For my video project, I will be looking at the Equestrian community. I have been a rider since the age of 8 years old and I am still amazed by the differences and distinctiveness of one of the oldest sports in the world. In particular, I will be attempting to look at the Equestrian community through a gender-lens. This interest was sparked by the fact that the equestrian sport allows for men and women to compete against each other equally, both on teams and individually (Haan 2016). Unfortunately, a gender barrier may still be a problem as “more men than women compete in Olympic equestrianism, although the number of female riders have increased over time” (Hedenborg 2012:302) and I intend to explore this and other gender issues within the equestrian field through the life of one individual.

Upon further speculation, I have decided to change both my approach, and my methods in creating this film. Instead of looking at several individuals in the community, I will be creating a life history film on a local female equestrian professional. As far as methodology goes, I plan to use an interview technique, where the narration acts as an addition of information to the visuals of the film, referred to by Heider as a dimension of narration called “added information” (Heider 1976). Part of my interview process will be incorporating personal (“native”) interpretations of my research by the subject herself (Heider 1976), since she may have different interpretations than myself of the information I will have found. Furthermore, similar to Preloran’s techniques in his films, my plan is to allow my subject to give an insight of her life through her own words with the overall goal of revealing her “truth” (Sherman 1998). By doing all of these things, I have devised a plan that will allow my exploration of the equestrian community through a gender-lens to be as close to the truth of the lived experiences of the female professional in this field as possible.

For the interview questions I plan to use - refer to Appendix A.

Scholarly Background

Horses were domesticated specifically for transport and labor, making them, from their original relationships with people, a symbol for strong masculinity (Schowalter 1983). Today, equestrian sport is a unique community in the sense that it is one of the only sports in the world that allow men and women to compete equally at all levels (Plymouth 2012, Birke 2009, Heilborg 2015, Adelman 2008, Hedenborg 2012). Although this gender inclusive sport seems to be a leader in relieving sports of gender issues, this does not mean that the sport has entirely rid itself of gender differences (Birke 2009). Originally, women were not allowed to compete at the highest level of competition when equestrian sport was added to the Olympic program (Hedenborg 2012). A common international concern was their men would be outcompeted by female riders (Hedenborg 2015). Despite this challenge, women have managed to break through, in part, because horses are “oblivious to sexist stereotypes” and “simply go best for whomever trains and rides them best” (Wipper 2000: 49), as well as due to “the destabilization of the societal gender order” that occurred after the two world wars (Hedenborg 2012:302). This destabilization allowed for “the feminization of horse riding” since, beginning in this time, it became more acceptable for women to show their skills, both physically and mentally (Dasper 2016:350). Regardless of this, women may not have “conquered men’s last strongholds” in the sport, due to men still dominating at the Olympic levels even though women dominate the sport in number (Hedenborg 2012:315). Through interviewing Susan Kelly, a professional female equestrian, I have attempted to explore this paradox.

According to Plymouth (2012), the common gender order seen in this sport is of knowledge being associated with men, whereas women are the ones who are taught. But, according to Hedenborg (2012) “nearly all riding schools are run by women” (Hedenborg 2012:302) and Susan Kelly, a top centered-riding trainer, is one of many equestrians who demonstrate this. As Susan stated in the film, women in the Geneseo area dominate the ownership of farms as well as teaching. Perhaps this is due to the inability of “social and cultural norms” to hold back the women who could not just sit on the sidelines (Adelman 2013:4) since they feel the need to share their extensive knowledge of the horse (Plymouth 2012); explicitly supported by Susan’s life story. Furthermore, “An adult horse girl has to take responsibility in several areas” (Plymouth 2012:340), and Susan is no exception to this, since the sport is “a matter of mastering a large animal” where dangerous situations can occur easily (Haan 2016:1256), and daily physical exertion is necessary for a horse’s upkeep (Dasper 2016). In the film, Susan points out that in her own experience, the sport is being led by “strong women” that don’t take away from the masculinity of the sport. This supports the argument that horse girls are not “shrinking violets who just want to kiss their horses” (Plymouth 2012:339), a common thought in society that has resulted from the increased feminization of equestrianism. With this increase in feminization, a common societal thought perception? stereotype? developed. Basically, non-elite women cannot be successful in the horse industry on their own (Adelman 2008). This modern societal idea arose from the historical painting ?? did you mean painting? that women, on farms, are confined to domestic roles, while their male partners do all the hard work even though “many women in the horse world regularly take on manual labour with ease” (Dasper 2016:360). Susan refuted this societal misconception when she spoke of her own relationship with her husband, as well as her friend Carol’s successes.

Curiously, Susan Kelly demonstrated throughout the film that she doesn’t believe she substantially fell victim to gender issues throughout her life. A study conducted of female equestrians by Dasper (2016) showed that the athletes in question did not feel they fell victim to gender issues either. This was also seen in a study centered around the Great Britain Olympic equestrian team, where the use of the words “rider” and “horse” replaced any form of gender reference to fellow teammates (Haan 2016:1263-64). Moreover, “there are no sex-based biological advantages for either males or females when it comes to equestrianism” since “the horse will always be the stronger partner” (Dasper 2012:216). So, why then, does society assume equestrians feel the impact of gender problems? Perhaps this is because sports are seen by outsiders as a “mirror of society and it’s gender order” (Plymouth 2012:346). But, what most non-equestrians don’t realize is that the equestrian sport revolves entirely around the horse, making it a “very levelling sport” with “no room for egos” between anyone (Haan 2016:1261-62). In fact, “media shape how and what we know about sports” (Heilborg 2015:260) and there are “social constructions that continue to demand that women be women and men be men” thus forcing the media to ‘police the boundaries’ of all sport (Adelman 2008:104) regardless of sex-integration or not. In equestrian sport, the media commonly portrays male riders as being more competent than female riders (Heilborg 2015). Therefore, the media may be the most responsible force for the continuation of gender issues in the most gender integrated sport in the world. great point
In conclusion, by using a testimony perspective, or first-person narration, in my film (MacDougall 1998), and comparing Susan's direct experiences of her life to my research, I hope to have accurately portrayed the life of female equestrians.

Very well-researched and written with interesting conclusions.

Cited Works:

Adelman, Miriam, and Fernanda Azeredo Moraes


Adelman, Miriam, and Jorge Knijnik


Birke, Linda, and Keri Brandt

2009 Mutual Corporeality: Gender and Human/Horse Relationships. Women’s Studies International Forum 32(n/a):189-197.

Dashper, Katherine


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Hedenborg, Susanna and Manon Hedenborg White


Heider, K.


Hellborg, Anna-Marie, and Susanna Hedenborg


MacDougall, David


Plymouth, Birgitta

Appendix A

1. The interview questions used:
   *Interview Questions for Susan.docx*

Proposal is about 250 words: yes no

Proposal outlines the goals of the project: strong good adequate needs work

Proposal outlines the methods of the project: strong good adequate needs work

Reference to course readings: strong good adequate needs work

Reference to scholarly/peer-reviewed anthropological works: strong good adequate (for proposal) needs work

Written Reflection

When this ethnographic project was assigned to us, I knew that the community I wanted to look at more closely was the equestrian community. I have always been perplexed by this sport, not only because I love it, but because of its unique gender inclusiveness at all levels. However, my question when approaching this project was: is the most gender-inclusive sport in the world truly without gender issues? The most obvious reason for this question was the fact that men still dominate at the highest levels of the sport, yet women dominate the sport in number at the amateur level. I originally wanted to look at the experiences of many individuals from all over the Genesee Valley, but upon further speculation, I decided that the complexities of the sport would be too much if portrayed by many backgrounds. Therefore, I decided to focus on the life of just one individual. The goal of my film was to incorporate simple visuals, from an outsider’s perspective of riding. This was my attempt at taking gender entirely out of the picture, and showing the individual solely as a rider. Furthermore, the narration was a voice-over interview of Susan telling the story of her life, or testimony perspective (MacDougall 1998), with some of her own interpretations of my research in order to give an insider’s view on issues I was finding (Heider 1976). The film Finding Oscar was the only life history film we watched in class, and I used the techniques outlined above in order to move away from a documentary film and into an ethnographic life history film. I found that the combination of these techniques was the best way to present my film.

Susan Kelly was kind enough to not only allow me to film her teaching, but to ask her personal and complicated questions that delved deep into her experiences in the equestrian world throughout her life. According to Susan, gender issues within the sport have not been the defining factor of her career, her skill on and around her horses have been. Yet, when looking at the many hours of research I had compiled, it said she, and all other female riders, should be and are defined by their gender within the sport. In fact, I was able to split my research nearly into two different categories; the outsider and the insider. I ended up finding the outsider, or society and the media, are the most likely result for the continuation of gender biases for equestrians attempting to reach the highest levels, while equestrians (insiders) at all levels usually view themselves as nothing other than a rider and judge each other solely on skill. By using the combination of my film and my research to answer my original question regarding the existence of gender issues in the most gender-inclusive sport in the world, I found a paradox unknown and unexpected to me: the existence of a sport that nearly entirely lacks a gender division at the individual and community level, but continues to be plagued by the ideal male and female role placed by society.