Connection, and the relational aspect of performing physical activities (and in some cases sport), has always been a key feature in the lives of First Nations peoples (Dudgeon and Bray 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a federal working party⁸ considered the impact of COVID-19 on First Nations peoples given the close connection of family, community, culture, land and spirituality (Dudgeon et al. 2021), highlighting the importance of these connections for First Nations peoples. The core recommendation developed by the working party was that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and community organisations must continue to be heard and then supported to lead the pandemic crisis and the risk recovery responses for their peoples and communities' (Dudgeon et al. 2021, 488). Evidently, the loss of this connection and community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was articulated by some of the women in this study, emphasising and heightening the importance of such connections.

The importance of connection to community, health and wellbeing

In the current study, similar to Maxwell et al. (2022, 26) in the adoption of a strengths-based, decolonised approach, our findings challenge deficit perspectives, by showing that as First Nations women 'work towards their shared hope for holistic wellbeing', they 'show strength and resilience in their participation and achievements in physical activity and sporting contexts'. In particular, a sense of connection and belonging in the form of engaging in team sports, walking with friends and family, or watching family members participate in sport were reported by the women to contribute in empowering ways to their overall health and wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of their respective families and communities. Having strong family and community connections and being holistically well were also found to be pivotal for Canadian Indigenous women in Ferguson et al.'s research (2019). Their research, which was also strengths-based, focused on the phenomenon of First Nations women flourishing in sport, where the key to success (or flourishing) for Canadian Indigenous women athletes was found to include 'multidimensional community support, personal accomplishments, persistent growth and wholistic athlete excellence ... and humble recognition' (Ferguson et al. 2019, 15). These findings are consistent with the results of our research, where both community support and holistic wellbeing (which is similarly expressed through what Ferguson et al. (2019, 10) term 'wholistic athletic excellence') were important aspects of sport and physical activity to First Nations women in regional and rural Australia.

Cultural connections in the form of community and family sports and leisure were also found to be significant features of health and wellbeing for First Nations women in our study. Similarly, in a study by Jones et al. (2018), family wellbeing was said to have been strengthened through participation in cultural activities (such as connection to country, language use and kinship) by First Nations families. Connection to First Nations identified communities through a combination of sport and culture was also identified in Stronach et al.'s (2019) research, where the importance of community activities for First Nations women was discussed. Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce (2019, 12) found that 'sport today offers Indigenous women a social meeting place, a means of participating in activities that are culturally appropriate, and a way to maintain culture'.

Taylor (2013) found that leisure takes on many roles, forms and meanings, particularly for women from cultural minorities, including leisure as a 'celebration of difference' and cultural diversity (535). These findings related to maintaining and celebrating one's cultural identity through sports and leisure in past research were also found in our current study. Together, such findings demonstrate the integral connection that sport, leisure and physical activity can provide First Nations women, when also intersected with cultural identity, family and community.

The importance of connection to self-determination and agency

Another key finding in this study was the women's self-determination to seek out connections and a sense of belonging with other women, similar 'sporting' mothers, as well as their own children and teammates. In addition, the women also spoke of the importance of other cultural gatherings, such as watching sport on television in family groups, watching their children play at local sport, or playing themselves – all of which contributed to the women's sense of agency, their cultural, familial and personal identity, and holistic wellbeing for themselves, their family and their community.

Likewise, Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce (2019) also explored Indigenous agency and empowerment for First Nations women as a way to combat deficit thinking and negative stereotypes that still exist about First Nations peoples. This strengths-based approach by Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce (2019), and as reported in the current study, found that by participating in sport, First Nations women felt that their self-esteem increased, enabling self-determination and agency to override shame and discrimination. Also, through a sense of empowerment and connection as a group or team within sport, Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce (2019) found that First Nations women's health and wellbeing, as well as that of their families and communities, can be improved. That is, by combining the integrative theory of belonging (Allen et al. 2021) with a decolonised, strengths-based approach (Brough, Bond, and Hunt 2004), the current study found that when First Nations women engaged in sport and physical activity, which enabled the development of skills, self-determination, and opportunities to foster connection with others, their families, their children and communities, it had a perceived positive impact on their personal, community and family wellbeing. The communal way in which these women engaged with sport, leisure and physical activity offset the shame of solely focusing on themselves and their own health, as their engagement was also about their children's health and their community's identity and agency.

These findings are in contrast to the dominant, Eurocentric 'individual responsibility for health' narrative of the western world (Dahlberg et al. 2018; Maxwell et al. 2022; Verbunt et al. 2021) because the First Nations women in this study emphasise the importance of community-minded, family-centred and holistic responsibility for health that is important to First Nations peoples (Butler et al. 2019; Dahlberg et al. 2018).

Concluding comments

Overwhelmingly, the women in this study position physical activity and sport as a central element of their lives, presenting a positive and meaningful connection between it and their families, their communities, and themselves. For many of the women, physical activity, sport and physical leisure activities formed their main (and sometimes only) social connection to community/ies. The importance is highlighted by the actions of those participants who took steps to ensure they, and their families, remained connected (via messaging, watching sport on television, or exercising within the guidelines) when COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions all but removed sport and physical activity, and thus the connections these elicited, from their daily lives. Those women who were unable to maintain such connections expressed feeling depressed at this loss and many actively sought to build less structured exercise connections as the restrictions eased.

This study on the sporting and physical activity experiences of First Nations women in regional and rural Australia highlights the need for cultural awareness and diverse perspectives and narratives on health, leisure and wellbeing. Our research also makes a novel contribution to the leisure studies field by bringing together an integrative theory of belonging with a strengths-based, decolonised approach, and, thus, providing a robust understanding of First Nations women's lived experiences. Ultimately, in sharing and centring these women's stories, within a cultural lens, we demonstrate the importance of advancing conceptualisations of belonging from the individual and interpersonal levels to incorporate broader

socio-cultural factors, such as First Nations peoples' understandings of health and wellbeing, the lasting devastating effects of colonisation on First Nations peoples' health and wellbeing, particularly women, and the need for a strengths-based approach in First Nations research. Instead of reporting that their experiences of sport and physical activity were fraught with barriers, the women of this study embraced the importance of the nexus of physical activity, self-identity, family, social connection and community engagement, with many indicating that they were personally empowered as well as socially connected.

Notes

1. The authors use the term 'First Nations' in this paper to acknowledge the diversity in nations, cultures and languages of the oldest living cultures in the world, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia (Australian Government Style Manual 2025). The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' may be cited from other authors or participants when referring to First Nations peoples of Australia and Canada. The term 'non-Indigenous' is used when referring to people or groups who do not identify as First Nations.
2. First Nations women in rural and regional Australia face significant marginalisation in comparison to their counterparts in city areas. This can be due to intersecting barriers including systemic racism, geographic isolation and inadequate access to essential and health related services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2023a; AIHW 2023c).
3. For more information on the two initial studies, see the **Participants** section below.
4. The COVID-19 global pandemic impacted the lives of Australians and, relevant to this study, impacted social connections, including sporting and leisure pursuits, which were cancelled or restricted. These restrictions were heralded as having the potential to significantly affect First Nations families (see Dudgeon et al. 2021).
5. Participants across both initial studies had the opportunity to define their own sexuality and relationship status. The participant who is listed as "straight" in Table 1 has self-identified in that terminology. Also, the participant who described their relationship and family status as 'In a relationship with no children' chose this terminology over the listed options available.
6. Participants are identified by pseudonym and age (in numerals).
7. According to a 2023 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report, the 2021 census revealed that 51% of First Nations women aged 25–34 had tertiary qualifications at Certificate III or greater. This figure drops significantly and incrementally when distance from major cities is considered (AIHW 2023b).
8. A national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working party was convened by Professor Pat Dudgeon and facilitated by the University of Western Australia's Poche Centre for Indigenous Health. The working party advised the establishing a National Indigenous COVID-19 Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Consortium 'to lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well-being policy responses' (Dudgeon et al. 2021, 490).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank all the participants from both studies for their generous contributions to this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics statement

- *Name of the ethics committee (de-identified)* – Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee
- *Approval number* – Approval numbers H20317 and H20144

Confirmation of informed consent from participants or legal guardians – Informed consent was received from the participants directly.

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