Zand Halstuch, Emmett: Gender Expression in female sports: Rugby

Research Proposal:

I plan to do research on gender expression in a 'non-traditional' female sport. Do to accessibility the sport I plan to do research on is rugby. Unlike many female sports, people who are on the female rugby team tend to be stereotyped as scary or 'butch'. In my video project, I plan to interview four players that are on the Geneseo Women's Rugby team.

The questions I plan to ask include:
Why they decided to join the team?
What part of the environment that is created by the team do they enjoy the most?
Do they feel their gender expression has changed since they joined the team? If so could you elaborate how?
How has being on the team contributed to their personality?
Ever since they started playing rugby, have their views of their body changed? If so how?
How would they describe their usual outfit choice?
What is a common rugby stereotype that they know of and how does that affect them?

Through the use of these questions, I will show the player’s perspective of the sport and if they believe the sport allows them to freely express their gender.

Sources that I will be referencing while writing the scholarly background include “"Barbie Dolls” on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women's Rugby” by Matthew B. Ezzell and “Violent femininity: Women rugby players and gender negotiation” by Fiona Gill. Further background research on the subject will be done. Depending on how the participants respond to the questions will depend on whether or not I also include research on female rugby players and body image. This is how fall under the belief that the way people view their body and want others to view their body has an effect on how they express their gender.

Scholarly Background

After interviewing four different people from Geneseo's women’s rugby team, I was able to analyze their answers. I was able to compare their answers to see how being on the team has affected their gender expression.

When asked questions on what they believe it means to be feminine and if they felt like their gender expression has changed due to rugby, the participant’s responses were not what I predicted. Two of the four participants responded to what they consider femininity by describing outward features such as clothes and speech, while one of the participants went into detail about how femininity is how one handles identifying as a woman. Jessica Goldstein explains, “feminine means embracing the hardships and benefits of being a woman and loving it.” (Goldstein, November 17, 2016). As a similar response to Goldstein’s, Kiersten Fitzpatrick discusses how femininity is what is expected of females, which derived from the idea of the nuclear family. Three of the four participants had also agreed that ever since joining rugby their ideas about femininity and the way they express their gender had changed.

It was discussed in “Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women’s Rugby” by Matthew Ezzell, that female rugby players “...engaged in defensive othering by identifying with dominants and disidentifying with women outside of their team.” (Ezzell, “Barbie Dolls” this is not American Antiquity style --just give year and page number). According to Ezzell, female rugby players identify more with dominance, which in American culture is a masculine trait, and to do so will also separate themselves with females, especially those that identify more with femininity, outside the sport. From my interviews I had noticed a pattern of the ruggers, rugby players, describing themselves as being more masculine, in terms of America's the American use of the word. Each participant appeared to be macho, muscular, aggressive add comma and rugged and explained how rugby helped them find this side of themselves and embrace it. It should also be noted that even though the participants I used were masculine and dominant, that not all female rugby players are like this. “...there are some girly girls on the team that are like femininity all the way. It’s like Tyra Banks run around with a rugby ball.” (Goldstein, November 17, 2016).

It is also necessary to address the second half of Ezzell’s quote where he states that female ruggers identify, “...with dominants and disidentifying with women outside of their team.” (Ezzell, “Barbie Dolls”) separately because I found that there were conflicting views of this throughout my interviews. I could understand that it is hard for females that are dominant to maintain healthy relationships with people that are perceived as opposite as them. This is where rugby becomes something that connects those who play it because these are people you can find similarities with. “...the rugby community as a whole is a very accepting community. Once you are a rugger and you another rugger, you instantly have a connection that no one else has with you....” (Broidy, November 20, 2016). It seems as though you become part of a tight-knit community when you participate in rugby culture. Yet, one participant mentioned that she lives with people who are in sororities and do not play rugby, and she considers them her friends. People in sororities are generally perceived as the stereotypical feminine female, yet the participant is able to maintain healthy friendships with them.

In “Alcohol consumption among women rugby players in France: Uses of the “third half-time” by Julien Fuchs, it was discussed how female rugby players are introduced to an identity dilemma due to the social drinking aspect of the rugby culture. It discusses how for women, social drinking creates the conflict on how to establish oneself as a rugby player by exerting this kind of masculinity and still remain a woman or be feminine (Fuchs, Alcohol consumption). When approaching this topic with my interviewees I found that all four participants disagreed. One participant stated, “I don’t necessarily have to put on a performance, but I think there are some things expected of you...not necessarily drink because there are plenty of people that don’t drink, but you are expected to engage with people....singing and dancing. (Fitzpatrick, November 18, 2016). I found that not only was drinking not a requirement to participate in rugby culture, but the participants didn’t believe it could influence how they viewed themselves or influenced how they expressed their gender.

After analyzing and comparing the responses of the four participants, I have realized that each individual gave different perspectives of what it means to be feminine on a women’s rugby team and how they feel their femininity has been affected due to rugby. The general consensus was that the rugby culture allows for people to express who they are and become strong individuals.
Interview Questions Used in the Video

1. What is your name and what are your pronouns?
2. Why did you decide to join the team?
3. Do you feel that the way you express your gender has changed since you joined the team?
4. Ever since you started playing rugby, has your body image changed? If so how?
5. What is a common rugby stereotype that you know of and how does that affect you?
6. If you could tell a class of non-ruggers one thing about your rugby team, what would it be?

Interview Questions Not Mentioned in the Video

1. What part of the environment that is created by the team do you enjoy the most?
2. In your own words, what does it mean to be feminine?
3. Do you feel your definition of ‘feminine’ has changed since you started playing rugby?
4. Do you believe there are feminine people on the team?
5. How would you define ‘passive femininity’?
6. Have you ever experienced sexism, homophobia, or transphobia from non-ruggers?
7. When people think of rugby they often think of a “third half-time” that includes a social event after the games. Do you find that you need to put on a performance to fit in at these social events?
8. Are there any aspects of these social events, including songs or games, that conflict with your gender expression or identity?

Written Reflection on Final Project

After writing the research proposal, I was able to create more interview questions since I had more time to do research on the topic of gender expression and female sports. The people I had interviewed were very different from each other in personality and views which made it easy for me to compare their answers.

I was able to cover topics in my written component that I could not cover in my final video. In that sense, it can be seen as reflexive since I was able to reveal my methods and reflect on the data I gathered through the writing portion (Ruby 152). I used the written component to express what I learned from my interviews in comparison to what was said in the research I found, while the visual component was used to express the emotional aspect of what it’s like to be in a sport that is generally stereotyped harshly. I found that my interviewees tended to disagree with what the research was saying, which makes me think that there might be an age component that I didn’t initially consider while doing my research. Most of the research I found was on adult female rugby players, who were old enough to drink and already come to terms with who they were as humans. Interviewing college-aged rugby players, who weren’t all of the legal drinking age, and who were all going through the same “Who am I?” and “What am I doing with my life?” college crisis, could potentially skew the data I collected. In response to realizing this, I would like to do more research on the same topic, but with rugby players of all ages.

If I could change one aspect of the final project it would be changing how choppy the final video was. Originally I had planned to include a clip of the rugby team practicing to take Balikci approach on, “Reconstructing the traditional life…” (Balikci 195), but I was unable to take time out of my own practicing to do so. Including the segment of the team interacting at practice would have eliminated some of the choppiness of the final video. It would have also given the class a visual example of how different everyone on the rugby team looks and how supportive they are to each other. I feel like that would have gotten my point across better, especially since it would have been showing the class what the team is like and not just telling the class what the team is like.

Reflection References

Balikci, A.
Ruby, J.