The evolution of elite hockey culture in Canada: A scoping literature review

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Prepared for Hockey Canada

by

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Executive Summary

Change in ice hockey is not new to the sport. Since hockey's formal regulation stemming from the Montreal Rules in 1875, hockey has moved from a sport with little to no protective equipment to equipment that is now out of reach of many children due to the cost. Change is not a process that hockey needs to be fearful of but instead embrace – as it has in the past. Hockey in Canada is precious but also offers children, youth, and adults an opportunity to participate in a healthy and active lifestyle and see positive representations of masculinity. Sport encourages physical fitness, which reduces obesity and improves healthy outcomes; builds healthy life habits, including diet and exercise; improves motor skill development; builds self-regulation, social skills, self-esteem, and confidence; improves emotional and mental well-being; and is *fun*! However, the current state of hockey culture is preventing many from accessing these opportunities.

This scoping literature review examines how hockey culture has become a site of exclusion due to the privileging of a particular brand of hockey that is "not for everyone" (Aliu, 2020). Ice hockey has become synonymous with men's ice hockey due to the continued focus on the men's game in the media and gendered stereotypes that keep women and trans people out. Hockey grew alongside the pre-colonial development of Canada as Canada moved to become an independent nation-state after colonization. Colonization, world wars, the cold war, civil unrest, and progressive movements toward inclusion all influenced our hockey cultures today. Hockey internalized what it meant to build a nation: a need to be strong, masculine, and white. This legacy remains part of the systemic tradition that needs to change to make room for those who are marginalized from the sport and remain marginalized.

This review revealed three themes, including first, the fabric of ice hockey, woven from threads of colonization, nationalism, whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, and violence resulting in a systemic structure that has erased Black and Indigenous roots and maintained a privileged status quo that includes an unhealthy culture and unhealthy representations of masculinity. The thread of hockey masculinity considers how hegemonic masculinity has created a culture of violence with limited potential for inclusion. Inclusion, as defined by the United Nations, ensures access – which is limited in ice hockey. Outcomes of the unhealthy hockey culture

include racism, sexism/misogyny, disabilities, and mental health—barriers to inclusion, the second theme of this review.

The final section is not a prescribed remedy, as the systemic nature of hockey culture is complex with unwritten codes such as "the code of silence," "the locker room code," and "the bro code." However, the research included in this review point to positive change arising from an ecosystems approach which takes intersectionality into consideration. Potential for change arises from naming the issues plaguing hockey in Canada and turning to an intersectional, trauma-informed, and ecosystems lens to guide change. In addition, there are opportunities for research to move change more broadly in inclusion, sexism, and mental health.

Hockey is at a crossroads. It can continue because it works – but only for a certain few. Specifically elite white cis/heterosexual men. However, hockey offers an opportunity to respond and lead change in the game and society more broadly by reducing violence, aligning rules to support player safety from an intersectional lens, enforcing said rules, not rewarding/upholding hypermasculinity, taking an ecosystems approach to organizational change, revise and monitor training programs, consider the difference between amateurism and professionalism, and engage in/with research to inform the shift.

On February 3rd 2010, Brendan Burke sent a message through Facebook to Brock McGillis telling Brock that he could not wait until Brock was 'out' to his family like Brendan was. 2 days later, Brendan was killed in a car accident. Brock, a gay man, was inspired by Brendan's words and told his family but not his hockey family – out of fear of homophobia. When Brock ended his hockey career, he could "feel free and experience life as a gay man without judgment from the hockey community" (Blondel, 2018). 2021 marks the first time an openly gay man is playing professional hockey however, it is "statistically impossible" to continue to have a lack of people in the LGBTQ2S+ community in hockey (Desouches, 2023).

Luke Prokop is leading change as the first actively playing gay player believing that "living my authentic life" will bring him success but also will demonstrate that "gay people are welcome in the hockey community" (Kaplan, 2021). Change arises through disrupting cis-heteronormativity and provides for alternate forms of masculinity. Like his teammates, Earl Betker, a goalie who played in the 1940s–1960s shown below, played with limited equipment,

and their toughness was valorized – their masculinity was privileged. However, the game has changed, and it is time for a change again and for Hockey Canada to take the lead in shifting hockey cultures, specifically elite white masculine hockey culture and performances of masculinity.

Note: Used with permission (J. Betkar, Personal Communication, May 24, 2022)

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Ice hockey holds a cherished place in the hearts of Canadians and is often referred to as Canada's national winter sport – or only sport. Ice hockey is integral to our Canadian identity, with its roots deeply embedded in the country's history and culture. As a result, it has garnered substantial attention from researchers across various disciplines seeking to understand the sport's impact, development, and significance within the Canadian context. Tangled with discussions of hockey and nationalism, many researchers have also focused on research in whiteness and masculinity. Disciplines such as kinesiology, medicine, psychology, sociology, law, business, and education have all engaged in studying hockey culture, and this scoping literature review provides a comprehensive overview and critical analysis of an existing body of research on ice hockey in Canada by exploring hockey's historical, social, and cultural dimensions. Hockey culture is not a singular identity[1], while it is an easy label to hang our problems on, we also need to tease out which culture, as there are multiple hockey cultures, such as Black hockey culture, Indigenous hockey culture, and women's hockey culture. We are speaking about the culture at hand, elite men's hockey culture, which is the stimulant of the broader issues facing ice hockey.

Ice hockey's significance in Canada extends beyond the realm of sport, offering a lens through which various social and cultural aspects of Canadian society can be examined, making it an intriguing subject of scholarly inquiry. From community engagement and youth development to gender dynamics and Black, Indigenous and multicultural representation, researchers have delved into numerous facets of ice hockey to shed light on its broader implications on and off the ice. One central theme in the literature is the historical development of ice hockey in Canada, including people that were erased or pushed to the margins. The review will explore seminal works that discuss the sport's origins, tracing its evolution from early iterations played on frozen ponds and community rinks to organized leagues' establishment and professional teams' formation. Understanding the historical context of ice hockey in Canada is crucial for comprehending its cultural significance. In addition, the

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[1] Hockey culture has become known as a singular culture plaguing hockey however, there are multiple hockey cultures, not one and this review is focused on Elite Hockey Culture.

factors that have shaped its growth and popularity and the threads of exclusion have woven themselves into the fabric of Canadian ice hockey. This literature review will examine the cultural dimensions of ice hockey, including hockey's impact on identity formation and social in/exclusion. As will be shown, ice hockey acts as a unifying force, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and fostering a sense of belonging however, we need to question what belonging means. Belonging is more than simply wearing a jersey; this review questions the system we seek to belong to. Hockey is not in a good space, and sport in Canada is not in a good space therefore, the review will examine studies that investigate barriers to participation and inequalities within ice hockey.

Additional cultural aspects of ice hockey will also be explored, including the rituals, traditions, and symbols associated with the sport. The review will examine how ice hockey has permeated and influenced Canadian culture and address topics such as fandom and the impact of hockey on Canadian national identity. By critically analyzing the existing body of research on ice hockey in Canada, this literature review aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the sport's multifaceted nature but, most importantly, provide insight for Hockey Canada and sport leaders as a means to shift a culture that has proven to be harmful. This review will identify gaps in the current knowledge base and highlight areas requiring further investigation. In addition, provide insights that can inform future research, policy development, and community initiatives related to ice hockey in Canada.

Following a brief discussion of the methodology employed, this literature review will outline three major themes. The first section takes a historical, and at times present, overview of ice hockey, including origin stories of hockey's role in Canada. This role also began the threads of whiteness, nationalism, and masculinity that remain deeply ingrained today. As such, I will engage these sub-themes within section one. The second section considers research from the margins – from the voices of those excluded in hockey culture, which form the 'isms – racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, and ableism. The symptoms of an unhealthy elite hockey culture are derived from the root of the issues we are here to address.

The final section forms recommendations to move ice hockey forward to be inclusive and refocused on health instead of a culture of accumulation. Ice hockey offers a beautiful

space for children and youth to foster various skills, be active and healthy and, for some, a career. As a result, it is imperative that hockey become inclusive and accessible for all Canadians in a healthy ecosystem. While literature was sought for both men's and women's ice hockey, this review focuses primarily on elite men's ice hockey culture[2], as elite men's ice hockey is at the core of hockey and is synonymous with broad understandings of Canadian culture. It is crucial to note that as a critical scoping review, a critical lens is taken to improve ice hockey in Canada and to do that, we need to acknowledge that ice hockey in Canada has been/is not a safe or inclusive space for all Canadians. This is not an exercise intended to cause shame or angst, but to quote Paulo Freire (2000), "Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who you are – so you can more wisely build the future" (p. 84). This review takes a critical lens as a means to raise awareness of how deeply engrained – systemic and historical, the issues of masculinity, privilege, and violence are in ice hockey and how ice hockey models for children, youth, and society more broadly expectations of what it means to be a man.

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[2] Elite men's hockey culture and elite men's ice hockey are used interchangeably with hockey culture as it is the focus of this review.