

IDENTITY ON ICE: INTERSECTIONS OF MIND, BODY, AND IDENTITY

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## 1. RESEARCH QUESTION

### RESEARCH TOPIC

How do “hockey culture” and identity intersect with mental and physical health among hockey players in their athletic community? Identity and its formations within imagined communities have been extensively researched in anthropology. However, I would argue that there is less anthropological research discussing the intersections of health and identity in sports among their imagined communities. The purpose of my research was to examine the intersections of culture and identity through the impacts of health among players within the hockey community. Hockey, a sport often connected to notions of Canadian national identity, creates an imagined community outside of the nation as well, contributing to a “hockey culture” within this community. This is evident through books and literature but also within social atmospheres and online through social media. A quick search on twitter with the words “hockey culture” will turn up a lot of results.

### INITIAL RESEARCH QUESTION

My initial research question was “How do mental and physical health intersect with the formation and maintenance of identity and hockey culture for players within the hockey community?” While this research question did not change over time, I did start to ask whether the question may have been assuming too much. After speaking with more research participants, these doubts went away. It was clear to see that, at least for the individuals I spoke with, there is a clear sense of community that arises out of one’s participation within the hockey community. While some individuals were proud of the friendships and outlet that hockey and its society provide for them, others had fewer positive experiences within certain areas of the society while finding themselves in others. This indicated to me that not only is there a hockey community that creates a sense of culture, but there are also communities within that larger community.

### FINAL RESEARCH QUESTION

Although I did choose to stay with my original research question, I did speak with one of my research participants who indicated that I should refer to physical and mental health as one entity. This was also suggested to me by one of the master’s students during the workshop seminars prior to beginning my research. I did ask another interlocutor for their opinion on this, and they also agreed. Their reasoning was that when their body is in shape their mind follows, and vice versa. They explained that the two are not necessarily one in the same, but that they rely on one another to help maintain good health.

## 2. CONTEXT

### FIELD SITE(S)

Research for this ethnography took place within a multi-sited field site. The main site of research was conducted within the hockey community, an imagined space. Hockey community, for the purposes of this paper, includes physical and imagined spaces where everyone who plays, coaches, watches, writes about or is involved with the sport of hockey in any way take part in social interactions within their society. Field sites included online spaces on social media through Instagram and Twitter as well as through zoom. Research on social media involved searching within the imagined community’s “Hockey Twitter” and through discussion posts of professional hockey players, teams, and associations on Instagram. Observations were also made at York

University hockey games held at the CanLan arena as well as at a Toronto Maple Leafs game at the Scotia Bank Arena and an ECHL game in Toledo, Ohio. The other field sites, where participant observation and interviews took place, were the Douro Community Centre in Douro-Drummer, Ontario, as well as a restaurant in Peterborough and the fireside lounge and media room in my apartment building in Toronto, Ontario.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

### *INITIAL OBSTACLES*

The participants of this research project are members of the hockey community. While this is a very large community, I wanted to keep it defined as such due to the discursive research I was doing on Instagram and Twitter which had no real “location” and where users could be from anywhere in the world. I did also want to narrow down the selection of my direct research participants and decided to stay within the Toronto area of Ontario, Canada. However, due to the busy time of the season, some of the participants I had intended to work with were unable to participate. I had planned to provide a survey to members of the Men’s and Women’s hockey teams at York University as well as the Professional Women’s Hockey team of Toronto, the Toronto Six. After communication with the media representative for the York University teams and the Toronto Six, none of the teams were able to take part in the survey or any interviews. I had also planned to speak to medical staff for one of the teams but was unable to get in contact with them.

### *DEFINING A COMMUNITY*

Initially, I had also intended to include fans, sports media members, hockey players and coaches. I was able to interview an individual who is both a fan and sports media member as well as a recreational hockey player. Adrian DiRaimondo works for the Habs Tonight YouTube channel as a social media manager and has played hockey for a few years now as well as been a fan of the sport for even longer. I met Adrian through my brother originally when they were producing a podcast together known as the Dawg House Sports Podcast. It was after listening to one of the podcasts that I had found an individual named Brady Leavold who also has a podcast that inspired the idea for this research question and was used for discursive research throughout it. Another research participant was Mark Mackie, a former professional hockey player and coach. Mark agreed to speak to me after having met each other through his son who is the close friend of another research participant for this project, Jacob Tugnutt. Jacob Tugnutt is a professional hockey player who also played NCAA hockey in the United States during his time away from Canada for college. I had initially planned to include members of both men’s and women’s teams in my research however, after reaching out to many individuals I was able to find mostly male participants and just one female participant who chose to remain anonymous but is also a hockey player and fan. This individual agreed to participate after the friend of another research participant suggested to contact her for her participation.

### *NARROWING DOWN THE SELECTION*

Beyond my research participants being members of the hockey community, I wanted to include members of the hockey community that had experienced injury or mental illness during or because of being involved in the sport of hockey. It was Brady Leavold that inspired this aspect of my research due to his podcast as well as his lived experience and life story of playing professional hockey. Brady has a podcast, Hockey 2 Hell and Back, where he speaks openly

about his struggles with mental illness and addiction and invites guests from within the hockey community onto the podcast to speak about their experiences. During my discursive research, listening to various episodes of this podcast, it became evident that physical injury and mental illness were prevalent among many of the individuals within this community. For many individuals within this society these forms of poor health also seemed to change how they viewed themselves within the community and, for some, how others within the community viewed them.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ice Hockey is said to be a part of Canadian National identity. This is evident through popular media advertisements for products such as beer or clothing that promote Canadian brands through their relation to hockey as a symbol of Canadian identity. According to Professor Mary Louise Adams (2006), “In popular media discourses it goes without saying that hockey is the Canadian sport” (72). Hockey is not just a part of national identity, though. There is a hockey community in which there is a culture, a hockey culture. This hockey culture goes beyond a physical space, it is a part of an imagined community. Therefore, Hockey is not only associated with Canadian national identity but also has identities associated to it. There are personal and social identities being formed and maintained by hockey players within the hockey community. In this community, hockey culture plays a role in forming identities through socially acceptable practices and normative behaviors that are considered acceptable or expected of hockey players. While hockey is said to be a part of Canadian culture, there are not many anthropological studies that have been conducted regarding the sport and its connection to not only the formation of Canadian identity but also for the personal and social identities of those involved in the sport.

In relation to injury and the health and wellbeing of the players, violent aspects of the game have long been a topic of discussion. In their book chapter “*Hockey Canada and the Bodychecking Debate in Minor Hockey*”, Michael Robidoux and Pierre Trudel (2006) explain, “The issue of violence in Canadian ice hockey is nothing new. There have been reports of “overt brutality evident in open fighting on the ice and in mob scenes involving fans and players almost from the outset of the modern game” (p. 101). Robidoux and Trudel (2006) explain that violence in Minor Hockey has been researched and studied for over 30 years, which would now be roughly over 45 years (p. 101). This research has been used to write “reports about how to reduce aggression and violence in minor hockey” (Robidoux and Trudel 2006, pg. 101). According to Robidoux and Trudel (2006), a hockey violence typology has been created by Ann Hall, Trevor Slack, Gary Smith, and David Whitson (p. 102). This typology involves two categories, Relatively Legitimate acts of violence and its two subcategories of Brutal Body Contact and Borderline Violence, and Relatively Illegitimate acts of violence, with two subcategories of Quasi-Criminal Violence and Criminal Violence (Robidoux and Trudel 2006, p. 102). When you apply this typology to certain generally acceptable acts of violence within the game of hockey, they can often cross over into the realm of illegitimate acts of violence. Bodychecking, as discussed by Robidoux and Trudel (2006), can often cross the line between legitimate and illegitimate violence. However, there are times when this form of violence blurs the line, and it becomes more than just violence but also a larger form of aggression such as intimidation (Robidoux and Trudel 2006, pg. 103).

Hockey Canada is the national governing body of ice hockey in Canada (Wikipedia 2021). It was created in 1969 “in response to Canada’s poor showings in international hockey, a second national administrative structure, Hockey Canada, was put into place to improve

Canada's national hockey program" (Robidoux and Trudel 2006, pg. 104). This association links back to 1914 when the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA) was formed because in 1994 the two organizations merged under a new name, the Canadian Hockey Association (Robidoux and Trudel 2006, pg. 104). Years later, during the spring of 2003, the association decided to change their name back to Hockey Canada. It was not just the name changes that occurred over time though. According to Robidoux and Trudel (2006), the mission of the association shifted from what started out as a way in which to supervise the sport into a sort of "feeder system for the pros" (pg. 104).

According to Andrew C. Holman (2009), "the first time that the interdisciplinary (and normally scholarly) ACS/AEC had lent its mantle to the examination of hockey in Canadian culture" (p. 3), was in 2004 when "the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS/AES) held a one-day symposium at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in Gatineau, Quebec" (p. 3). There had been calls-to-action prior to this for academics to study the sport of hockey and its relation to Canadian culture and some informative literature has been produced since then.

Holman (2009) refers to the importance of the historical particularity of the sport, writing, *To understand hockey in a scholarly way is to see it as a series of historical struggles that emanate from its central position in Canadian culture as national icon, as work and entertainment, as pastime, as enterprise, as privilege, and as a class-race- and gender-based locus of identity* (pg. 6).

Hockey studies are an interdisciplinary field "that Gruneau and Whitson carved out" just over 20 years ago (Holman 2009, p. 7). It is a field of study that I believe anthropologists could contribute to and benefit from conducting ethnographic studies and research within.

### 3. METHODS

#### SUMMARY OF METHODS

For this ethnography I decided to conduct discursive research along with preliminary research from academic articles, books, and other hockey related literature. I also planned to conduct semi-structured interviews as well as conduct a short survey and participant observation. I did not change my initial methods however I did question the need to use the survey within my research. It did not seem to provide great information statistically. However, I began to realize that the answers still provided me with an understanding of different perspectives and the anonymity of the survey allowed respondents to participate without having to attach a name or face to their answers. The survey answers ended up being extremely useful in the final analysis of my ethnographic research, especially the long answer questions that provide an explanation for their answers, allowing for a sort of in-text interview.

#### *DISCURSIVE RESEARCH*

Discursive research involved listening to a podcast and watching it on YouTube, reading through comments on Instagram, and scrolling through content on Twitter. I decided to do this because during my time watching and listening to the podcast that inspired my research question, I had heard mention of something called *Hockey Twitter*. I decided to investigate it and found the hashtag #hockeyculture being used and thought this was probably being used on Instagram as well. This meant that there was an online hockey community, a community that I recognized to be contributing to the discourse around violence, the well-being of players, and identity.

### *SHORT SURVEY*

The anonymous short surveys were first written out as word documents. Two of my interlocutors filled these documents out physically: one scanned the document to send back to me and the other gave me the physical copy. However, during my communications with the York University men and women's hockey team's media consultant, I decided it would be easier to create an online version of the survey, so that players could easily access it. While it was unfortunate that the players were unable to participate, it was convenient to have all the survey information online because I could see the statistics of each question as well as their typed out long-answer responses. A third survey response was provided through the online survey link while the physical and scanned copies were manually entered into the online survey using the SurveyMonkey website to collect and analyze the data in a more organized manner. This idea was one that I was inspired to use after another student explained how they had used a similar survey service to gather their data as well.

While I had initially planned for many more individuals to take part in the survey I was able to have 3 participants respond. At first, I had thought that gathering more data would help me understand any patterns among the answers. I slowly began to realize that it did not matter if I had just one participant respond to the survey because the answers are of value. The idea of collaborating with my interlocutors involves allowing participants to decide what they would like to share or contribute and how. But more than that, the purpose of the research project, and of anthropology, is not to simply gather data and statistics but instead to share stories and attempt to share the lived experience of human beings, and in this case individuals within the sport of hockey. The survey consisted of 10 questions, some of those questions with sub-questions or follow-up questions that required a short-answer response.

### *SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 participants, 2 of which responded to the survey. These interviews varied in length for each research participant and depended on how much that individual was willing to divulge. I utilized the questions of the survey to guide my line of questioning throughout the interview and let the conversation guide itself in-between.

### *PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION*

Participant observation was a method I chose to use because I wanted to speak to the participants one on one but also observe what getting ready for practice was like and what practicing with friends was like as well. I wanted to witness the interactions of my interlocutors with one another, seeing as I was lucky enough to be connected to other participants through one of my interlocutors who was able to set up a practice for them all. I also was able to watch a few games in which I observed the crowd and the research participant, Jacob Tugnutt, who attended both the NHL game and the ECHL game with me.

### *AUDIO & VIDEO RECORDING*

I also decided to record audio of the interviews I conducted as well as video of two of the interviews and of participants practicing with friends and former teammates. This was extremely helpful in the final analysis because while my notes were a good reference, I found that reviewing the audio and watching the videos brought back even more memories of the feelings and senses and made it easier for me to go over exactly what participants did and were saying. While these audio and video recordings were helpful for analysis and to use as content for a short

documentary film, I did find that the mentioning of the short documentary and video seemed to be what made certain individuals more reluctant to participate. I was told by two of my interlocutors that the topic of my research is a sensitive topic within the hockey community and many individuals would rather not speak on the topic for fear of what repercussions could follow if they were to say something negative.

#### *POST-RESEARCH REFLECTIONS AROUND METHODS USED*

All these methods helped work together to inform my analysis of the ethnographic research conducted throughout this ethnography. The survey answers revealed certain views around whether there is a “hockey community”, how violence is addressed, how mental and physical health are addressed, and more. These responses, alongside the semi-structured interview responses, my fieldnotes, and participant observation, provided data that I then took notes on and was able to understand certain shifts and various understandings of the sport and how identity is or is not tied into the health and well-being of players.

The risks involved with this research project were concerned with mental health and speaking about sensitive topics. I did my best to refrain from pushing participants on this topic. While participants were comfortable with freely speaking about their health and well-being, this was a concern because of the impact that it could have on their current state by bringing up the past. Thankfully none of the research participants experienced or exhibited any severe emotional response to any of the questions. However, I did include resources within the consent form that individuals could access if they were to later feel that they need to reach out or utilize any.

During my time as a radio news reporter, conducting interviews was as easy as calling or e-mailing and asking for an interview about a certain topic or sticking around at council meetings where it was expected that councilors would discuss what had happened. I found that having to explain and discuss the consent form made participants more reluctant because of the length of the consent form I had drafted for this research project. This was something new for me because I had faced certain challenges with getting interviews before but not because of having to complete certain paperwork first. For those who did participate, I did find that the consent form helped them understand exactly what the project was about and helped them understand how they might help or contribute. Once I had gotten the consent of two interlocutors, one of the two introduced me to others who then introduced me to others. This was something I had anticipated happening but was still extremely grateful for because it resulted in my being able to witness the research participants interacting with one another and not just have one-on-one interviews with them. The interlocutor that had originally linked me up with the other research participants was someone whom I had built a decent rapport with. We had gotten very close as he helped explain certain aspects and rules about the sport to me. This interlocutor is a friend of Brady Leavold’s, whose podcast inspired the research question for this project. Over time, Jacob and I grew closer, and he became much more comfortable with sharing his experience with me in our interview. Looking back, I think that my coming to Jacob as an individual who knew nothing about the sport helped to balance out the sense of authority I may have had, creating a mutual relationship between myself and this interlocutor. During my interview with Adrian, we had a mutual friendship through my brother and had met previously so it was already comfortable for us to speak about these things with one another. Jacob was someone I had met through Instagram and whom I was not yet comfortable with and vice versa. It took more effort to build rapport with Jacob, however once it was built it was easier to interview the individuals that he had introduced me to because of our connection. This was something that I found interesting since it felt as

though I was witnessing a sort of sense of community pulling together for Jacob and for his new friend, that friend being me.

While witnessing the actions and responses of research participants I found that there were certain aspects about each rink and each community within the hockey community that were constant throughout. For the rinks, it is the smell, the cold, the sound in the arena, the scripting of the game and the announcing. For the hockey community the repetitive aspects include a certain understanding of normative social behaviors and language that run constant through many of these sub-communities. I did not go into the research project thinking that I would want to make any changes within the community, but I do still believe doing this research and having public access to ethnographic research within hockey studies will help individuals within anthropology understand different aspects of the hockey community and how this interacts with local, national, and international communities, associations, and organizations. I also believe it could help remove or reduce stigma around speaking about certain topics within the hockey community. This feeling was one that I carried with me from the initial inspiring moment for my research question and throughout. I admit that this influenced my initial understandings of my question and how I approached my line of questioning. This was something I noticed after writing the survey questions and had to stop myself from projecting my bias too heavily into the research project.

For the first two interviews, COVID-19 complicated things a bit, however for the final interview and participant observation there were no restrictions that interfered with or complicated the research. For the first interview, with Adrian, it had to be conducted by zoom because we wanted to be able to speak without our masks on and at the time there were restrictions around this in public places and settings. The second interview I conducted also had its own complications due to COVID-19. The interview and participant observation were delayed because of difficulty getting access to ice due to certain closures and restrictions.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTED**

Research included collecting and analyzing opinions and experiences relating to how physical and mental well-being are addressed and viewed by athletes, coaches, hockey fans, and the media. Research and data was collected via survey, interviews and participant observation of hockey players and other individuals within the hockey community. It also included discursive research using podcasts and social media such as Twitter and Instagram to examine discussions relating to mental and physical health of hockey players and their identity within the hockey community. The research conducted was used to analyze if and how well-ness of the mind and body impact how identity is viewed, formed, and maintained among athletes within the hockey community and in relation to hockey culture. Utilizing audio recordings, digital video, and photographs, a short ethnographic documentary was also produced to accompany the final analysis. The choice to conduct surveys and semi-structured interviews was for the reason of collecting anonymous data regarding a uniform set of questions that is accompanied by personal experiences and stories. I had initially intended for everyone who participated to also complete the survey. After consideration, I felt that it was best to leave the decision of how the interlocutor would like to participate up to them. The surveys, interviews, and participant observation were complimented by discursive research that also addressed the lived experiences and discourse regarding my research question.

A final ethnographic documentary was used to represent the findings of this research analysis for several reasons. The main purpose was to provide an alternate mode of consumption and exhibition for the presentation of research findings and analyses. The short ethnographic film is also meant to demonstrate and add to discourse around how media is used to perpetuate certain formations of identity, particularly within the hockey community. Other reasons include the accessibility of information and legibility. That is, the choice to present the final analysis as an ethnographic film will hopefully demonstrate an alternative to the research paper as a product of ethnographic research and speaks to public anthropology and how it might present ethnographic research to publics. I believe having video and audio recordings can help the ethnographic process and offers an excellent source of data to create a visual or audio representation of your ethnography. While this is true, I also felt that asking interlocutors to participate in the research project was made more difficult when mentioning the possibility of audio and video recordings or photographs being taken.

For my final analysis I decided to break down my findings into sections for review that I could then compare notes on, and complete further analysis based on that. I started with my survey findings, then my interview findings, then my participant observation findings, and then the findings from my discursive research. After analyzing these findings, I looked to identify patterns and differences. After looking to identify patterns or differences, I decided to search for data and findings that seemed ordinary to discover what was extraordinary about them.

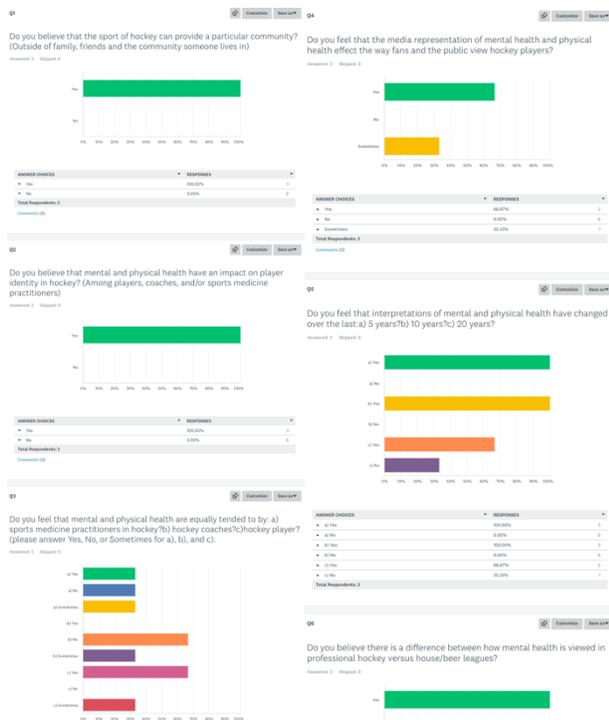


Figure 1

Figure 2

### SURVEY FINDINGS:

Three individuals participated in the survey and for the very first question of the survey all three respondents answered the same. The question was, "Do you believe that the sport of hockey can provide a particular community? (Outside of family, friends, and the community someone lives in)" (Figure ), to which all participants responded *YES*. The same held true for the second question which was, "Do you believe that mental and physical health have an impact on player identity in hockey? (Among players, coaches, and/or sports medicine practitioners)" (Figure ), to which all interlocutors responded *YES*.

It was the next question where the respondents had very split answers. This question was a three-part question that required the respondent to answer the question, "Do you feel that mental and physical health are sports medicine practitioners in hockey? b)

hockey coaches? c) hockey players?” (Figure ). The answers to this question differed for a) and c) but two of the three respondents felt that coaches did not tend to mental and physical health equally while one respondent answered that they felt that sometimes they do.

The next question was, “Do you feel that the media representation of mental health and physical health effect the way fans and the public view hockey players?” (Figure 2). For this question one respondent answered *SOMETIMES* while two answered *YES*. While all respondents agreed that over the past 5 to 10 years the views towards mental and physical health have changed within the hockey community, only 2 of three agreed that this change carries back as far as 20 years ago while one respondent disagrees (Figure 2).

All three respondents agreed that *YES*, there is a difference between how mental health is viewed in professional hockey versus house/beer leagues (Figure 2). When asked, “Do you think there is a stigma around mental health and illness in hockey?” (Figure 3), two of the three respondents answered *YES* while one answered *SOMETIMES*. There was a short answer section attached to that question where respondents were asked to explain their answers. One respondent gave an example of one of the stigmas around players which was that they are expected to be fine because they make tons of money. Another respondent explained that the stigma exists and continues to be perpetuated because “players don’t admit that they need help. Healing begins once forgiveness creeps in.” Another respondent answered, “I believe that there is a stigma because many players have come out and talked about their mental health like Jonathan Drouin. Many players have become addicted to painkillers and other drugs after their career

For the next question, participants were asked, “Do you think there is a trend with physical injury in hockey and the idea of needing to ‘play through the pain’?” (Figure 3), to which two of three answered YES and one answered NO. When asked, “Do you feel that hockey can have a positive impact on mental and/or physical health?” (Figure 3), all three respondents answered YES. Their short-answer responses for this question included, “Can escape outside world and only worry about what’s happening on the ice,” “It absolutely can because for many people like myself, hockey is my favorite past time and makes me feel great going to the rink,” and “The game is an alternative viewing of accepted violence. Eliminating negative players is the only way to keep the game governed.”

When asked “Do you feel that hockey can have a negative impact on mental and/or physical health?” (Figure 4), two of three respondents said *YES* while one answered *NO*. The short answer responses for this question were, “When it comes to overthinking about things that are out of your

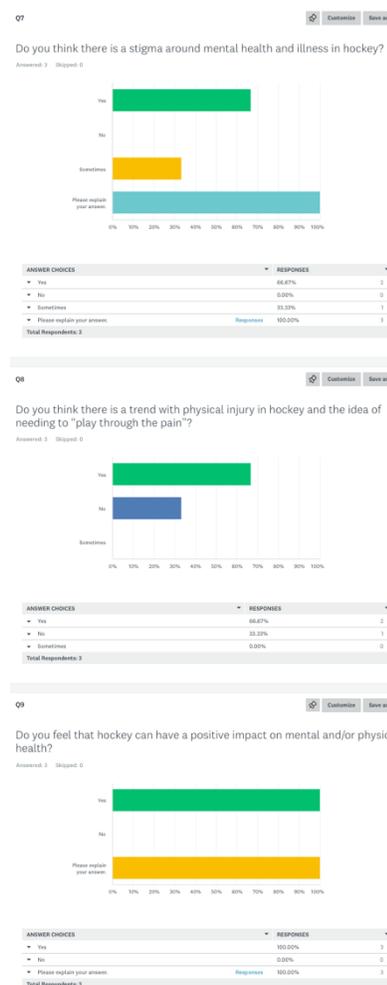


Figure 3

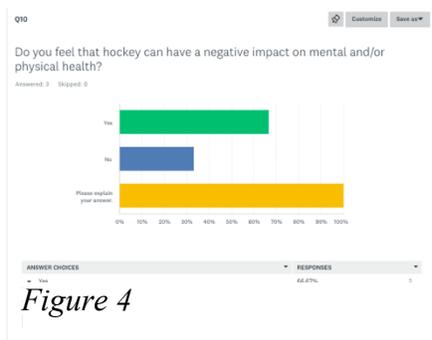


Figure 4

control,” “Everyone is different. But injuries, especially concussions have been proven to be harmful to player's lives during and after their careers are done,” and “The hardest trophy to win will forever require a group of men that provides an emotion that overrides all pains”.

### *INTERVIEW FINDINGS:*

One thing that my interlocutors mentioned to me during our interview that I felt was particularly important to note was that the topic of mental health and injury are sensitive topics for many players and that it may make it difficult to find people who are willing to speak on the topic. Even though that may be the case in some situations, there are still many individuals within the hockey community who openly advocate and support the need to address the health and well-being of hockey players and its importance.

#### *Adrian DiRaimondo:*

During my interview with Adrian DiRaimondo, I noticed that he had a very positive outlook for the future of player safety at the professional level for hockey players. He seemed very optimistic about the changes that had taken place over the last 5-10 years and when I discussed injury and mental health he brought up the case of Sidney Crosby and his many concussions that brought awareness toward mental health and concussions or CTE as well as its effect on player in the league. Adrian's response to these changes over time was this:

“I think it's changed drastically in a good way, um, the last 5-10 years when you have guys that have taken their own lives because they needed help and they didn't know where to go or, you know, their hockey career is done and they don't know what to do after and just have a lot – like – really bad CTE, or head injuries, or things like that... I was watching a clip from my Habs Tonight channel, they interviewed Dan Carcillo and he talked about ... when Steve Montador died in 2015, and he had a bunch of concussions – I can't remember the exact number. He



He suffered from concussions, and he needed help, and everyone in the room knew that he needed help... you know, it's one of those things where, back then it was kind of frowned upon to get help because, again, hockey has a hush-hush culture, right... It's just sad because, you know, your physical well-being and your mental well-being should be looked after, right, and it really took the face of hockey, Sidney Crosby, to suffer a series of really bad concussions to really raise awareness towards the mental health aspects of concussions and just overall science and studies on it.”

According to Adrian, it has taken the efforts of individuals speaking out against player's associations and unions for them to make changes for player safety. Adrian explains that player safety has not been a major concern for the league until recent years and it's a shame that it still is not being address adequately. He says, “a lot of strides have been made but it's because people have come out against the establishment, I guess you could say and, you know, talk out against

them, right.” He goes on to say, “I always say, I don’t know if this is a bad thing to say but, you know, sometimes it takes people getting injured or dying to really change things in the world”.

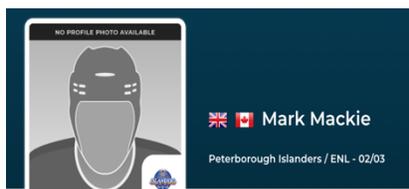
Adrian did address the fact that in the past, views towards injuries and mental health were different and that often players were told to or chose to play through the pain. He says that while this still happens today, it is much less prevalent, especially amongst professional hockey players. He acknowledges that, in the past, violence and playing through the injury was much more prevalent,

“It has been common for players to become addicted to opioids throughout their careers because of trying to play through pain or treat their injuries ... I would see it myself when I was a kid. These guys - some guys - would just get absolutely rocked in the corner from a hit or they’d take a bad punch and they’d be concussed and again, no concussion protocol before 2010, so you have guys that are physically concussed on the bench, and they just take the smelling salts to wake themselves up and then they go back out. So, I think, again, that’s how things were back then but I think it’s different now though.”

As we spoke more, Adrian revealed to me some of his own struggles with mental health, “From my experience with mental health... some days it’s just hard to get out of bed, you know, and you just can’t. You just don’t want to do it, right, and sometimes you have to but for some people with severe cases, it’s really hard to go on with your day.” He later shared more with me, saying,

“On the whole mental health aspect of hockey, for me, it’s been a great escape for me. I’ve made a lot of friends, you know, built a lot of relationships through the game. I’ve met a lot of great people and I still am, you know, and that’s why I think a friend of mine said to me, you know, ‘Hockey is just that gift that keeps on giving’ you know and sports in general, I think are a gift that keeps on giving because you don’t know, you can meet people that will completely change your life, you know, just because of a game you love, right. So, you know, I’m very thankful, even for my dad for getting me into hockey. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be doing any of this stuff right now, making content for a great YouTube channel and you know playing it, watching it, just being such an enthusiast. It’s been good to me. Hockey has been great to me and I’m very thankful for where I am now.”

Mark Mackie:



(*Elite Hockey Prospects 2021*)

During my interview with Mark Mackie, I found that he had a less positive view toward the direction of player safety in the game. However, he did mention that roughly 30 years ago when he played professionally, it was often up to the player whether they would play through injury. He says that some players would do it and others would not, “I’m old-school, If I got injured, I played through it, or tried to play through it.”

He explains how things were back when he was playing,

“Back then it was basically just up to the individual themselves. Okay, and um, myself, I played through a lot of things and you now, you just did it. That’s just the way I was. Okay, If I had a broken finger, I’d get it taped up and play through. I had many injuries in my career. I broke my sternum in the middle of a game, I didn’t know it at the time, and I played through it. I just thought it was a couple ribs, but I found out afterward I broke my sternum and if somebody had of hit me in the chest I might have pierced my heart.”

He also explained why he feels that player safety has gone down over the years. According to Mark, safety equipment like face masks and screens or visors allow players to have a sense of safety that makes them more inclined to violent actions because they feel they are less like to get hurt or receive any physical retaliation because of their actions.

When I spoke to Mark about the connections between mental health and physical injury, he said that in his time it was up to the players to take care of themselves. He also brought up concussions, saying “There’s more concern about concussions and everything which is totally understandable and, you know, they’re trying to prevent it from happening, but then again in a contact sport there’s always going to be that ‘what if?’, okay, and if you’re going to worry about the what if’s, you shouldn’t be playing the game.”

Jacob Tugnutt:



While interviewing free agent goaltender Jacob Tugnutt, he told me that he was born into the game and started watching at the age of three. Some of his earliest memories are of getting up early in the morning while living in Ottawa and going to the rink with his mother. It seemed that he cherished those memories, they brought a smile to his face. He continued to tell me that he had been playing hockey for 23 years. I asked him what keeps him coming back to the game of hockey and this was his response:

“I’ve been playing hockey for 23 years and after taking a couple years off what brings me back is the post-game adrenaline and relaxation after a tough match as a week’s energy and preparation and energy that goes into the game is finally complete so then you can repair and get ready for the next battle, but for me it’s going to be a bit different now. But, I think what brings me back is mostly the social connection and the, yea like I said, the process of what goes into a hockey match is something that not too many people understand so I think that is something that in my position will allow me to keep pursuing the things that I enjoy doing and the loves that I continue to find and create in the sport and the game.”

Jacob had left the sport because of an injury and the need to have surgery on his hip. After his recovery he has chosen to return. He continued to say, “What brings me back is that the game of hockey now will allow me to portray a version of my life that I didn’t think was possible.”

I asked Jacob how he felt about violence and fighting in the sport and whether it has increased or decreased over time. He responded:

“The violence is starting to creep back towards what it used to be like but it’s a subtle kind of violence that is not foreshadowed like it used to be. It’s the subtle injury that players are getting hurt from more nowadays compared to what the players went through back then due to the outlook of how players respect one another has changed and I think that’s the reason that it’s going to be dangerous now moving forward in the game because the appreciation for the human’s soul and counterpart, I think, is in question.”

Jacob continued to say, “The game has gotten more dangerous because the equipment has become a part of the human anatomy on the ice which then can become weaponized.” When I

asked him about how he felt about the increased level of safety due to equipment and how he thinks that may or may not have an impact on the game, Jacob said:

“The equipment allows the player to feel in the state of protection but the player on the ice, once they enter the game they’re already a weapon on ice... the equipment aspect will allow the player to play at a higher level and speed that they didn’t feel comfortable playing at once before due to the equipment adapting over time.”

Jacob explained to me that players feel more comfortable with putting their bodies at risk because of the level of safety and the feeling of protection that their equipment provides but notes that the level of risk of injury has also increased due to the increased level of play, even outside of just the fighting.

When I spoke to Jacob about mental health and how it is viewed within the league, he explained that there is a stigma around speaking about it:

“I think that not acknowledging that [mental illness or injury] is the most chosen way in locker room settings in society, it’s just to ignore it. I think that’s why now it’s coming down to who’s willing to not be ignored. So, that’s why the safety - that’s in the players looking out for each other, you know, and I think it’s a team atmosphere and it’s a team protection and kind of, like, unit that patrols the safety of the club, I think that’s why it’s definitely a sought-out acquisition and trait that I think GMs, and owners, and head coaches still look for in players today.”

#### *PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION FINDINGS:*

Participant observation involved watching interlocutors practice as well as attending professional hockey games with one of the participants. It also involved viewing some video footage that a participant sent to me of them practicing with their friends. Witnessing the practices helped me to understand the friendship and sense of community that is what every one of the participants of this research project had referenced. Even during a practice, there is a strong sense of support from each of the individuals on the ice and everyone is helping each other and cheering one another on. This sense of community did carry on into the live sporting events that I attended. I was lucky enough to attend two live professional sporting events with my interlocutor Jacob Tugnutt. One was an NHL game to watch the Toronto Maple Leafs play at the Scotia Bank Arena and the other was to an arena in Toledo, Ohio to watch an ECHL game. One of the most prevalent things that I noticed from these events was the scripting of the event and the controlled reactions of the crowd. There was this sort of robotic feeling to the entire thing when you are witnessing it from an outsiders’ perspective. To be honest, I felt like I was in the movie *Gladiator*, watching the men fight it out as the crowd screamed their cheers of joy and booed their favorite man’s opponents.

#### *DISCURSIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS:*

Even after my first twitter search, the violence within hockey culture was prevalent. There were many arguments over player safety as well as over the need for tougher players. There were also videos of a certain toxic masculinity that seemed to be prevalent throughout the sport in terms of a certain “locker room” behaviour that set social expectations that the players be strong and not talk about their mental health or physical well-being as well as condoning behaviors that are misogynistic and sexist. Without speaking to the individuals who partake in these behaviors it is not for me to say what their intention is or their reasoning for participating in this negative social act. I can however comment on the fact that there seem to be quite a few

individuals within the hockey community, or at least a lot of fans, that are against these behaviors. There was not too much response from professional hockey players on these kinds of posts which I assume is because they do not condone or want to draw attention to these things or because as research participant Adrian DiRaimondo pointed out, there is a hush-hush culture among the sport as well as a lot of players choose not to be on social media or engage with negative comments.

Instagram had a lot of videos of fights and comments on the fight about the players performance in it or what they had done to call for the fight. Here I notice there was less of a tendency to expose disliked behaviors as was the pattern on Twitter. On Instagram it seemed that people were more likely to condone the fighting and partake in offering and sharing their opinions on why or why not a player may have deserved the fight.

For the discursive research that I conducted through listening to the podcast by Brady Leavold, *Hockey 2 Hell and Back*, I found that many of the former pro athletes that had been on as guests had experienced some form of injury, whether it be mental or physical, that may have led to some sort of addiction. It became evident that many players turned to substance abuse after leaving the sport for different reasons. However, what I found that was even more alarming was that many players were prescribed pain killers during their time in the professional league that they played in and as a result later became addicted to pain killers or similar drugs. I also found that many players who suffered from addiction and who had been injured also experienced some sort of negative impact to their mental health. While these issues were not properly addressed during their time in the league, I do believe that the community that these individuals have found through this podcast and in connection with their involvement within the hockey community helps and allows them to have a group of individuals who understand what it is like to go through these experiences. While many admit that their struggles are often stigmatized, they are working together to help remove these stigmas.

#### *FINAL SUMMARY OF ALL FINDINGS:*

One thing that seemed to be apparent during all methods of my research was the acknowledgement of the existence of a community within the sport of hockey. It became apparent to me that being within the hockey community at a certain capacity, especially for players and coaches, automatically includes you in this community and provides many individuals with a sense of comradery and protection. It is a place where individuals can reveal aspects of their identity that they cannot act upon or reveal in other aspects of everyday life. It also was apparent that the mention of violence and mental health or injury tended to bring up discussion around concussions and head injuries. Participants mentioned the mental health illnesses that can arise from head injuries and from physical injury and the toll it takes on the body and other aspects of the players lives. They also mentioned that mental and physical health is not always addressed equally by everyone in the league and that this is an issue that is being addressed and is changing but still has a lot of work to do to get to a place where players are truly supported and protected.

There seems to be a shared appreciation and respect for not only the sport but all other members within the community to some extent or another. Participants noted that fans often are not respectful, especially on social media and sometimes even at the arena. The respect is mostly among players and coaches. This was even witnessed by myself at the games that I attended during my participant observation. Fans had collaborated cheers to antagonize the opposing team and often fans would gather in a collective chant or boo against certain players or the entire team.

What is more curious is when fans start to insult members of the team they support and came to watch. In my opinion, this speaks to the violence that is prevalent throughout the sport. While it is a form of socially accepted violence at some capacity, I believe it also provokes some of its viewers to partake in violent behaviors as well.

There is this idea of the “tough guy” that was mentioned by many participants, and I think this speaks to the toxic masculinity that was pointed out in many of the twitter posts I scrolled through during my discursive research. I believe that the social expectation to be or mimic this tough-guy persona adds to the hush-hush mentality that is spoken about by my interlocutors as well.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### FINAL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In my understanding, the concept of identity and intersections of it have been extensively researched by anthropologists. There is a large amount of research, as well, regarding community building and cultural practices, beliefs, and normative behaviours. Mental and Physical health of athletes has also become a popular topic of research among sports journalists and scientists. According to anthropologist and sociologist Eduardo P. Archetti (1998):

*It is clear that the anthropological perspective of Levi-Strauss in the critical tradition of social theory and the historical sociology of Elias have something in common: sport is perceived as an important field of analysis for achieving a better understanding of the appropriate or contradictory functioning of modern societies (92).*

However, in my understanding, there is little research currently being done by anthropologists regarding the intersections of mental and physical health among athletes in relation to identity and community in sports (Archetti 1998; Moore 2004). I believe this research reveals that there are an abundant variety of aspects and avenues that anthropologists can conduct ethnography and research on beyond just researching the community and identity but even finer details within hockey studies. Utilizing the concept of *Imagined Communities* as presented by Benedict Anderson (2006) regarding national identity and adapting and relating it to the realm of sports, I would say that the hockey community is an imagined community and this notion is solidified by the constant reification by participants that they are part of a community, and that there is a sort of culture present within that society. Marcel Mauss’s (1985) theories regarding notions of the person and the self were prevalent throughout my findings as players spoke of a sort of social presence that could be found within this community, for themselves. This demonstrates how the players are utilizing or putting on, metaphorically speaking, a sort of social mask of their identity, in my opinion. I would say that the way participants spoke about their own struggles and how the sport provided a refuge or escape or support in some way indicates that there is also a sort of split between the persons feelings and thoughts that they keep to themselves and what they choose to portray within the hockey community.

In the chapter “*Just part of the game’: Depictions of Violence in Hockey Prose*” by Jason F. Blake (2009), he writes about violence in the sport and literature relating to the sport explaining that

“...as Michael Robidoux has written, ‘violence on the ice can be seen as a highly expressive text that may establish a player’s identity’ (Robidoux 2001, 75). It is violence on display, a thought-out performance in real time of an audience – which means that

sport moves towards art because Drinkwater is fighting according to a script” (Blake 2009, pg. 77).

I found this quote interesting as one of my interlocutors said something similar about violence being a performance and the entire sport being scripted. It was something that I also felt I witnessed when I had attended the professional games with my interlocutor, Jacob.

How do mental and physical health intersect with the formation and maintenance of identity and hockey culture for players within the hockey community? Based on my findings and the data I collected throughout my research I would say that mental and physical health do have an impact on the building of players identities within the sport. There is an intricate intersection between the way participants viewed the connection between the mind and body as well how the wellness and overall health of a player impacts their identity within the hockey community. In the past, players were expected to be strong and play through their injuries, which would become a part of their persona and identity as professional hockey players. You can see reflections of this in popular media through films such as *Slapshot* or *Goon* which depict the violent side of the game. Now, players are expected to be strong and tough but fast and skilled, with restraint and the ability to exhibit a controlled violence that, as several participants mentioned, is more subtle. This also impacts the way players interact with one another within their community. There is this demand for a certain behaviour on the ice, but off the ice and in the locker room or within local hockey programs there is a sense of comradery that allows the players to express yet another aspect of their identity. For one of my interlocutors it was through the Hockey Ministries that he was able to find a community off the ice within the hockey community where he could speak his truth. It was surprising for me to find out how important mental wellbeing and physical health is to members of the community while also taking part in or condoning violence in the sport and thus contributing to the formation of accepted violence within the sport as discussed by Michael Robidoux and Pierre Trudel (2006) regarding hockey violence typology (pg. 102).

### *REFLECTING ON THE RESEARCH*

Looking back at this research and finding out about the field of hockey studies does inspire me to delve further into this research. There are so many different aspects of the sport that can be studied by anthropologists, and I feel that it would be important research to conduct, especially in Canada as the sport is so interwoven and enmeshed into its identity through the media. Hockey is the national winter sport of Canada (Government of Canada 1994; Marsh 2013). There are power relations at play that could be explored and economic and environmental aspects of the sport that can be researched as well. I would like to conduct more research into the realm of sports and especially hockey to understand its history further and how the hockey community interacts within various local communities in Ontario and in other parts of Canada. I would have liked to have included more perspectives from women in the sport. My initial plan was to include an even balance of perspectives between men and women however in the end, most participants were men. Beyond that, there are so many different aspects of the sport that I would like to explore further. I would not go back and change what I did but now that I know what I know, I think I would like to explore patterns of addiction among professional hockey players, post-career. I think this topic would uncover connections to physical and mental health but would also be left open to further avenues of discussion. I would also like to further explore issues of racism within the sport as this is a topic that was not discussed by any of my interlocutors but was brought up in some of the literature I came across during my preliminary research and in some of the on-screen videos during the games that I attended.

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