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The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of women who play rugby as articulated by the women themselves. 14 women took part in three focus groups to discuss their experiences in rugby and the meanings they attributed to them. The ways in which women are affected by participating, and how rugby and sport are changed through these women's participation is also addressed. Emergent themes which developed from the focus groups include: Rugby is Inclusive, Rugby is Fun, Rugby is Community, Rugby is Empowering, Tactics for Social Change, New Visions of Sport and Claiming Feminist Identities.

The concepts of binaries and bridging are introduced to illustrate overriding phenomena. Binaries work to maintain ideologies, while the meaning of bridging has multiple meanings, most importantly is describes how the women playing rugby are bridging several sport settings. The themes and phenomena are discussed and supported through the words of the participants.

BINARIES AND BRIDGING: A FEMINIST
ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S RUGBY
PARTICIPATION

by

Jeanine E. Scrogum

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Approved by

Committee Chair

To Guilford Womyn's Rugby who provided a space in which to critically examine sport,
and to my mother and grandmother for their unconditional support.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the
Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sport is pervasive in U.S. society. It is a cultural practice, a social context where ideological struggles are played out. As a cultural practice it is a location where the values of society are reproduced (Coakley, 2001). At the same time, sport can also be a site where these values are challenged (Hall, 1996). For example, masculinities and femininities are both upheld and questioned when women enter sport, an arena previously considered the domain of males. Because sport is gendered, there are cultural beliefs associated with men and women who participate in sports. The gendering of sports leads certain sports to be strongly linked to masculinities or femininities. For example, contact, team sports such as football and rugby are closely associated with masculinity while figure skating and gymnastics are viewed as feminine. Social pressures work to maintain these divisions and crossing these lines often can result in repercussions. Challenging gender roles can also lead to social change and be a sign of feminist activity. This work seeks to explore sport as a cultural practice, specifically the ways in which women playing rugby and their sport work to challenge and reproduce prevailing visions of sport.

Sport is traditionally viewed as a male preserve where masculinity is defined and developed (Cahn,1994). It is where boys learn what it is to be a man and have the opportunity to practice this; masculinity is performed. Not only is masculinity defined,

but more importantly clear lines are drawn to clarify what is not masculinity.

Masculinity and sport are closely tied to men and women are outside of this, therefore marginalized. Sport works to construct and reconstruct male hegemony (Bryson, 1994; Hall, 1996).

Given that sport has been so strongly associated with boys and men, by participating in sport women challenge what is masculinity. Social and legal exclusion has worked to keep females from participating in sport and when they have participated, their achievements and activities have been neglected and devalued (Koivula, 1999). Because sport is gendered in this way, the measuring stick against which all sports are measured is the experiences of men. When females participate their activities are viewed as different from and inferior to male sporting activities. Females are viewed as less strong, less powerful and less aggressive than males and therefore their sports are also inferior. It is assumed that they are not as capable of performing the same feats or providing intense action defining their games are slow, boring, less exciting and less important (Koivula, 1999).

As stated previously, sport plays a central role in society and holds a great deal of value and this is linked to the importance of masculinity. Masculinity is therefore tied to prized skills and values while females are excluded from this treasured site. Gendered understandings of capabilities in sport go far beyond the walls of sporting arenas; they also relate to views of gender outside of sport. This all appears natural and innate because of the gendered views of society. In addition, sport most often is controlled by men and interpreted through male eyes through such roles as commentators, sports

journalist and administrators. Sport has been co-opted by males. Women have been socially excluded from sports. Women compete on unequal terms and receive unequal recognition. Women's accomplishments are ignored and trivialized (Bryson, 1987). Females are forced to play by rules and circumstances created without their input (Hall, 1996). The ways in which gender is constructed in sport contributes to sexism and the degradation of women participating in sports.

Social controls are used to manage the actions and behaviors of women involved in sports (Griffin, 1998). Female athletes are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization because athletics are so strongly associated with strength, power and masculinity. There is a contradiction between what it is to be feminine and what it is to be an athlete because sport is so strongly affiliated with masculinity. The femininity of females who participate is questioned and they run the risk of being portrayed as unfeminine and therefore lesbian or butch. This is even more obvious and problematic when females participate in contact sports. Included in this control is the underlying belief of the need to hide any hint of lesbianism or any behavior that is outside of femininity. Both the behaviors and the appearances of women participating in sport are critiqued and often managed through social pressures such as media coverage. The pressure to maintain what is socially acceptable and attractive while hiding signs of homosexuality or any behavior outside of femininity becomes increasingly important (Griffin, 1998). Women are forced into one of two boxes, either they are feminine or they are not. Wright and Clarke found that women playing rugby were forced into femininity and the media used hegemonic versions of heterosexual femininity to describe them. Heterosexuality is naturalized and normalized

and prescribed gender roles are maintained. To preserve traditional roles constant surveillance of these athletes and their sexuality is required. Heterosexuality becomes compulsory through social and sexual control. It is defined in terms of opposition; it is that which is not homosexual and vice versa (Griffin, 1998; Hall, 1996).

Sport is a cultural practice which is most fitting with hegemonic masculine identities (Bryson, 1994), and rugby has been described as a sport setting which most closely resembles misogyny (Pringle, 2001; Schacht, 1996). Within the culture of rugby, violence and physical domination is centralized and even occurs through physical and verbal abuse by teammates and coaches (Pringle, 2001; Schacht, 1996). Women and those men not viewed as physically competent are devalued and degraded. This is consistently seen within the sport and the social setting off the field. The action which occurs on the field can be violent and provides ample opportunity for injury because it is a full contact sport. The violence has been described as leading to physical abuse which is legitimated and in a sense required (Schacht, 1996). As Schacht (1996) describes violence is not only part of the actual game, it permeates every aspect of the entire culture. An example of this is apparent during practice when coaches use violence and the threat of violence to maintain a hierarchy. It is also seen during the socials that occur after the game. Here verbal and at times physical abuse occurs and this also works to maintain a hierarchy of power. Sports are very much tied to masculinity, and rugby is one of the most glaring examples of this. It is these same behaviors that are used to define what is masculine and what is not masculine.

However, rugby is not simply a sight of misogyny or the reproduction of hierarchies and social ideologies. Certain characteristics also lead rugby to be a prime location for potential challenges to these ideologies. The sport is outside of the establishment of professional and commodified sports. In contrast to coach centered and professional sports, rugby is run by the athletes; they schedule games, raise money for equipment, and the athletes often do the work of a coach as well. Within the United States rugby is an amateur sport, therefore those who wish to play, must pay out of their own pocket. Rugby is also unique in that the social aspect both and on the field is of the utmost importance to the athletes. Because of these factors the athletes themselves have a great deal of control in creating the culture in which they participate, and the atmosphere created is often centered on camaraderie and the needs of those participating not just sport as usual.

Although there is potential for social change within sport it has generally been taken for granted to be hegemonic and antifeminist, and because of this, feminist perspectives have been underused in the realm of sport (Bennett et al. 1987; Hall, 1996). In addition, research in the area of sport has strongly focused on the experiences of males or worked to fit women's experiences into the prevailing model (Hall, 1996). Generally feminist scholars have viewed sport as unimportant to the "real" struggles of feminism (Hall, 1996); yet the presence of women athletes disrupts what Coakley (2001) calls "gender logic" (p224). In the words of Birrell and Theberge (1994) women's presence highlights a "leaky hegemony". Women's involvement in the sport of rugby may represent the most persistent leak yet.

As the number of women involved in rugby and other contact sports continues to rise, so do the questions about the reasons women participate and the need to gain an understanding of their experiences. Although the participation rates of females have increased, there is still a lack of information with regard to how women experience sport (Hall, 1996). Traditionally, sport works to reproduce relationships of power and dominance (Bennett, Whitaker, Smith, & Sablove, 1987). Women's involvement in sport does not necessarily signify a challenge to these relationships, but the inclusion of women into this cultural practice at the very least requires a reevaluation of the practice and its meaning.

Women's rugby is a worthwhile site of study because of the potential for disrupting this gender logic, and at the same time it is a sport rich in oppressive traditions and actions. Rugby has a history entrenched with misogynistic principles. The women playing rugby certainly do not passively accept misogyny, but neither is there a strong sense that the women purposively challenge any ideologies. The women playing rugby are a diverse collection of athletes and even some self described non-athletes. The majority of women playing rugby in the United States are college aged or older, although there are a growing number of youth and high school teams. They become involved for many reasons including the chance to continue elite physical competition and the chance to meet and enjoy the company of new friends. The teams that they play on range from a small group of 10 women just starting to develop a team to a large assembly of 50 with the intention of competing at the highest level and a vast team history stretching more than 25 years. Teams are spread throughout the country, although they are clustered in

large cities and college towns and are more heavily located on the east and west coasts. Women's rugby offers a unique research setting because of this diversity, but at the same time there is an understanding that rugby provides an immediate connection for those involved. Rugby is a sport setting that on the surface appears to be fraught with oppressive incidences, but is a paradox because of the potential for resistant actions. Employing feminist methodologies to investigate this environment sets the stage for uncovering how these women experience this sport setting. It is the foundation of this work that sport has the potential to create social change as well as reinforce the social order.

Rationale

There is little academic work focusing on the experiences of women playing contact sports. This project attempts to address this void in literature. The experiences of women who play rugby have been explored and are examined through feminist eyes with the intention of uncovering ways in which sport can be empowering. Sport settings have the potential to both reproduce and resist ideologies; here this paradox is discussed as are experiences of the women playing rugby. Insight into how the participants interpret these experiences and how they live this cultural practice is developed through this work. In addition, a deeper understanding of sport as a cultural practice and the meanings attributed to it will be revealed.

Research Questions

Through personal experience and a review of literature the following overriding research question was developed:

What are the experiences of women in the specific sporting environment of women's rugby?

This central question also includes the sub-questions of:

Are women changed through participating in rugby?

How do women change rugby to fit their preferences for a sporting environment?

Do the women playing rugby interpret their participation as feminist or leading to new structures of sport?

Reflexivity Statement

Feminist methodology requires that research begin with the researcher confronting their biases and acknowledging the experiences and beliefs which brought them to the research (Hoff, 1998). As a researcher it is necessary to uncover and discover these pre-existing ideas. This helps ensure that the voices of the participants are not just supporting my personal beliefs, but are speaking for themselves. This section describes how this project has been shaped by my experiences.

I am a part of the experiences of the participants; I have played with or coached many of the participants. Rugby is also my experience and a central facet of my life. Therefore, it would be impossible to separate myself from these women's experiences. To even attempt to be objective or unbiased would create a loss of understanding and knowledge. This research has been shaped by my experiences as an athlete, coach and administrator in rugby and this has led to a unique perspective and a deep connection with the sport. I have invested a great deal of time, energy and money in rugby and I am

deeply committed to the sport. I am invested in the sport of rugby, but also willing to critique it with the intention of enhancing the understanding and meanings attributed to rugby by the women involved.

Most recently my knowledge and experience of rugby was expanded due to coaching a collegiate team while attending graduate school. Prior to this experience I assumed that competition and winning were as important to all athletes as they were to me. Through coaching I was given a supportive environment in which to explore other meanings for sport, specifically rugby. I began to focus on the potential for personal development and enjoyment of all the participants. I also developed a sense of personal responsibility for the women I was coaching and wanted only the most positive and rewarding experience for them. Coaching stretched my vision of sport and rugby. This experience and exposure to scholarly work which supported these ideas and challenged me to think more critically about sport and rugby has led to an expanded understanding of what rugby can be. This project has been directly based on all of these experiences, and because of these experiences I am willing to critique rugby in hopes of improving it. This work is based on the assumption that sport can be a positive and empowering experience especially for women.

As a child I did not see myself as an athlete, in part due to the lack of opportunities for girls to play organized sports in the 1980's. Opportunities for competitive sports grew and by high school I was playing on organized teams. But it was not until college that I truly identified as an athlete. That is when I realized how much I enjoyed competitive sports and that I missed them, which is what led me to start playing

rugby. It has become much more than a game or a hobby; it is a significant part of my life.

The initial attraction to the game was the physical contact, but this was not the only reason I continued my involvement. Through rugby I gained a new set of friends, and a sense of community. I also developed a new sense of confidence, a feeling of power and physical ability unlike what I knew from other sports, and I found a place where I felt like I could truly be myself. These personal experiences in rugby have been reaffirmed through observation and discussion with other rugby players. This is not to imply that every moment in rugby has been positive or that sport is always a positive experience which consistently meets the needs of everyone. It is, however, my belief that athletes have the potential to transform sport into an institution that more closely fits this vision. This work explores the specific experiences of the participants and how they have taken part in creating their own sporting environment, and it is expressed through my own analytic lens.

Scope of Study

Due to travel constraints all participants in this study were from teams located near the researcher. The participants were women who were currently playing rugby and had played for at least one year, allowing for adequate experience from which to draw. All were over the age of 18 and played on collegiate or adult, club teams. There is limited diversity among participants in regards to race/ethnicity, which represents the lack of diversity in rugby as a whole. Similarly nearly all the participants were college-

educated. Broad (2001) found similar characteristics in her work with women playing rugby.

Women's rugby teams vary by the number of athletes, skill and experience level, team goals, resources and the diversity of the individuals on the team. However, due to time and financial restrictions it is assumed that not all of these circumstances are adequately represented. Focus groups were used for this work and each focus group was essentially a sample from a larger team population. This is not to say that all the participants had the same views or that this is a case study of particular teams, but because the participants in each focus group were part of the same team, they had experienced rugby together and attributed similar meanings to it. In addition, the researcher has been involved with each of the teams, and therefore there is a knowledge of the team, its history and culture which is known by the entire focus group including the researcher.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In order to inform new understandings of women's participation in contact sports three areas of literature are reviewed in this chapter. The first section, Sport and Society, explores the socio-historical meaning of sport in the United States, specifically rugby and the history and ideologies of women's involvement in sports. The second segment, Effects of Sport Participation, reviews the investigation of the outcomes for individuals due to sports involvement. The final section, Feminisms and Sport, describes feminist methodologies and scholarship, and their application and absence from sport and the resulting transformations of sporting environments.

Sport in Society

Sport is ever present; it is interwoven throughout all aspects of American society. One can not turn on the television or read a newspaper without encountering it. It touches the lives of everyone within the United States in some way. It is also intricately connected to other cultural institutions such as education and religion and has meanings beyond the scores and highlights it is also a cultural practice (Coakley, 2001). Sport is one of the most popular cultural practices in American society (Sage, 1998). It is more than just fun and games; there is also a subtext with significance beyond the final score. It is a location in which people develop connections and rivalries, it is where identities are developed, and where people become part of something larger. Sports, and its'

participants and spectators do not exist in a vacuum; the meanings change from time and place. It is because of these varied meanings that it is important to understand the contexts in which this project took place, specifically the sport and culture of rugby and a more general depiction of the ideologies which work to gender sport.

Rugby

To have a more complete picture of the setting of this research and the participants it is imperative to understand the particular sport setting of rugby in the United States. Both the game itself and the culture surrounding it are integral to understanding this work. To most rugby players, rugby is much more than a hobby; it is large part of their identity, it is not just a weekend activity a great deal of time, energy and money are invested (Broad, 2001). This is a key factor in the uniqueness of rugby as a sport setting.

Rugby Culture

On the surface rugby appears to be very much aligned with the ideologies of masculinity and sport (Kane & Snyder, 1989). It is a full contact sport with very little padding or protection for the body. Rugby is a collision sport which is physically and mentally exhausting. The exhibition of strength and power are essential. The body is required to be active and act on other bodies. In the sporting world, rugby is considered an exemplary instance of masculine practices. Masculinity is entrenched in the interactions and rituals both during the game and after at the social functions (Schacht, 1996). Schacht (1996), states that while men create and reinforce these images of masculinity, they at the same time construct contrasting, misogynistic images of

femininity. The evidence for this is layered within the sport and the social atmosphere that surrounds it.

Pringle (2001) describes rugby as a place where violence and aggression are not only accepted but prized. This violence and domination take many forms both on and off the field. Schacht (1996) found that coaches of men's teams used physical and verbal violence to maintain their position of authority. Schacht (2001) described the potential for violence within a team as ever present. The verbal assaults often took the form of degrading athletes to the position of female. The team culture reinforced the elevated status of masculinity and set up a hierarchy with the most experienced and physically capable at top, then less experienced and skilled players, and finally women at the bottom. Sexist and homophobic remarks were regularly used during practice and games to define what is and is not acceptable in terms of proper masculinity.

Within rugby the ability to give and receive pain is central (Schacht, 2001). Not only is rugby a contact sport but rigid protection like that worn in football or hockey is not allowed. Therefore there is a high potential for injury and pain. Playing with injury is expected and players are mocked for complaining about injuries. Coercion is employed to teach new players that it is unacceptable to leave games due to injury. The pressure to continue to play with injury increases with the importance of the game or when one's status on the team is uncertain (Howe, 2001). Scars and injuries from games are viewed as medals of honor. This ability to continue playing regardless of pain or injury is a central aspect of masculinity within the rugby community.

The culture surrounding the game is also misogynistic (Schacht, 1996). The most blatant example of the degradation of women occurs during the socials when songs are sung and the women present are expected to passively stand by and even take part in their own degradation. These songs often describe physical and sexual violence toward women. Schacht (2001) sees this as reinforcing the importance of not appearing injured. To do this would place them on the same level as those who are the victims in the song. Additionally, men may single out a female at the social and chant “show your tits.” The woman often complies due to coercion and the potential for physical harm. These examples highlight the ways men not only distance themselves from the feminine but prove their superiority in the process. Chandler (1999, p. 54) clearly identifies the problematic nature of rugby:

In the case of American rugby and particularly college rugby, we have a situation in which a male bonding activity (sport) noted for its sexist, racist, and homophobic discourse is supplemented by the effects of alcohol which have been identified as providing release from and/ or resistance to the confines of one’s social and cultural constraints.

Although women entering the sporting world of rugby may on the surface appear to be in direct challenge to a misogynistic culture, this can not be taken for granted. There are some distinguishing features that appear in women’s rugby that need to be understood in order to have a more clear picture of this sport setting. Broad (2001), found that women’s rugby was not diverse in terms of the race and ethnicity of the participants. A large majority of the women were White. The culture surrounding women’s rugby may be conducive to the resistance of sport ideologies in other key

aspects. Within women's rugby there is often a great diversity in regard to sexual orientation. For female rugby players there is not only an acceptance but frequently a celebration of this diversity (Broad, 2001). While most other sports value a specific body, in rugby there is not one ideal body. Rugby is a place for all body types. The women playing also have a great deal of control in creating a sporting environment that fits their needs. The teams are almost entirely self ran and have little outside intrusion. Teamwork is essential to rugby; it is a game where one can not move the ball, let alone score, without team support. All of these factors create a sport setting which can evolve to meet the needs of its participants. This is not to assume that only resistant practices occur in rugby, as stated previously it is not that simple. There are both acts of resistance and compliance within women's rugby. These acts and their meanings also change across teams and athletes.

Rugby History

Rugby throughout the world is known as a game for gentlemen (White & Vagi, 1990). It originated with boys in elite schools in Great Britain. The history of rugby in the United States has taken a similar path. It was first played in an organized fashion at the Ivy League schools of the East Coast. It grew in popularity and was promoted as a worthy alternative to the violence and commercialization of football. It was the West Coast schools of Berkley and Stanford that vehemently pushed for the maintenance of rugby as a nonvarsity sport (Chandler, 1999).

Rugby saw a large growth during the 1960's and early 70's at the time of a great deal of civil unrest on college campuses; a time when patriarchy and other cultural

sanctions were being questioned. Rugby became a place of refuge for young men. It was a place where the understandings of gender had not changed (Chandler, 1999). As a nonvarsity sport it was made “other” in sporting culture because it was not part of the establishment. It was a place of resistance because it defied the strict control of the coach centered, public image machine that characterizes collegiate sports. The students controlled the culture because it was student run. Chandler (1999) argues that rugby is a counter culture; it is an un-American sport and a way to “unidentify” with the ideologies of sport in America.

In other countries rugby has become a national past-time. It is deeply embedded in the culture of countries such as New Zealand and Australia. In the United States, rugby has been marginalized to the status of “other” (Chandler, 1999). This positioning has allowed a sense of ownership and control due to the fact that it is participant run. Therefore rugby culture is a site where resistance to dominant sport ideologies is acceptable. There is also a deviant status associated with the game because of the extreme amount of physical contact and reputation of wild parties and drinking that go along with it (Chandler, 1999).

Rugby in the United States

Rugby in the United States has unique organizational structures. USA Rugby, the national governing body, uses the term “club” to describe teams which are not affiliated with a college. These teams tend to have older participants who work full time and often played rugby in college and have chosen to continue playing. On college campuses rugby is described as a club sport. Here the descriptor “club” is used to distinguish

between varsity, club and intramural sports. Rugby is almost exclusively a club level sport at universities in the United States. As a club sport there is much less support and resources made available to the teams compared to varsity sports. The athletes do not receive scholarships from the school for their participation. Most programs receive very little funding. Travel and equipment costs are almost entirely covered out of pocket by the athletes or through fundraising endeavors which require a great deal of time and planning. Even those individuals who develop to the elite echelon and play at the national and international levels still receive only limited funding from their local territorial unions and the national governing body (USA Rugby). Club sports receive much less in terms of funding and other types of support, but like varsity sports, club sports also travel to other schools for games and hold organized practices. There is a time commitment which is much greater than intramural sports. Yet club sport participants are not bound to continue their involvement because of scholarship as they are in varsity sports.

USA Rugby categorizes women's rugby teams as either club, collegiate or youth. They are also divided into two divisions, Division I and II. Within the rugby community teams are also unofficially grouped into as either competitive or social. Teams may chose to enroll as Division I or II, but this is also dependant on the existence of enough teams in the surrounding area to support two divisions. Generally the division represents a team's confidence in their ability to compete successfully with other teams. Larger teams with more support and a history of winning tend to be classified as Division I. While those teams that describe themselves as social, are newly formed, have limited

numbers or lack administrative structure are more likely to describe themselves as Division II.

Although it is an unofficial classification within the rugby community teams are labeled as social or competitive. Social teams are those that do not necessarily always prioritize winning. It is not that the athletes are indifferent to winning but value other aspects of the team over winning. An example of this would be selecting those who have shown the most commitment to the team to start games as opposed selecting based purely on skill. Competitive teams tend to prioritize winning and aim at performing at an elite level. They also usually require much more in terms of time and financial commitment.

There are three rugby seasons per year. Two seasons are devoted to 15's, which is the version of the game focused on during this project. During the summer, 7's is played and involves seven players per team instead of 15. The fall season is generally late August to mid November, while the spring season begins in late January and continues through May or June. The weekends throughout these seasons can include a single game with a nearby team or a cross country trip to a tournament where three or four games are played. It has also been described as outside of the establishment of the sports world this is in part due to the independence rugby teams in U.S. have. Because of this the individuals have a great deal of control in the creation and development of the teams. Rugby also has a distinct organizational structure which lends itself to creating an environment which can change and mirror the desires of the participants.

Sport as Gendered Cultural Practice

Although the image of the female athlete has changed dramatically over the last three decades there is still the perception that sport is a predominately male arena (Griffin, 1998). Sport is traditionally a masculine domain (Miller & Levy, 1996). The values created and reinforced are masculine. It is a place where masculine identity is created. The inclusion of female athletes disrupts the traditional understandings of gender and sport. Because men and their sports are the standard by which all sports are measured women and their sports receive much less attention (Hall, 1996). Women's experiences generally have been ignored. By and large when the experiences of women are studied their voices are not heard and the intentions of the research are often suspect. Their experiences are told from a male perspective. The views and experiences of men are used as a model. Women are expected to fit into this ready made mold. Through this method, women's voices and experiences are silenced.

Females' involvement in sport is inconsistent with an essentialist view of gender. Female athletes do not fit the established model and therefore negative stigmas are associated with women's sports (Bryson, 1994; Clasen, 2001; Willis, 1994). Women participating in sport do not fit the traditional model of femininity. When female athletes have been part of research it is often suggested that they are in some way deficient or develop negative characteristics due to participation. Specifically, sport sociologists have put forward the concept of the feminine apologetic and sport psychologists have set forth gender role conflict.

The feminine apologetic is said to exist because sports are viewed as unfeminine and not acceptable for real women; women therefore in some real way must apologize for their participation in sports. Through the feminine apologetic, female athletes make a point to accentuate their femininity, to prove that they are real women even though they play sports. Examples of this include wearing ribbons or otherwise accentuation attractiveness while playing sports (Griffin, 1998). Gender role conflict is said to occur because females are aware of the contradiction between playing sports and being female and have trouble making sense of this conflict (Miller & Levy, 1996). Neither of these concepts takes into account females' own perspectives. Little research has taken the perspective that these women might have an understanding about their own experiences that has not been fully explored or acknowledged.

In response to gender transgressions, female athletes and their sports have been marginalized and trivialized. For instance, media attention is directed at the appearance of the athletes and works to sexualize them. Females are believed to be weak, frail and not physically competent when compared to men (Coakley, 2001). Due to this their sports are seen as less important and meaningful. Men's sports are the standard to be compared to and when women do not measure up their accomplishments are belittled. When women participate in sports especially contact sports their femininity is called into question and they are described as not real women (Wright & Clarke, 1999) Sport is not just a game; it is also has the potential to define those involved (Hall, 1996). Sport works to socialize men into the role of masculinity. Women entering sport represent a

challenge to this ideology. If sport is a vehicle in which women can define their own identity and control their own body, male domination is brought into question.

The social ideologies related to sport and gender are intensified in sports such as rugby which are so strongly connected to masculinity. These sports center on power and strength and require movements traditionally reserved for males, specifically physical contact. When women participate in these sports their participation is belittled in two ways. First, women who do not fit the image of heterosexual feminine are portrayed as not “real” women they are manly, lesbian and butch (Carle & Nauright, 1999). Their accomplishments are not validated because they are not seen as women. Often women are also sexualized in the representation of their sports. Carle and Nauright (1999) found that women playing rugby in New Zealand and Australia were sexualized in media images which worked to trivialize their skills and sport.

Because gender is so embedded in sport a feminist perspective is employed to uncover a more complete picture of the experiences of women playing rugby. An initial step in this process it also to understand the socio-cultural and historical context in which women’s participation in sports take place. Sport has undergone great changes in the last thirty years. One of the most glaring changes has been the influx of females participating in organized sport. This has been largely due to the passage of Title IX¹ of the Education Amendments of 1972 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Title IX has given females

¹ Title IX of the Education Amendments states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U. S. Department of Education, 1997)

a legal foothold on which to demand equal opportunity within institutions receiving financial assistance from the federal government. Since the inception of Title IX the number of females participating in high school sports has increased eight-fold and there has been a four-fold increase in intercollegiate sport participation (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003). Although Title IX addresses all of an educational institution's programs, it is most often linked to sporting opportunities and inadequacies (Reith, 2004).

The 1960's and 70's began a new era for women in sports. During the 1970's the number of females participating in sports began to increase. According to Coakley (2001) this increase can be attributed to the women's movement, the fitness movement and equity legislation. Title IX was enacted with the aim of making educational institutions funded by the federal government more equitable. Sports programs are one of the 10 areas dealt with by Title IX. Since Title IX there has been an explosion in the number of females participating in school sponsored sports. For instance between the late 60's and early 80's there was a 500% increase in the number of high school girls participating in sports (Cahn, 1994).

Most important to this research, there has been a large increase in the number of females participating in contact sports inside and outside of schools. For example, according to the Women's Sports Foundation (2003) in 2001 there were 1,655 girls playing high school football and 3,023 girls wrestling on high school teams. As time has progressed, contact sports such as rugby, boxing and football have also seen a swell in the number of women participating for instance in 1995 the Golden Gloves sanctioned

women's boxing and since then more than 2000 women have registered as amateur boxers and more than 700 as professional boxers (Lawler, 2002). In 1999 the Women's Professional Football league was created and in the 2000-2001 season, eleven teams played (Lawler, 2002). A handful of other football leagues have also started. Women's rugby has also seen a large growth.

The 1980's saw women beginning to play rugby in large numbers (Carle & Nauright, 1999) and today there is at least one team in nearly every large city and many large universities. This is demonstrated in the increase in the number of teams in the United States over the past few years. In 2000 there were 88 women's adult club teams; and by 2004 this increased to 118. An even larger increase can be seen in the number of collegiate women's rugby teams. In 2000 there were 276 teams, and then by 2004 there were 333 teams. The most dramatic growth can be seen in the number of girls' youth teams; in 2000 there were 38 and by 2004 there were 126 teams. Within four years 175 new female rugby teams have started, this represents a 44% increase (Hagerty, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004).

These women are not only entering the sporting world they are participating in a sport that has been dominated by men for its entire history and is very much linked to masculine ideologies. These women have a unique vantage point from which to comment on sport. They are entrenched in a sport setting with traditions of misogynistic and oppressive activities, but they may also be challenging the meaning of these sports. There has been little opportunity for these women to describe for themselves their

experiences. With the large increase it is of value to understand how they view their sporting experiences.

Because sport is a gendered cultural practice it is important to understand it as that and employing a feminist perspective adds to this ability. This perspective has been largely ignored in research investigating sport and this work will serve to fill that gap and answer questions that could not be answered otherwise. In addition most of the work focusing on rugby has focused on men and their experiences. How women interpret rugby may be very different. It is not that women are unaware of the oppressive aspects of rugby but perhaps are working to create an environment that differs from this in some ways. Chandler (1999) finds it problematic to assume that rugby is only a form of resistance or compliance; it is more complex than that; “different motivations and different meanings could be brought by a range of teammates to the same field at the same time” (p. 57).

Women playing rugby can be viewed in itself as a form of resistance. The movements involved in the game are very different from the dominate form of femininity. The game requires athletes to physically act on others, to be powerful and strong. Women playing rugby disrupts heterosexual hegemony; women are doing what is supposed to be only available and possible by men. Women’s rugby challenges patriarchal ideology in sport (Wheatley, 1994). Through playing rugby women bring into question the belief that contact and collision sports are available and attractive only to males.

Effects of Sport Participation

There is a strong social assumption that sport provides positive experiences for participants. These benefits go far beyond improved physical health. Sports have become a vehicle in which individuals are encouraged to develop skills relevant beyond the field or court. Sports are believed to provide an opportunity for individuals to gain skills such as: confidence, leadership, teamwork, and discipline. Sports are understood to be an area where children gain character and learn valuable skills for later in life (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003).

The research on athletes, and the resulting knowledge, has typically been restricted to males. When females are involved, it often attempts to fit them into models or theories that have been developed with traditional gender roles in mind. Previous research has not adequately given women a voice in explaining the repercussions and benefits to participating in sports. To avoid the assimilation of females into a model that was not developed with them in mind, we need to ask them why they participate. Females may participate for their own reasons (Sherman, 2002). They may come to sport with their own motives and perceive effects that have not been fully discussed in the previous literature. By employing a feminist perspective, this will be more fully explored and this work addresses this.

There has been an increase in the amount of work investigating women's and girls' experiences in sports. This line of research focuses on the benefits sports provide for girls. Participation in sports can lead to an increase in self esteem (Richman & Shaffer, 2000), a more positive body image, an enhanced sense of competence, reduced

stress and depression as well as better grades and higher test scores (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003). According to Weiler (1998), girls who play sports are at a decreased risk of dropping out of school and unplanned pregnancy. They are also more likely to attain occupational success, academic achievement, and leadership positions (Giuliano, Popp, & Knight, 2000; Weiler, 2000). Physical activity has also been shown to lower the risk of obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis and other chronic diseases (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003). Sports provide many potential benefits to girls and have even been found to be empowering for women (Broad, 2001; Miller & Penz, 1991; Obel, 1996; Lang, 1998).

The research discussed, has tended to employ positivistic science, which assumes that there is a single, true conclusion to be made while feminist research is based on the assumption that conclusions are very much determined by the setting in which research takes place. Positivistic science is based on assumptions that may lead to erroneous conclusions. First, those who come to sport may come because of skills or interests which differ from those who do not choose to participate; it is often self selective. It is therefore difficult to conclude that sport participation itself leads to the above mentioned benefits. This type of research also assumes that all sporting experiences are the same and produce similar affects in the individuals. The participants come to sports with varying backgrounds and will view these experiences differently (Coakley, 2001). At the same time not all sporting experiences are alike.

This line of research has also focused almost solely on girls; it has neglected adult women's experiences. It is taken for granted that girls will "grow out" of playing sports

(Lawler, 2002). Women have not been given an opportunity to openly discuss what brings them to sport and why they choose to continue their participation beyond childhood. It would be of value to understand why females become involved in sport and what keeps them involved. How do they experience sports? What meanings do they attribute to their participation? This will lead to a more multifaceted understanding of sport.

Although there has been little research in the area of women's contact sports a handful of projects have sought to explore women's experiences in these sports using various approaches including interviews and ethnographic studies. Within this area of research the reasons given for participation by women can be generally grouped into the categories of: social benefits, health benefits, and enjoyment. Socialization may play a large role in determining if women play sports. It has been hypothesized that female athletes have been socialized differently from female non-athletes. They have learned to value sport. For them the contradiction between athlete and female is minimal (Giuliano, Popp, & Knight, 2000; Weiler, 2000). Weiss and Barbara (1995) found that over a 10 year period not only did the level of social encouragement from significant others increase for Division I volleyball and basketball players, but an increase was also found in the number of people giving it. Social psychology's, social learning and social role-social system paradigm place significant others as keys to socialization into sport. This is important considering the strength of gender ideology in society.

Giuliano, Popp and Knight (2000) reported that varsity athletes who had a great deal of support from numerous people were more likely to play with "masculine" toys or

in mixed gender or predominantly male play groups. In addition, encouragement from male and female peers increased the likelihood of playing team sports. Furthermore, many women involved in contact sports reported being introduced to the sport and encouraged to participate by friends or those involved in the sport (Halbert, 1997; Clearly, 2000). Lawler (2002) found that women most often came to contact sports through a friend. The key being that their interest in this type of activity was accepted.

Many women have reported the enjoyment of spending time with others as a positive outcome to their involvement. “Collective involvement” according to Young (1997, p. 300) is empowering to women in nontraditional sports such as rugby and martial arts. They enjoyed sharing the company of women with similar interests and goals; “playing a sport in a woman friendly environment was a major source of appeal” (Young, 1997 p. 300). A sense of community was found within these sports. The strength of this female bonding is so great that outsiders who oppose these athletes’ involvement lose credibility (Broad, 2001). It was also found that women thought that the other women involved in these sports would be an interesting group to know. The importance of camaraderie was discussed over and over again. For these women the camaraderie of the game is intricately tied to the intense physicality of the game. The physical nature of the game brings them closer together and binds them “as a team and as friends” (Lawler, 2002, p. 134).

At the most basic level sports are about the body. Common reasons given for females participating is the effects on their body and how they felt about it. Lowe (1998), found bodybuilders were often intrigued by bodybuilding because their body fit

the muscular image of bodybuilders. The women she interviewed were fascinated not only by their own muscles but those of other women as well. Often they had become discouraged from participating in other activities due to their muscularity. Lowe (1998), described a dancer that came to the realization that her legs were too large and muscular to reach professional status as a dancer, she then found bodybuilding which not only allowed muscle but required it. Although these women were working to transform their bodies and reach an ideal it was an ideal very different from that reinforced through traditional femininity. They were active in creating their own ideal not just accepting what society had presented them with (Shea, 2001). This is not to suggest that these women are beyond the effects of cultural forces prescribing how their body should look or that they should feel compelled to work to transform and control their bodies, but there is a sense of moving beyond the limited definition of female body. A football player interviewed by Lawler (2002) felt that women needed to find the sport that fit their body instead making their body fit a sport.

An improvement in health is also a common benefit reported by women involved in nontraditional sports. This includes both mental and physical health. The women involved in previous works often cited the desire to increase their physical health or get back into shape (Halbert, 1997; Lowe, 1998). When discussing her own reasons for becoming involved in Tae Kwon Do, Lawler (2002) referred to not wanting to have a heart attack and to get back in shape. Collegiate athletes, who were also involved in weight training, discussed the enjoyment of being strong. Interestingly, the stronger the women viewed themselves the more they trained. The intrinsic enjoyment of physical

strength was the key factor (Duff, 1999). When women who weight lift perceive even small changes in their body, it leads to positive feelings about their bodies. This feeling then flows into other parts of their life (Prevention, 1994). Kuga and Douctre (1994) found that female athletes perceived an increased physical well being from sports participation.

Increased levels of confidence and a more positive self image were commonly reported by women as key benefits from their participation in contact sports. Schulze (1990) found that women enjoyed bodybuilding because it improved their self-image and they could strive to be different from others, to be an individual. Similarly, Castelnovo and Guthrie (1992) found that women gained self-respect and had more healthful views of their bodies. Through research with a women's rugby team (Broad, 2001) found that, the women gained an increased level of confidence from participation. They were proud to be one of the few that can and do play rugby. When they wore their team attire they walked more confidently. Through this confidence the rugby players were less afraid in other aspects of their life. Wesley (2001) established that bodybuilders developed pride through the hard work. A development of leadership skills, a more positive self image, increased confidence and sportsmanship were benefits gained through participation. The longer females participated in sport the more likely they were to attribute a positive self image to sport (Kuga & Douctre, 1994). The women found success through physical exertion. Sport and physical activity are often cited as effective means in which to relieve stress. The women involved in contact sports do not differ in this aspect. In fact

it could be expected that the physical nature of the sport lends itself well to be a means of stress relief. Lawler (2002) found evidence of this echoed throughout her interviews.

Women involved in nontraditional sports reported sports as being an integral part of their life. They felt it was “natural” for them to participate in sports. Being involved in nontraditional sports was the next logical step in their sports career. During interviews, the bodybuilders in Lowe’s (1998) study described how they had always been athletic and found great enjoyment in athletic involvement. The women Halbert (1997) interviewed couldn’t resist becoming involved; they felt inspired as if they had to do it. They also reported the chance to compete, the adrenaline rush and the love of the sport as reasons to participate. Kuga and Douctre (1994) found that a heightened sense of competition was a key factor. According to Young (1997), the women who play nontraditional sports do so to go beyond what was previously thought physically possible. Sherman (2002) concluded that fun was the most important benefit.

The intense physicality of the game was an important factor in enjoyment of the sports. One woman interviewed by Lawler (2002) specifically stated that she enjoyed hitting people. The women interviewed also spoke of enjoying the feeling of toughness and the exhilarating sense of risk. They felt there was a strong connection between the physical contact and exhilaration” (p. 45). The level of physicality involved in these sports lead to very enjoyable experiences for the women involved.

Previous research on females in sport has focused on the potential ill effects caused by participating in an activity that transgresses social norms. The feminine apologetic and gender role conflict are examples of this type of research. The assumption

is that participation leads to negative repercussions. In contrast some recent works have taken a feminist perspective, and focused on the ways that involvement in contact sports is an empowering experience for women. Women participating in sports threaten the traditional views of masculinity and femininity. Sport may act as a place of struggle where gender can be resisted. In addition women gain confidence through learning new skills or seeing their body as strong and powerful, and being able to do things previously thought impossible. This confidence may influence other aspects of life. Indeed, women may gain a sense of empowerment (Broad, 2001; Chu, Leberman, Howe & Bachor, 2003)

Much of the work exploring the potential for empowerment through sport has focused on bodybuilding. Attention has been given to bodybuilding mainly because of the apparent contradiction in the sport. It both requires women to gain muscle, a very masculine characteristic and it also requires women to control their bodies and fit an ideal that has been set within feminine standards. There is a conception that the women should be muscular but still feminine. Moore (1997) found bodybuilding to be empowering because it allows women to construct their bodies on their terms. Shea (2001) interprets bodybuilding as a paradox. It is both empowering and reinforces traditional beliefs about women's bodies by restricting their choices. Bodybuilding obscures and clarifies the lines between femininity and masculinity. Bodybuilding is a threat to traditional norms. Through bodybuilding women take on characteristics typically viewed as masculine. Their bodies become strong, lean and muscular; they are refusing to fit into gender

categories and challenging social norms. It can both increase and decrease a woman's self esteem and it requires women to be both feminine and athlete.

As Lawler (2002) states women have been conditioned to fear and to submit on a daily basis, at the same time they live in a culture of violence. Through contact sports women learn how to defend themselves, in her words "to be their own hero" (p. xxv). They learn that they can be strong instead of frail and do not need constant protection. They no longer fear pain or injury and react with confidence instead of panic. Moreover Broad (2001), argues "women playing rugby do not apologize, but instead unabashedly transgress gender, thereby destabilizing the boundaries between women and men" (p. 188), "rugby players resisted and challenged beauty standards through their continued participation in the sport" (p. 189). Sport becomes a political tool; a way to transcend gender roles (Broad, 2001; Miller & Penz, 1991; Obel, 1996; Lang, 1998). Young (1997) finds that these athletes have found a way to weaken patriarchal constraints; and most importantly they embrace this deliberate defiance.

Sport has taken on the feminist motto of the "personal is political." Broad (2001) found that not only does rugby allow women to challenge gender roles but the construct of heteronormativity as well. They create a sex positive environment by changing the denigrating lyrics of songs from men's teams to one's that empower women. Instead they become about women's choice, control and power in sexuality. The subculture of women's rugby allows them to create their own culture (Wheatley, 1986). Through rugby a stronger sense of self is developed. They became more confident in all aspects of their lives due to their involvement. They felt empowered to move beyond socially

defined roles and create their own definition of what it means to be a woman (Broad, 2001).

Sport and Feminisms

This research purposefully employs a feminist approach. This is done with the intention of giving voice to the experiences of women who have been left out of previous work. Taking this approach requires a set of guidelines and assumptions that differ from traditional positivistic science. As with any research the soundness and value of the final outcome is dependant on the careful and systematic adherence to methodology. To maintain a feminist standpoint specific methodologies were used.

Traditional, positivistic science contends that there is a single truth to be found and this can be accomplished in part through the objectivity of the researcher (Hoff, 1988). Conversely, the feminist critique of traditional science contends that science can not be value free or neutral (Namenwirth, 1983). Because both the researcher and the science are molded by society (Du Bois, 1983), it is not possible to undergo research without biases. The questions asked and how they are answered is determined through the setting in which research occurs. According to Stanley and Wise, (1979) the researcher is an important and often unseen variable in research. The personal experiences of the researcher will affect not only what is researched but how the research occurs. Therefore the knowledge that is “found” through traditional science is only one perspective. Within feminist research it is assumed that there are multiple truths and the method used will determine what is found.

Positivistic science takes for granted men's experiences and makes them the standard (Gross, 1992). Feminist methodology, in comparison, places women's lived experiences at the center (Gross, 1992). For this to occur research must be relevant to the lives of the women involved. The research must reflect their voices; it must acknowledge and validate their experiences. The participants hold knowledge and must be heard through the research in a way that is meaningful to them. This calls for the socio-historical context in which women live to be understood in order to develop a clear and vivid picture of their lives. Women can not be separated from their environment (Flax, 1979). In addition, the social context in which women live must be viewed from their perspectives.

Creating an environment in which women feel empowered and at ease in discussing their lives requires a partnership between the researcher and the participants. The relationship in feminist research, however, is not free of power or dominance. The researcher does hold more power and can leave the relationship more freely (Armsted, 1995). Great care must be taken to provide an empowering environment in which the participants also gain from the research.

Specifically, this is accomplished through reciprocity, intersubjectivity and reflexivity. Reciprocity entails that all parties involved both gain and provide knowledge from the experience. Intersubjectivity involves the interaction of the participants and the researcher. They must be able to meet at a point where they have a shared experience. Reflexivity is the process in which the researcher reflects upon the experience and the

knowledge gained. These methods aid in the creation of a setting that allows the participants' experiences to be validated.

Reciprocity is essential to feminist research. There must be a give and take relationship between both parties. It is a collaborative process (Hoff, 1988). The researcher gains insights into the life of the participants while the participants have the opportunity to be heard. Within this project insights into the life of the participants were gained while the participants had an opportunity to be heard and to discuss their experiences with their peers. The methods employed must be empowering by acknowledging and validating the participant's own knowledge.

Reciprocity requires a common bond between the researcher and the participants. There must be an intersubjectivity, or a point in which the parties can come together. The participants and the researcher must have a shared experience and language. This differs from the relationship enforced by traditional science where the researcher takes information from the uninformed participant and makes sense of it. An intersubjectivity incorporates the knowledge of all contributors (Du Bios, 1983). The language and experience of rugby was the shared to provide an intersubjectivity within this project.

In feminist research reflexivity is also a key factor. Reflexivity is the reflection of the researcher's participation and the insights gained through it (Dyck, Lynam & Anderson, 1995). This contributes to the collaborative nature of feminist research. The research leads to benefits for all those involved. New insights and visions of individual experiences and society as a whole are generated.

As with all research, validity and reliability are important aspects of feminist research. Traditional science assumes an objectivity of the researcher is necessary to maintain validity and reliability. Feminist research assumes that true objectivity can not occur; however, other methods are employed to ensure a valid and reliable outcome. These can include: a consciousness of the biases and understandings which affect the research, member check and a detailed and rigorous description of the research process. All parties involved bring their own experiences and bias to research. Therefore, the researcher must be aware of her biases (Shields & Dervin, 1993). She must confront and voice her own biases prior to interactions with participants. The values brought to the research are made clear before contact (Hoff, 1988). This helps the researcher to be more open to the views of the participants.

Within feminist research validity occurs in part through a member check. Informants are given an opportunity not only to review the data but to make alterations, to make certain that it accurately portrays their experiences. The participants themselves validate the data. This also includes an opportunity for the participants to voice their agreement or denial of the conclusions of the researcher and this creates a collaborative relationship. Within this project reliability is determined by the extent to which the project has meanings to the participants and has been addressed through a member check. It should accurately reflect their experiences. Reliability is also determined through the process of research. Detailed descriptions and rigorous attention to detail are required (Armstead, 1995). It is of utmost importance to be clear in the ways information has been obtained.

There is a great responsibility involved in feminist research. When dealing with intimate aspects of human life great care must be taken to accurately represent the information. The participants are in a highly vulnerable situation and precision is necessary. Accuracy is important in order to maintain the open relationship between those involved. Through feminist research, the researcher is allowed into the lives of the participants and must take care not to exploit the relationship.

Just as women have been left out of the research focusing on sport, sport has been ignored within feminist research (Hall, 1996). According to Hall (1996) antifeminist ideologies and activities are deeply embedded in sport culture, and sport is a conservative institution highly resistant to feminism or any change. The physicality and potential empowerment through sport are seen as irrelevant to feminism. In fact, Hargraves (1994) found that sportswomen themselves often do not see a connection between their sport and the broader social context. It has also been found that females involved in contact sports have purposefully distanced themselves from the feminist label (Broad, 2001; Bachor, 2003; Young, 1997). Instead of being seen as a site of resistance sport becomes a location for reproduction of the dominant culture; one of violence and aggression.

Liberal feminism may see the value in women breaking down the barriers of sport, focusing on making sure that women find a place in the preset structure of sport. This however only situates women in a faulty system. In addition it only works to support the increased opportunities for only a limited number of women. Breaking these barriers does not necessarily constitute feminist activity, in fact women entering a male model of sport may work to reproduce and support hierarchical and oppressive

relationships (Bennett et al., 1987). Women's participation in sports, especially contact sports, are vehemently contested, trivialized and sexualized and their mere presence challenges what is masculinity and femininity (Wright & Clarke, 1999). Are these women then aspiring to be just like men or are they creating their own version of sport? Individually both of these views are limited. There is not a universal female experience of sport nor is there a black and white answer to the question "is women's rugby resistance or reproduction" (Broad, 2001).

Sports are more complex than merely a site of ideological reproduction, and women are not docile bodies that just accept prescribed roles. Sport can also be a place of resistance. Women themselves have described sport as empowering, as a means to create their own definitions of femininity (Miller & Penz, 1991). Although sport as an institution has been assumed to reinforce the dominant ideologies of hegemonic masculinity, there are instances of sport as a site of resistance to these same ideologies. There is a growing understanding that by employing feminist analyses sport can be reclaimed by women (Bennett, Whitaker, Smith, & Sablove, 1987). This transformation can occur both at the individual and institutional level. There are a number of projects that go beyond the researchers merely examining women in sport to ones where the participants themselves describe how they have altered sport to fit their beliefs.

Zipter (1988) describes softball as more than just an athletic endeavor for the lesbians involved in the many teams and leagues from which she collected information. She found that softball was a means in which lesbians could find each other and a community. It was a place in which to make connections. Softball was described as a

universal part of the lesbian experience where lesbians feel welcomed and included. This sentiment does portray the potential of sport to be a place where marginalized individuals can feel validated, supported and safe.

Many of the women stressed the importance of the social aspect of the game. They saw it as an environment where they could fit in and be themselves. Ultimately, it was a place of refuge and a place to meet other lesbians. The importance placed on the social ties developed is also supported by the value given to cooperation even in a competitive environment. Zipter (1988) states, “what begins as cooperation and teamwork on the field often evolves into off-field intimacy and support” (p. 75). The relationships formed were more important than winning and losing. The women found a way to combine competitiveness with caring. The athletes were playing to win but not at any cost.

Zipter (1988) found that not only did the women hold a perspective of sport which differs from the hegemonic masculine ideology of winning at all costs, they also described examples of changing sport to reflect their values and lives. For instance a participant described how an entire team came together at the beginning of the season to discuss the team philosophy and guidelines. The team as a whole also decided how positions and playing time were to be determined to make sure that the less skilled and less experienced athletes were not just forced into the outfield. Rules were created to ensure that a positive environment was produced. These rules included: the degradation of other teams not being tolerated, everyone received playing time and the acceptance of

asking for the pitches to be slowed down. In addition, when unevenly matched teams met if the teams agreed, the players were split up to make the teams more fair.

Theberge (1987) argues that a feminist analysis of sport requires that competition and in turn sport must be redefined. She asserts that competition is not about dominating others but instead encouraging and empowering others to strive for the development of new skills. Included in this work are examples of women changing the meaning of power in sport from strength and supremacy over others, to the development of a shared experience of support and teamwork. Although Theberge (1987) states that these secluded sporting environments only indirectly affect the larger social institution of sport, they do have a great affect on the individuals and groups that are involved. The hope for further institutional affects lies in the potential of sport to provide women the opportunity to employ creativity and find power in their bodies.

Through interviews and observations Birrell and Richter (1987) investigated how self-identified feminist shaped the softball teams they were involved in to become an alternative to the traditional male model of sport. Some of these women specifically sought out alternative forms of sport and some found that they agreed only after their initial participations. Often they took issue with institutionalized sport. Sport as traditionally defined, did not fit their needs so they created sporting environments to more closely resemble their feminist philosophies. The level of resistance of the individuals and teams varied from overt feminist actions and beliefs to a “feminist unconsciousness” (p397). Problems with sport were addressed and the women worked to rectify them within their teams. Winning was not the prime motive. People and their feelings were

considered more important. Through this sport setting the women were able to create their own culture. They defined the guidelines and acceptable behaviors.

Not only was it found that feminist beliefs can lead to a transformation of sport but sport was also found to be an arena in which women developed a feminist consciousness. The participants described the feminist softball teams as a place for physically and mentally strong women to come together. They found pleasure through the process of playing not on the outcome of winning. Not only are the ways in which women experience the traditional institution of sport described but also the ways women may celebrate feminist praxis through sport.

In summary, this work reflects the importance sport plays in society. It is a cultural practice and because of this the specific setting in which it takes place must be understood. Rugby is a unique sport setting, particularly in the United States. It is both a site of the reproduction of misogynistic and repressive ideologies and a setting with great potential for resistant behaviors. The sport setting in which women participate is a paradoxical site; if not critiqued the setting can work to maintain a subordinate status for women and their sports. However, women's sports have also been found to be empowering. Although a feminist perspective has been applied on only a limited basis to sport, when used it has been found that women have resisted repressive ideologies and worked to create their own sporting environment which more closely fits their desires.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Design

This study is both phenomenological and feminist in nature. The analysis of this project takes an interpretive approach and reads beyond what is literally said. These approaches were employed in order to explore how women in this project experience rugby. The goal is to uncover common threads that weave throughout the experiences of a diverse group of women; and to gain an in-depth understanding of these experiences. It is deliberate in its desire to foreground women's voices, and ways of knowing and is intended that this will also lead to an understanding of rugby as a cultural activity (van Manen, 1984; Hultgren, 1989).

As a feminist work the purpose, as bell hooks (2000) asserts, is to bring the knowledge of women from the margin to the center. Women's experiences in sport have largely been ignored or co-opted (Hall, 1996). To gain a clearer picture the women are asked to reflect on and describe their experiences. The information shared by the women in this project is interpreted through feminist eyes. This is done with the hopes of uncovering ways that these women create their own sporting environment and also to critique their involvement in a cultural practice that reinforces the dominant ideologies.

The analysis of the data goes beyond a literal reading; an interpretive approach was also used. Inferences were made to construct and interpret the meanings given to the

participants' experiences (Mason,2002). It is acknowledged that the researcher can not be separated from the research, and even a literal reading is shaped by interpretation; therefore an interpretive approach must be used. However, every effort has been made to allow the participants to speak for themselves and not ascribe any unintended meaning. In order to fully understand the experiences of these women within rugby, the setting is viewed as a cultural practice with the voices of the women central to the project and their words analyzed both literally and interpretively.

Overview of Study

Focus group interviews were used for this project and the interview guide for these focus groups (see Appendix A) was developed primarily from knowledge gained through ten years as a rugby player, coach and administrator. In addition, a review of literature clarified the concepts included in the interview guide. The interview guide also evolved throughout the focus groups themselves. The interview guide was initially tested in a pilot study which was completed as a separate project. The information gained from the pilot study and throughout the project further refined the interview guide. The data obtained from the pilot focus group was used only in the development of the interview guide and focus group procedures, and not in the findings of this project. The pilot study was integral in the development of the interview guide and the development of group interview facilitation skills. As the focus groups progressed, questions and ways of asking them which led to fruitful conversation were found. Not only did the interview guide evolve but the facilitation of the discussion improved as well. This project was a process that was continually developed.

Recruitment of Participants

The teams from which participants were recruited were selected based on three characteristics. Teams in which the researcher had previous ties were chosen in order to aid in the recruitment process. Teams were also selected based on their classifications as club or collegiate, their division and if they described themselves as social or competitive. This was done to gain a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Lastly, teams were chosen based on their location due to time and financial restraints.

Before an entire team was addressed, team leaders were asked for permission to recruit team members. This was done either through an informal email or a personal conversation. A brief review of the project and the recruitment email (see Appendix B) were also given to the team leaders at this time. All team leaders agreed that addressing the team was acceptable. The entire team was then emailed the recruitment email. This initial recruitment message included information about the research and a general time line for the procedures. In all cases there was a very limited response so the recruitment email was resent. Those who showed interest were reminded of the criteria and asked for convenient times and locations to meet. Participants were then contacted personally via telephone and email to finalize the time and location of the focus group. The focus groups all occurred in a home of either a participant or the researcher. These locations were chosen because they provided a comfortable, quiet area where confidentiality could be maintained and the participants could speak freely.

Participants and Team Profiles

Fourteen adult, women rugby athletes participated in a total of three focus group interviews. All participants were women who were currently playing rugby on a women's collegiate or adult club rugby team or were involved with their team but not playing due to injury. The women were at least 18 years old with at least one year of rugby playing experience. This ensured that they had an adequate level of experience from which to draw. Three focus groups took place which were initially to consist of five to eight participants, but this goal was not realized in all of the groups. Following are two tables providing a brief description of the focus groups and participants. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the teams from which the focus group participants were recruited. Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic information of the focus groups. The focus groups have been given pseudo-names to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Team Characteristics Summary

	<u>Collegiate</u>	<u>Club</u>
Division I		Midwestern Mustangs
Division II	Southern University	Atlantic City

Table 2

Focus Group Participant Summary

	<u>N</u>	<u>Average Age</u>	<u>Average Number of Seasons Played</u>	<u>Education or Work Status</u>	<u>Self Identified as Feminist</u>
Atlantic City	3	25.67	8.67	Predominately graduate students	1
Southern University	5	20.6	4.8	Predominately undergraduate students	2
Midwestern Mustangs	6	32.5	20.5	Predominately college graduates employed full time	2

Following are profiles of the teams from which the participants of this project are members. The profile information was taken from the demographic questionnaires, focus group discussions and also informed through the researcher’s own experiences with these teams. Each focus group consisted of women from a single team. Each team held a unique set of characteristics and this section provides a general description of the teams and associated focus group participants. As with any setting, the teams and the participants change over time, therefore these profiles are meant only as snapshots. In order to maintain confidentiality all team and individual names have been changed.

Atlantic City

Atlantic City is a club team with a focus group participant average age of 25.67 years and a range of 24 to 29 years old. This was the smallest of the three focus groups with three participants. The team itself has a wide range of experience levels and this is

observable through the demographic information obtained during this project. Of the women who took part in the focus group the average number of seasons played was 8.67 with a range of 4-12 seasons, therefore they have played for an average of four and a half years.

Since it is located in an area with an abundance of graduate schools, a majority of the team members of Atlantic City are graduate students or working in academia. One of the focus group participants held a graduate degree and the remaining two were working toward graduate degrees. Because so many of the athletes of Atlantic City are students they often do not remain in the area more than a few years. In part due to the transient status of many of these women Atlantic City struggles to maintain enough players for a full side. This is one reason leading to the Division II status of Atlantic City. On the whole, the players are very concerned with the development of their own personal skills and also in developing the team, but rugby is only one of many aspects of their lives. Other things often take priority.

Atlantic City's schedule involves approximately six weekends of games each season. Most often they are traveling one to three hours within the state or to neighboring states. They also attend one or two tournaments each season traveling approximately four to six hours and will play three to four games. It is also common to play a few home games during the season, usually with other Division II club teams and a few college teams. There is an abundance of women's rugby teams within just a few hours which allows the team members to play games regularly while committing only a day or afternoon.

Only a few of the women playing for Atlantic City identified as lesbian and all of those who participated in the focus group identified as heterosexual and European/Caucasian. When asked if they identified as feminist, two women in the Atlantic City focus group did not self-identify as a feminist while one did. When the participants were asked to define “feminism” each of the definitions given included the word “active” and seemed to be describing feminism as working toward social change in a visible way. For a complete listing of definitions see Appendix B.

Southern University

Southern University is a college team, and the participants are younger than the participants of the other focus groups. The average age of the five participants of the Southern University focus group was 20.6 with a range of 18-23 years. They were also the newest to rugby; on average they had played for 4.8 seasons with a range of 2-11 seasons. All were currently undergraduate students with the exception of one who recently completed a graduate degree at the same university. Only one participant was employed full-time.

As is a newly established team which has only been in existence for two years, Southern University is registered as a Division II team. There is a real desire to improve their standing within the area, but they also enjoy the social aspects of rugby. Their schedule is similar to Atlantic City’s in the length of the season and amount of travel. Southern University, however, plays mostly Division II college teams and the occasional club team and Division I collegiate team, usually the “B” side.

A majority of the women playing for Southern University identify as heterosexual. However, of the five focus group participants, two identified as lesbian. One participant identified as Hispanic/ Latina and one noted that she had a physical limitation that affected her participation. Two of the Southern University focus group participants identified as feminist. One participant left the definition section blank while the remaining four all centered on equality. All used “equal rights” in their definitions.

Midwestern Mustangs

The Midwestern Mustangs differ from the other teams involved in this project, and most women’s rugby teams, in a few ways. First, the Midwestern Mustangs are a nationally ranked Division I, club team and winning is a priority. In terms of skill and win/ loss record, the Midwestern Mustangs are considered one of the top 10 teams in the country. To maintain this status more is expected of these players in terms of time, energy and money. For instance the Midwestern Mustangs schedule requires them to play other nationally ranked teams and this requires a great deal of travel including multiple plane flights, and at least three road trips of seven or more hours each way as well as a few shorter road trips each season. Their season is also longer and often includes more than eight weekends of games. Because of the added costs of playing there is also a great deal of time spent performing administrative functions and fundraising when not playing. Each season there are approximately three major fundraising events which require at least 200 hours of work to execute. These are done to supplement the travel and other costs for the players.

This was the largest of the focus groups with six participants. All the participants were employed fulltime, with the exception of one fulltime student who also worked part-time. The participants were employed in a variety of settings including: mortgage banking, software development and legal research. The majority of the Midwestern Mustangs also hold a college degree. Three of the focus group participants have a four year degree, one holds a graduate degree and one is currently a full-time undergraduate student. On average this was also the oldest focus group with the most rugby experience. The average participant age was 32.5 years with a range of 25-45 years. The average number of seasons played was 20.5 with a range of 4-40 seasons of experience.

The team members of the Midwestern Mustangs are predominantly White. One focus group participant identified as Hispanic/ Latina and data was missing for one participant. In regards to sexual identification, three identified as lesbian, one as bisexual, one as heterosexual and one as other. This group was also diverse in views on feminism. Two participants self-identified as feminist, three did not, and one left the question blank. Their definitions of feminism varied greatly and included statements such as: “I don’t” (define feminism) and “uncertain of this label”. One definition seemed to imply a negative view of feminism, as positioning women hierarchically above men in terms of power. Another definition used the words “advocacy and political rights” to describe feminism, while a final participant found feminism to have many levels with equality as the focus, but at times going beyond equality working toward “an unfair advantage.”

Setting of Focus Groups

Rugby was selected as a setting for many reasons. First, the researcher has an explicit interest in the specific context of women's rugby. Secondly, due to the fact that there are a small number of women involved in contact sports, it was imperative to select a sport in which the researcher had previous contacts to aid in the recruitment. Thirdly, as Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) state, it is important for the researcher and the informants to have a shared knowledge, a point at which to connect to facilitate the development of data. The researcher's history within rugby and ability to communicate in a shared language was a key aspect not only in the recruitment of the participants but also in facilitation of the focus groups.

Specifically women's rugby was chosen because of the interests of the researcher and because it is an area that has been neglected. Contact sports that are played by men have been explored to a much greater extent. In particular, club and collegiate women's rugby was selected for three reasons. First, that is where the knowledge of the researcher lies, allowing for clear communication. Secondly, within the United States only club and collegiate rugby allow for participants who are old enough to participate without parental consent. In addition, it would be expected that aspects high school and youth rugby, especially the socials after the games, are quite different. North Carolina was chosen as a site because there is an abundance of women's rugby teams within North Carolina, and therefore, it was a convenient sample. Two of the focus groups took place in North Carolina, and one took place in Missouri.

Focus Group Procedures and Protocol

Three semi-structured focus group interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes were facilitated, all taking place in the home of the researcher or a participant. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and consisted of 3-6 participants. All focus groups were audio-taped with two tape recorders. When not being used, all materials were kept in a locked cabinet. The focus groups began with a reading of the consent form (see Appendix C). Once the consent forms were signed, returned and placed in an envelope the participants were given time to eat and socialize. The demographic surveys (see Appendix D) were then distributed and filled out by the participants. In addition to demographic information the survey also contained questions related to the sporting and physical activity history of the participants and their views of feminism.

Once the demographic surveys were completed, returned and placed in an envelope, a brief introduction and review of the guidelines was read by the researcher. Additional time was then given for participants to ask questions and to clarify the procedure. This introduction is documented at the beginning of the interview guide (see Appendix B). Following the clarification of the procedures, a preliminary question pertaining to how the participants were introduced to rugby was asked. The participants were asked to describe what brought them to rugby and other reasons they thought women had for coming to rugby. This question was designed to act as an ice breaker but it also provided a good base from which to ask further questions.

The questions asked were taken directly from the interview guide although the order varied. These sections included one focusing on motivation for participating, the

second on what rugby has meant to the women, and the third section attempting to explore rugby as a cultural practice. As the research progressed, minor changes were made to the interview guide and the facilitation of the focus groups, such as the way questions were asked but the overall meaning remained. At the conclusion of each focus group, the researcher reviewed the main points of the discussion and asked for verification. Participants were also reminded that their identity would remain confidential and they were given an opportunity for further questions or clarifications. Finally, the participants were thanked for their time and for sharing their experiences.

Data Analysis

Following a feminist, interpretive framework the analyses of the data generated in the focus groups was an ongoing process. It began with the first focus group and continued through the expression of the central phenomena. The systematic process of data review included the following steps: note taking, transcription, reading of the transcription, development of individual focus group themes, member check, theme development for the entire data set and development of the central phenomena. While these analyses are certainly informed by previous, related, scholarly work, it is integral to this interpretive design that the transcripts be read for their unique content prior to making assertions about their fit with the previous literature.

The data analysis began during the focus group. General impressions and overriding themes were noted both during the focus groups and immediately following. Notes were also taken to capture meaningful statements, points to follow up, and to clarify who was speaking. The researcher's notes and those of the note taker were

reviewed following the focus groups. The audiotape of each focus group was also reviewed soon after recording occurred and notes were once again taken. These procedures allowed not only for initial impressions of themes but also further development of facilitation skills and the interview guide.

The audiotape recordings were then transcribed. In the transcription words such as “umm”, “like”, “ya’ know” were left out, as were parts of the discussion that drifted to conversation not related to the research. An example of this is discussion focused on where next weekend’s game was going to take place. Other than these instances the transcription was verbatim. Once transcribed, the focus group was read in its entirety multiple times, and notes were taken on potential themes and meaningful statements were underlined. If possible, data were reduced and noted in the margins. Relevant data were determined through three guiding principles. First, if the statement or a portion of it seemed to directly and specifically answer the research question or a question from the interview guide. Secondly, if it was well articulated and described a particular experience of rugby. Thirdly, if the statement seemed to allow for an interpretation beyond what was specifically stated; it described rugby as a cultural practice. The transcription was reviewed until the researcher was satisfied that all the relevant pieces of data had been underlined. Each focus group was read independently and data were placed into categories. These categories began as separate Word Documents where pieces of data were “cut and pasted” into the coordinating document/category. After multiple revisions of data placement the categories emerged into themes.

The themes for each individual focus group were continually revised and edited until there were five to eight categories and all of the significant points were included in a meaningful language. The themes were then defined and described. This document and the transcriptions were then emailed to the participants for review and they were asked to provide as much feedback as possible. The instructions in the follow-up email also stated that if no feedback was returned by a specific date then it would be assumed that they found the themes acceptable. This member check provided an opportunity to learn if the participants found the themes meaningful and accepted them as relevant to their experiences.

Each focus group was initially analyzed separately. Following the uncovering of emergent themes and verification by the participants, the themes from all focus groups were compared. A cross-case analysis (Mason, 1998) took place to identify patterns of divergence or convergence across the themes of all of the focus groups. All themes were cut out into individual pieces of paper and then grouped into broader themes. These themes transformed numerous times before the final conclusions were made.

To further clarify these overall themes short paragraphs were then written to describe and define them. Once this was complete the transcriptions were reread to confirm that the overall themes fit the entire data set. Meaningful, relevant and well stated quotes were then found to exemplify these overall themes. Finally, the overall themes, the themes of the individual focus groups and the transcriptions were reviewed once again in order to develop a central phenomenon. The purpose was to articulate a

central phenomenon that told a story and tied all of the information together. This central phenomenon was revised, reduced and restated many times before it was finalized.

Collaboration of Data

Feminist methodologies assert that research can not be value free or unbiased (Namenwirth, 1983). It does however need to accurately reflect the experiences of the participants. Within this project specific strategies were implemented to assure that this occurred and this began even before the data collection. The researcher must be aware of her biases prior to contact (Hoff, 1988); these biases were previously addressed in this chapter. Additional strategies include the use of a participatory model for the focus groups, a member check regarding the individual focus groups themes, a conscious effort to maintain the centrality of the participants' voices and experiences throughout the project and a detailed description of the research process.

The collection of accurate data depends on the environment in which it is collected. A participatory model was employed during this project with the intent of creating a cooperative relationship and overcoming the division between the researcher and the researched (Cotterill, 1992). Although the researcher may have more power and control to leave the relationship and take from it without reciprocity, through this work it was found that there is another side of this vulnerability. In many ways the researcher is dependent on the participants for being present in the process and their continued participation. Through this discovery a more pronounced effort was made to assure that the participants also gained from the experience. All of the focus groups took place in a home and food was provided, guidelines for the discussion were made clear prior to

beginning, and everyone in each focus group had some familiarity with each other. These details worked to provide a cohesive, supportive and social atmosphere where participants felt comfortable in discussion and each discussion even continued for as long as two hours after the formal focus group had concluded.

Following the development of the emergent themes for each focus group a member check took place. The participants were asked to assess the themes of their individual group interview for relevance and accuracy in describing their experience. The transcriptions were also provided to refresh their memory if needed. Few participants replied and of those who did, all agreed with the themes and stressed that they captured their experiences. No participants provided feedback to change any part of the themes.

During the data analysis it became difficult to critique women's rugby without the sense of critiquing the individuals and their choices. Due to this constant awareness of the process, mindful decisions were made at every step of the project. The principle that was always returned to was to describe the participants' experiences from their perspectives. To protect the viewpoints of the participants and maintain their original intent, whenever possible the participants are quoted. In addition information on rugby and the teams on which the participants play are provided to give a backdrop for this project.

Ultimately the reliability of this project is determined through the design and detailed description of the process of research. Therefore, a rich detailed description of the process has been included and a rationale for the design will also be discussed. The

research process began long before the formal research began, but it was initiated when decisions were made on how this project would take place. Focus groups were used for this project for three reasons. First, athletes are not often encouraged to think about why they play sports; “it is just something they do.” Focus groups provide a dynamic setting in which interviewees can encourage others to voice their opinions and spark new ideas. Secondly, rugby is a very social and cooperative sport. Participants develop close bonds, this is an essential element of the culture and maintaining this within the research was significant. Finally, focus groups are by nature interactive experiences and this aids in the collaborative intent of this work.

During ten years as a rugby player, coach and administrator commonalities were noticed among the four very different teams of which the researcher was a part, as well as among many other individuals and teams the researcher came in contact with. Initial thoughts related to the interview guide began here. The participants of the pilot focus group also took part in development of the project. All participants were self-identified feminists, and most had less than one year of experience. These participants were purposefully recruited for the pilot study for two reasons. First, the ability to employ a feminist analysis to the final project was broadened by drawing on the understanding of rugby from other self-identified feminists. The participants were also selected due to the high level of familiarity between this group and the researcher. The participants of this group were members of the team that the researcher coached. The pilot study also acted as a rehearsal for facilitating a focus group. This description and rationale are provided

to clarify how this research has been shaped and that it would be a much different process and outcome if undertaken within a different context.

All research is in some way shaped through interpretation. This project is dependent on the trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretation for its meaningful representation of the data. The researcher was not only immersed in the data collected, but in the culture of rugby long before this formal work took place. Within this project women's rugby is the shared experience that provided the researcher and participants a point at which to connect and communicate. This, along with an opportunity to see many perspectives of rugby and to explore these through scholarly eyes, creates a unique vantage point and expertise for interpretation. Therefore, the final approval is determined not only by the researcher, but by a researcher who is also a member of women's rugby.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The following section addresses the research questions through the emergent themes uncovered from the entire data set. Quotes and details from the transcriptions are included to further clarify and describe these themes. Initially five to eight themes were developed from each focus group and were then combined to create a set of overall themes which represented the entire data set. Two broad topics are used to organize the themes: What is Rugby? and Is Rugby Feminist Space? Four themes are included within the heading of What is Rugby? and include: Rugby is Inclusive, Rugby is Fun, Rugby is Community, and Rugby is Empowering. Under the descriptor Is Rugby Feminist Space? three themes are included: Tactics for Social Change, New Visions of Sport and Claiming Feminist Identities. The focus group participants described many experiences in rugby and varying understandings of these experiences. The perspectives and interpretations of the participants show the diversity and similarities in these experiences.

Rugby is Inclusive

Overwhelmingly rugby was described as a supportive, welcoming environment in which the participants felt that they belonged. The participants focused on two aspects of women's rugby that have led to an inclusive sporting environment. First, few women play rugby and it is often difficult to field an entire team. Secondly, there are a variety of roles on the team and these roles require different body types, strengths and skill sets. For example rugby is unique in comparison to other sports in the fact that any and all

body types are welcome. Regardless of one's size or shape there is a position on the field.

A common problem for women's rugby teams is the difficulty in recruiting participants and because of this teams will generally accept and encourage any woman who is willing to play. There generally are not try-outs, all that is needed is the motivation to play. As one participant from Atlantic City stated, "There just aren't that many women willing to play rugby so we are kind of taking all comers," and a second agreed "We are like anything goes." Rugby is a sport setting that is open to all women, regardless of their skill and experience level. This sentiment is reaffirmed by another Atlantic City participant, "There is a place for everyone; it doesn't matter your physical body type, how much training you have had, where you are at in your rugby skills you are needed on the field." The fact that there are so few women who play rugby may lead teams to accept and even welcome anyone regardless of current skill or even potential. "Somebody who shows up with zero skills and hasn't run a step in three years, I don't care we can teach them. That was me when I showed up and no one made fun of me." This is shown by the experience of one of the Atlantic City participants:

I would not have played another team sport because I would have thought. "I am too slow. I am just going to slow everyone down." But when you come to a rugby team you see there are all sorts of people there.

This feeling was restated by the same woman, "Overall rugby provides an environment that is inclusive and welcoming; a place where anyone who wants to can have a place."

This was clearly articulated by a Southern University participant, "Some people who

haven't even ever played a sport before come out and play rugby that is pretty impressive because they couldn't really find their place on a soccer team or a basketball team or what not." The Atlantic City participants discussed ways in which they made the socials after the games more inclusive, "We had a girl on our team that didn't swear so we had to extensively modify songs. It was very cute but at the end it didn't have many words."

In college one of the schools we played a lot of the people on the team were religious so we wouldn't sing Jesus Can't Play Rugby. It seems like schools or teams were different in levels of rude and obscene songs they had. And so we would try to be respectful of people who were not comfortable with that kind of thing.

It is true you will see it for other aspects of the social too. By and large you are seeing a larger population of non drinking rugby players and everybody tries to make a conscious effort not to exclude those people at the social.

One participant even added a hint of desperation to this sense of openness "I think it comes from the fact that we always need players. You are willing to make accommodations for just about anything that walks through the door that wants to play."

The same woman summarized how this need of players translates into a feeling of hospitality for potential players, "Women's rugby teams are always looking for more players, so they are always very excited to have new players. "Aww people want me.""

Rugby is also a unique sporting environment due to the fact that many body types are valued. It is felt that literally any body can find a place within rugby. All bodies have a set of strengths that can add to a team. For example, an Atlantic City participant

described her search for a sport. She was initially interested in crew but was apprehensive when she was told, “You will either have to gain 40 pounds to row heavy weight or lose 40 pounds to row lightweight.” A woman from Southern University reaffirmed this, “One thing about rugby is people of all shapes and sizes and weights and heights; it doesn’t matter what, there is a position for everyone on the field. I think that is a cool thing.”

Rugby Is Fun

Fun and excitement are usually understood as important attractions to any sport. For the participants of this project, enjoyment was also a large part of their rugby experience. Most obviously they found the time spent playing the game fun and exciting especially tackling and the physical nature of the game. When asked to describe how she felt about her first game; one participant from the Midwest Mustangs responded, “Oh my god, this is so much fun you get to tackle bitches and run, it was great.” This sentiment was repeated many times, for example a player from Atlantic City stated, “It was really fun and you got to tackle people,” and again from a Southern University participant, “Wow this is really cool that you can just hit people.” Not only did the women describe in words that they enjoyed this part of the game it was also clear in other ways. It was heard in their voices because they spoke louder and faster and it was seen in their faces. Their eyes grew larger and they smiled while talking about tackling.

Within rugby there is a tradition of putting on a party for the visiting team after the game; this is known as the third half or the social. This social also provides a great deal of enjoyment for the women; for some it may even be more important than the game

as shown by a woman from Southern University “Yeah it is cool we tackle, but man we have a good time together.” This social is also more than just a chance to drink in excess. It allows women a chance to visit new places and meet new people as stated by another Southern University participant:

After every game we get together and there are kegs and food, we travel to different places. I have traveled a lot with rugby, going to different states and cities and meeting a lot of people.

Even more than a chance to travel and meet new people rugby provides a way to experience life:

The other way it has changed my life is the travel that I have done with different groups. It has been an amazing adventure and experience and you just can't substitute those ... I have gone to Venezuela and Hong Kong, countless times to Canada and every trip that I take like that just reminds me how much fun it is and how much it really is like an adventure in rugby and I am just living for the next adventure.

The socials provide a unique opportunity for would be adversaries to socialize and develop friendships. This is an aspect of rugby that many players feel is significant and essential to the culture. A Southern University participant described, “Yeah this is probably the only sport where you party with the other team,” and then again by an Atlantic City player “I do love the fact that we go drink beer with the team that we just tried to kill, I think that is fantastic.” The socials are also a draw for potential players and many even cited the socials as the reason they started playing as described by a Mustang participant “The reason I started playing rugby was 100% social there is no question about it.”

The lively atmosphere provides a setting for a unique set of behaviors. This is discussed by an Atlantic City player, “There are activities that are socially acceptable with your rugby friends that are not socially acceptable with everyone else, which is fun”, and a Mustang athlete, “It is a great sport for generating stories you can amaze your friends with.” The following dialogue shows how two Midwestern Mustang athletes felt: “When I try to explain to people the things that happen on rugby trips, they look at me like I am just nuts, because some of the stories that we have you would never think would happen,” “Grown adults don’t just do that.”

Rugby is more than just a good time the experience is fun but also meaningful as stated by a Mustang, “Part of the fun is being able to participate on the field and feeling like you contributed to the outcome.” One Southern University participant described just how meaningful rugby is to a few of her teammates.

I know at least four or five girls who have chosen to stay at Southern University because of the rugby team here. They had so much fun they have found a sport that they really enjoy playing and instead of transferring they decide to stay here.

However, the participants of the Midwestern Mustangs also stressed that the fun of the social did not and should not override the importance of intense competition and elite levels of play. For example “If that is what motivates you on this level than I don’t see how you are any good.” It was very important for the participants of the Mustang focus group to clarify that rugby was about much more than the parties; it is a serious sport. As two participants share, “We play just for the rugby and not the social aspect,”

“This is not just you hear about this at a bar and you go out and drink. That is not what we are about.”

For the women involved rugby provides many ways to enjoy themselves. The game itself is exciting especially because it allows women the chance to take part in a contact sport. The party after the game provides the participants a chance not only to socialize with their teammates in a different setting but also to engage with athletes from other teams. Although the socials are often used as a recruiting tool, the participants in the Midwestern Mustangs focus group felt it was important to clarify that the socials should not be a prime motivating factor for their involvement. Instead, the Midwestern Mustangs found fun in the fact that elite competition was readily available.

Southern University stressed the importance of the fun that they had with their teammates. Rugby provided a chance to party with teammates, meet new friends, travel and in general have experiences that otherwise would not have happened. “In general I have been exposed to a lot more things,” one member from this group reported.

Interestingly and perhaps telling of this group is the fact that this was the youngest group, almost exclusively college students and they seemed to really enjoy the party associated with rugby. This contrasts markedly with the Midwestern Mustangs focus group, which had a much different perspective. Here the chance to be competitive was clearly the most important factor for their continued involvement. The chance to compete at an elite level was consistently cited as of utmost importance.

Rugby is Community

As was found in previous research the women frequently discussed the deep bonds that were developed through rugby. The importance placed on these connections varied, but the social connections were discussed throughout each focus group. There was a deep bond that connected teammates as described by an Atlantic City player:

I do think the social attachments are sooo important on a women's team. Really having to be close to the people on the team and really taking care of them. Perhaps more than on a men's team. They do it for the sports, whereas on a women's team it seems like it is almost as much for the people.

The participants found rugby to be unique in that this sense of connection goes beyond their own teammates and extends to all women who play rugby. There also seems to be a knowledge of the experience that only fellow rugby players can understand. This is made apparent through the words of an Atlantic City player:

It is also an unusual enough sport in this country, especially women's rugby that once you have played it, you have this sort of camaraderie of weirdness with anybody else that plays. "Ahhh you understand me."

Rugby provides an instant community for these women. This is as true for those new to the sport as it is for those who have played for twenty years. An Atlantic City participant who has played for three teams shares, "Every time I have moved, I have been able to find a women's rugby team to join and it is a way for me to find a foothold in the area". It is a means to find friends but also to fill other needs as shown by a Mustang:

I love the fact that I can hop on a plane and land in any city in the United States and probably call up a rugby friend and “hey can I stay with you” “sure come on I got a place for you to sleep whatever.”

This is at least in part due to the similarity felt to exist in the experiences of suffering, sacrifice and pain. The extreme level of physical contact seems to intensify the feelings of connection. One Atlantic City participant compared it to the closeness that develops within a basic training unit:

We have collectively suffered and bonded through hardships and it is like that in rugby. You get beat up together, you go through the long car rides, you sleep on the floor, and drink crappy beer.

The discussion continued with descriptions of these experiences by another Atlantic City player:

Only people who you do that with understand that and remember all the weird stuff you did. And people who haven't played just don't understand and it just isn't very satisfying to talk to them about it. Even if it wasn't the people who directly experienced it with you, other rugby players have been through those exact experiences and they get it and they relate.

Another Atlantic City participant added to the discussion:

The camaraderie is different for rugby than it would be for other sports because it is such a contact sport. I know Jen keeps me from dying and you kind of feel that way about everybody on the team more than if it were a like a golf team. You kind of trust these people more.

One Southern University participant summarized it:

I guess rugby players kind of come together because you all play the game and you all know the hurt and that is a common bond. Everybody has been through the same pain and the same practice.

Players sacrifice a great deal for the development of the team. As shared by a Mustang athlete “It takes an enormous amount of commitment”, and another added “and money.” Another Mustang described why this sacrifice was worthwhile:

For me it is the idea of having a team goal and a group of women. Five years ago most of the team wasn't there. It is the ones who stay year after year; it is just being with them year after year and watching it grow. That is exciting watching it progress to a point where we have gotten to be ranked in the top ten in the nation. I watched that happen with State City. The same thing being involved in that process is really fun that and the camaraderie.

Previous related literature places a great importance on the social aspect of the sport as a strong draw for women in nontraditional sports. They valued the opportunity to spend time with other women, and enjoyed being in the company of like-minded women. This was also discussed in this project and was exemplified by this statement from a Midwest Mustang participant:

It has made me feel like I have a place to fit in as far as you know like people who are smart. I consider everyone on the team pretty smart, you know, athletic. They have a drive for something a goal and this is somewhere I can be accepted.

The social connections made were important and rugby is significant because it is a way for these women to become part of something larger.

Rugby is Empowering

The focus groups uncovered ways in which the women are changed through their rugby participation. Research, especially in the area of youth sports, frequently stresses that sports participants are motivated by the opportunity to learn and develop new physical skills (Gill, Gross & Huddleston, 1983; Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992). In the current work this came up in only one of the three focus groups, not nearly as much as would be expected. Instead, the psycho-social changes that participants saw in themselves and others due to playing rugby were more often discussed. During the focus groups the participants described how they had been changed due to their involvement. Two specific changes were focused on. These included an increase in self-confidence and the awareness of insular beliefs along with the willingness to critique them.

The women described an increase in confidence attributed to their participation in rugby. The participants in the Atlantic City group focused on how physical confidence leads to self assuredness. This is stated by one, “I am more physically confident than when I started playing rugby.” When asked to describe how she knew she was more confident and what that meant, she went on to say:

I know that I can tackle and take someone down. I don't know, it is not that I go around thinking I want to beat people up or anything, but I do feel like I know I can take a lot and feel pretty confident.

The women were proud of the fact that they are part of a small minority willing to play rugby and as explained by an Atlantic City participant they “Take pride in the fact that

you can go out there.” This assuredness was also translated into an ability to control one’s self outside of rugby as described by another Atlantic City player:

I must admit, in the rest of life, if someone is trying to get my goat or something, I am kind of thinking I could take them what do I need to get upset about this...I have taken worse than this, I am not going to get upset about this.

The participants developed a new sense of power and control.

The women also focused on the fact that rugby led them to challenge their views and become more tolerant and open-minded. The first example comes from a Southern University participant,

Then I got on the team and got to know people and I am like “Dang maybe I shouldn’t,” I mean I wouldn’t say I judge people but you have your preconceived notions, yeah I don’t do that anymore.

And the second from a Mustang,

I think rugby opened my, broadened my horizons, and if anything helped me break down those stereotypes...rugby will broaden your horizons and let you accept people for who they are. And you have so many different types of people on your team so many different types of backgrounds that I would never have ever met let alone sit down and have a conversation with. That is attributed only to the fact that I played rugby.

This ability to see beyond first impressions was expressed by another Southern University participant. She became aware of this when she realized her view of a team mate had been changed.

You have preconceived notions when you see people...I always thought she was like this prissy girl but when she got out there and when the game started clicking for her. I have never seen somebody more competitive. And seeing what people are capable of when you automatically had an original thought about them...and I have seen dedication in people that I automatically had written off I think is really cool.

These changes occurred due to participating in rugby and rugby provided a space where a diverse group of people could come together. Another participant from the Southern University group states “It sounds cheesy but it is great that we have all these different eclectic group of people that all come together to play this fucking amazing sport.” And then goes on:

I think we are a pretty diverse group, I think everyone has that one thing in common where you are playing a contact sport, which is pretty different. It takes a lot to tackle but then again everyone is so different.

The same woman then discussed how she did not feel welcomed initially. Not only did she work to make the team more inclusive, but the foundation of her argument was based on the common bond of the sport; in turn, the team evolved into a more inclusive environment.

I think my role on the team when I first came to Southern University was I was the token, the one lesbian on the team. Well, I wasn't really open the first two weeks because I was kind of feeling it out. And a lot of the straight girls on the team were so scared about being stereotyped as a lesbian that they were really vocal about “I am straight, I am straight” so it makes the people that aren't straight like “ooh maybe I should keep it on the down low.” But I felt like my role was “I am just like you guys I am not here to hook up with you guys, to mack. I am just here to play rugby.” Other than that there is no difference, just to

get the acceptance if I am going to play a sport where I can get my head knocked off you guys better accept me for who I am.

She continued:

I was like “Forget this. Why am I even doing this for people who don’t accept me.” And so that was a big thing. It is not so much actually playing rugby but it is just a part of it. I had to overcome, so that was a good experience just to help with tolerance and acceptance. Everyone is different but we play a kick-ass sport together.

There is an overwhelming sense that rugby has provided a place where the participants have challenged their own beliefs and learned something new about themselves and others.

The participants cited two specific changes to themselves repeatedly. First, the development of confidence was commonly named as an outcome of participation. The women described feeling more confident in their lives outside of rugby due to the new vision of their bodies and abilities. Secondly, through participation the women were confronted with their own prejudices. By being exposed to so many people and put in a position where trust is required the women question these prejudices and develop the ability to move beyond them.

Power to Change

As is the contention of this research, sport can be a place of social change. This project showed that the women interviewed were well aware that they had the power to change their immediate sporting environment. They were unambiguous about their ability to affect their team culture, goals and actions. There was also some awareness

that their participation in a sport such as rugby has a broader effect on sport and society, but they were more aware of their ability to affect their immediate team.

It was clear that the women saw that they affected change within their team. The teams changed over time and evolved because of the personnel and the choices they made. Those on the Southern University team had quite lucid examples of this change within the team. One described a change in coaching.

Our first coach always focused on winning and while winning is a great thing if you push to hard to win especially for people who have to pay to play rugby, people who have to work and so this as an extracurricular activity they aren't going to want to stay and be continually hounded to play. So we changed our motto and we changed our focus on to more of an extracurricular group more to have fun.

From this example, it is clear that in the end this team was about the needs of the players, not the coach.

The Midwestern Mustangs focus group described an instance when the team ethic was altered.

Well I think there was a turning point for the Mustangs were we said "Ok do we want to be a social team or do we want to be a competitive team. Do we want to be serious about this game and play to our potential and beyond?" And then we had a vote on it and everyone said yeah we want to be competitive.

The entire team came together to discuss the issue and vote on it. This shows that the goals of the players can change and that they have the power to alter them. This ability to have control over the evolution of the team was most apparent in the Atlantic City focus group. This type of change was a part of their very recent history.

This was part of the whole kind of split between Eastern and Atlantic City. To start out with I think those girls wanted to be a lot more competitive about their sport and that is fine it is just it didn't fit in with the way Atlantic City was. Essentially it is not that we hadn't played hard and that we weren't a good team it is just that our attitude toward it was we are all adults who have lives and jobs and families outside of rugby and you can't expect everybody to give up everything to do this sport. And I think that was more the attitude was that we are going to train hard and work hard and do a lot more traveling and make it much more of a commitment than your average women's rugby player was willing to make.

There was a deep understanding that they were part of the process of team development.

Not only were there changes within the individual teams described, but there were also examples of alterations to the larger realm of rugby. Specifically the Midwestern Mustangs women saw their actions as affecting rugby as a whole.

Positive publicity, just the game, so taking the socialization out of rugby and showing the enthusiasm to other people. That it is not about a social thing and if they could just see and take it for that. Just a sport and have positive feedback, "wow this is a kind of complicated game and wow these people hit really hard and if they are that crazy about this sport in the rest of the world why aren't we doing it more." And with our team doing our big fundraising events at different venues then we are showing a positive showing with getting out into the community and explaining to people what rugby is about on just a rugby scale. With no this is my sexual preference this is my age I have been playing... and I have two babies from two different fathers type thing but just looking and saying I play rugby, this is where we are at, this is a big fundraiser this is why we are fundraising. I am really glad you came out to support us, check our website out. And taking away the individual in the game you know like me as an individual just letting them know us as team.

They felt that they were actively working to change the image of rugby from party first and a sport second to a sport with a professional and polished image.

Rugby teams are by and large very independent and self sufficient and due to this the participants have a large role in the creation, continued existence and evolution of their team and to an extent rugby as a whole. For example, a Midwestern Mustang compared the experiences of female football players to those of female rugby players.

At the same time I watch these girls that played football last year and they put out an enormous amount of money and time and energy and I don't think that many of them were very happy and satisfied at the end of the day. But they didn't have control-- I mean at the same time we get to build our rugby club, which is a bad and good thing, but they don't have that control of the football team. It built itself they kind of got stuck with shit.

The teams developed into a model that represented the views of the athletes involved.

When it was clear that not everyone felt that the team represented their vision of sport or what they wanted from rugby, changes were made. An example of this was when a founding member of the team had been asked to leave because she physically attacked a teammate.

We had an incident in college that we had to actually ask a girl to leave the team because she blew up in practice. She dove after a ball, took a boot to the chest and essentially because she dove it wasn't anybody's fault. She came up and she took a swing at the person who happened to be one of her best friends on the team who just took it. Sara wasn't going to say anything about it. We had to seriously ask her to step off for a few games. She had been a founding member of the team and it was sad to see her go but you just have to make a conscious effort not to let your team degenerate into something where that is actually acceptable.

This seems very different than the setting described by Schacht (2001) where physical violence was used to enforce team norms.

Teams were also molded through not so mindful methods. When asked about ways in which norms are enforced within the team a participants from the Midwestern Mustang focus group provided these examples, “Peer pressure... when I was an undergrad if you went out drinking during the week you were vilified, you just didn’t,” “The newer players, just getting them to think about what we do and to realize how important it is to us who have been playing a while,” “The leadership on your team you have people in charge and their examples you can follow.” An Atlantic City participant made it clear that the team was a product of the continuous actions of the players. She stated, “I guess every practice, every moment you are making a conscious decision of what your team is going to be like.”

Participants discussed how the teams changed and evolved due to team member actions. For example a Mustang athlete described, “We changed from being a group of rowdy drunks to people who played hard,” and another participant added, “Exactly, and as we all got better together it was more serious and we realized damn we are not getting our asses kicked by every team that we play we are actually now kicking ass.” A member of the Atlantic City focus group shared a similar reflection “I think this team’s dynamic has changed a lot many times even in the short amount of time that I have been here.”

In addition the participants talked about women’s rugby being evidence that times and roles for men and women are changing. It is a means to create change in society at large as described by a Southern University athlete:

I think it changes history. I mean for real, women used to what--play badminton and tennis. I mean they were expected to hit balls not people and now we have a contact sport. And yeah people still clinch at it but it is starting to be more acceptable.

There was a validation that came from being part of this as a Southern University participant reported, "It is a liberating feeling knowing I am part of that. It has defiantly changed female's sports." Most interesting is the idea that women's rugby is meaningful because it is not a spectacle. A Southern University participant declared,

When I am out there, I am just having fun and I guess I don't think about it. I don't have to think I am doing something special for women or I am taking this step for women or whatever. I am just having fun and if I happen to advance women's place in sports or whatever while I am doing that, well, great. But I think the fact that we can go out there and we can have fun and it doesn't have to be, you know nobody watches us when we play rugby. We do it for the fun of it. The fact that it is not something special to see us out there playing or whatever, I mean it is special. But the fact that a whole bunch of people aren't making a big deal about it or whatever I think is a step or shows that we have taken a step in the right direction. Because a long time ago, or not so long ago, if there were 15 women out there running into each other, it would have been a lot bigger deal and it would have drawn a lot more attention. I think the fact that we can go out there and have fun and play and not worry about stuff or being looked at funny, well we maybe, but anyway but there is not a lot of attention on the fact that we are playing. That we can just go and have fun says that we have come in the right direction.

New Visions of Sport

The Midwestern Mustangs stressed wanting to see rugby in the United States develop along the lines of professional sports. This maintains the status quo of sport and by evolving in this way, rugby, and by extension the athletes playing rugby, are validated. Yet the remaining two focus groups see rugby as an alternative to the status quo because

it allows women the chance to do things they are not allowed to do outside of rugby. The participants seem to be describing a balance of the status quo and the innovative. This piece of a conversation from the Atlantic City focus group illustrates this paradox, “I think there is like a real classic old boys’ club network type thing... men’s rugby is like the ultimate in traditional in some ways and women’s rugby is almost the opposite in some ways.” “And yet we have adopted a lot of those traditions.” “While we have adopted traditions we still kind of fly in the face of tradition.” The participants take part in creating the team and its evolution. The team is built through numerous methods and through this rugby is revisioned.

When asked what initially drew them to the game, there was a focus on what was missing from other sports. The chance to play a contact sport was brought up multiple times and exemplified by this Atlantic City participant, “I had always wanted to play football and this was something that was similar enough that I could sink my teeth in to it.” “Women don’t get to play contact sports. You may have played football with your brother when you were a kid, but there was no outlet for this to do it normally.” The opportunity to play a sport and to be challenged was also brought up as shown by two Midwestern Mustangs, “I was looking for something to play.” “The thing that I love about it is the constant challenge.” By and large the participants described rugby as providing opportunities not available in other sporting environments.

It was apparent that rugby filled a void for the participants. For example, the opportunity to continue to compete beyond college was a strong draw for the participants of the Midwestern Mustangs focus group.

I think part of it is just the competition. I played soccer forever in college. Whenever I played after college, it was totally different. There was nothing competitive. We played indoor soccer and I think we won the championship 10-0. I mean it was not fun to play...just the sheer joy of doing something new and being competitive at it and facing competition who is just as serious and as good as you if not better.

Another Mustang was very clear in what she was looking for from sport:

The reason I started playing and continue playing is I look at rugby as a sport, a competitive sport and if you have that competitive drive and you lose that, you look for a way to fill that void and rugby, because it had potential after college even more competitive than college, you are able to continue on with the sport...as a woman that wants to play sports and be competitive, as I got older, rugby fit that for me.

To contrast this, a participant from the Atlantic City focus group found rugby because she felt her college soccer team was too competitive she described them as, “Very good and very intense and definitely a little above my level.”

With these varying perspectives on the rugby environment, it is clear that the teams themselves also differed in what the central goals and ethic were. The personal views of the participants seemed to be closely aligned with that of their team. Their visions of sport were reflected in the team ethic and even the motto. The participants used the team mottos to describe the atmospheres of their own teams. For example the motto of Atlantic City is “Have fun, kick ass” and Southern University uses the motto “Pride, power, and sisterhood.” It is clear through these sayings that for these teams playing well is important but not the only concern

Claiming Feminist Identities

Previous related works discussed the stereotypes placed on women who play nontraditional sports. The women involved in this project were well aware of these stereotypes. Examples from two Southern University participants include, “All rugby players are lesbians” “Those girls need to have sex; you know stuff like that; they are deprived.” And an Atlantic City player “Only lesbians play rugby.” One Atlantic City participant also noted that there was a difference in the way rugby athletes were viewed versus women in other sports. “They assume you are a lesbian if you play women’s rugby...they don’t assume that with soccer or softball but rugby yeah.” Another participant agreed, “I don’t feel like anymore there is much of a social stigma for a woman who plays sports, there is probably more of a stigma for women’s rugby than there is for other sports.”

The women were proud to play rugby yet they also are very quick to deny that they fit the stereotypes of women’s rugby players, perhaps with the intention of aligning themselves with more acceptable views of femininity. A Midwestern Mustang participant reported, “I have never met a rugby player that would say no I don’t (play rugby). In fact I think every rugby player I have ever met or seen has been proud to say I do play rugby.”

Another added

Yeah, but turns out we clean up nice and have enough intelligent people on this team who can combat the stereotypes. So it is not like we are embarrassed to say we are rugby players, but stereotypes come from somewhere.

The same participant later added

You know who you are you can laugh at those stereotypes and say of course I play rugby, what do you think about that, and now you know of a perfectly normal person that plays rugby, how does that fit into your stereotype.

Two related stereotypes were consistently combated. First, the notion that all of the participants are lesbians as shown by a Southern University player “All rugby players are lesbians and I was like I am not one.” What seemed even more important was that the participants wanted others to know that they were attractive. For example, “I would say that the Southern University team is probably like the girliest team that I have ever seen.” Likewise, “The Midwestern Mustangs are hot... You clean us up, you dress us up, we are hot. Like there are hot girls on this team and people are almost uncomfortable with that.”

Not only was it clear that the participants wanted to separate themselves from the stereotypes associated with women’s rugby but there also seemed to be a distancing of themselves from men’s rugby, while at the same time highlighting the similarity. A Southern University athlete exemplifies this, “It is the same sport no pads just like the guys.” Yet differences between the games and athletes were also described, perhaps again to align themselves with a heteronormative femininity. A Southern University participant explained, “I don’t think the brutality of women’s rugby ever goes to the levels that you see in men’s rugby.” This participant discussed both of these aspects:

It is the same exact game. It is still 80 minutes. It is the same rules. I want to say guys games are little faster paced, like I have watched our

men play and the game moves a little bit faster. But it is all relative I mean it is the same exact game. And I think when men play they expect to show their manlihood by the harder hits they make... we will hit the people just as hard but it is not because I want to do it to show how strong I can be. It is because I am playing the game and that is how the game is played, and I think that is the difference between men and women.

Many stereotypes are associated with women's rugby. Although they are loosening, strong social norms remain in regards to gender and sport. Women playing contact sports are stigmatized. The participants take pride in contradicting these stereotypes. As a result, rugby is a place where the women can take what they want from the traditional sport and change aspects that do not fit their ideals.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This section includes an interpretation of the data illuminating the central phenomenon and recommendations for future study. The central phenomenon is drawn from the set of themes and is meant to provide an overall picture of the experiences of the participants and connect them to related work. Conclusions drawn from the work come together to tell a story; and are discussed first. Secondly, recommendations for ways to expand and improve on this knowledge are made.

As was stated earlier there is limited work examining sport as a potential site for feminist actions, but a few works have begun to investigate female athletes' attitude toward feminism. Specifically Hargreaves (1993) found that female athletes did not identify as feminist, while Young (1997) found evidence that older female athletes with more sports experience were more likely to see a connection between their sports participation and a feminist praxis. While the existing work does give some insight into how female athletes see themselves fitting into sport, there were only limited instances of the participants detailing specific examples of their choices and behaviors working to effect change in the larger world of sport.

More participants of this project self-identified as feminist than expected. Yet these women did not voice that their actions had much, if any, impact on the greater

world of sport, or that sport is or could be feminist. They did not make a connection between sport and feminism. In addition, many of the participants were very clear that they did not claim feminist status, perhaps in the attempt to avoid closer association with stereotypes and discrimination (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1994). Strong emotions emerged when feminism was discussed. In fact, three participants actively chose not to define it. One was explicit that she did not think about what the word feminism meant. It will be argued here that women participating in sport, especially a contact sport, can be in itself a feminist action, although it may not be labeled as such by all of the participants.

Even though as a whole the women playing rugby may not see their actions as directly creating change in sport, change is occurring. Sport is a site where women struggle with cultural ideologies and these struggles are highlighted when women participate in sports, especially contact sports. These sports are fraught with examples of these struggles, and rugby provides an exciting area in which to explore them. As related research has concluded, sport can be a place of both resistance and reproduction of social ideologies (Birrell & Richter, 1987; Broad, 2001; Castelnovo & Guthrie, 1992; Chandler, 1999). Women's rugby is also a site of resistance and reproduction of social ideologies and often it is both at the same time.

This simultaneousness is a key to the central phenomenon of this work. There is both resistant and reproductive work occurring within the teams of the participants. To fully describe the social ideological work that is occurring in this setting two concepts are utilized. Binaries is the first concept that will be addressed and is used to describe work which reproduces existing ideologies within sport. The second concept discussed is

bridging which is developed from Chela Sandoval's (1998) "third space" and Gloria Anzaldua's (1999) "border crossing." By bridging multiple worlds, women are able to transcend borders. This is not only a crossing of physical space but also of cultural and ideological space and they are bridging multiple spaces simultaneously. Bridging has meanings beyond this; it is also a technique used on the field where an athlete uses her body to bridge over the ball to maintain possession and both of these meanings will be explored.

Binaries

Binaries extend from the view that the social world is very much divided into opposing dualities. Examples include feminine/masculine and strong/weak. These categories are perceived as mutually exclusive. Although the women who took part in this project may be creating their own sporting environment, they also described feeling forced into choosing one of two opposing categories. They had a particularly difficult time resolving the feminine/athletic dilemma. As previously discussed, women who participate in sports are often portrayed in stereotypical images. This is discussed by a Midwestern Mustang, "I think it is lesbian identified because people on the outside, patriarchal males, identify it as lesbian identified." The participants were aware of these and were relentless in pointing out that they personally did not fit those stereotypes.

Two participants from the Southern University shared,

I have even heard about in class discussion people had come up and been like "Oh we talked about rugby players today" and I was like "What about" "Well they were saying that all rugby players are lesbians" and I was like "I am not one."

And another Southern University stated, “Everybody is like.” “Oh only lesbians play rugby.” “And I am like I am not a lesbian and I play rugby.”

Broad (2001) found that women playing rugby took pride in the fact that they played a sport that was seen as deviant; in fact, they took every opportunity to flaunt it. Within the current project a different conclusion was uncovered. Whereas Broad found that the women in her work were unapologetic for their deviance, the participants in this project wanted to make it clear that they differed from the stereotypes associated with rugby. Most importantly, they do not fit the image of the ugly, butch, manish woman. For example a participant from the Southern University group stated, “I wear make up and stuff, but I am really sports oriented and stuff, but I like to go out and look good.” And as shown earlier a Mustang asserted, “Midwestern Mustangs are hot ...you clean us up, you dress us up we are hot, like there are hot girls on this team” and another woman from Southern University added, “Southern University team is probably like the girliest team that I have ever seen.”

There was a strong desire to deny the validity of these stereotypes. It was difficult to deny that they did participate in a sport that is strongly associated with masculinity but they were also not willing to acknowledge that they fit the prescribed role. The participants did however find an interesting method in which to accommodate these contradictions. They described themselves as being two people; they took on another persona while playing rugby. Two Atlantic City players discussed, “For me it is also sort of an alter ego. I am not normally a super aggressive sort of person.” Another agreed,

So you get a whole persona. People who have never seen me play assume I am like a rough tough kind of person, and you know I will go on the field and get done what I need to get done on the field as I can be as aggressive as I need to be; come off the field, I am not that aggressive. I let a lot of people walk all over me in my regular life. The participants also made clear distinctions between different team cultures.

These opposing cultures include those of social teams and competitive teams and also men's team and women's teams. Where a competitive team is focused on winning and developing the team's ability to compete at high levels and a social team may play hard but be less concerned with the outcome of games, their sincerest concern is the team atmosphere. A discussion between the Atlantic City participants highlights the understood differences in teams. "We play because we like it, we are not going to get crazy about the competitiveness of it. We don't scream at each other on the field." "There are so many men's teams I have seen where they just shirk at each other on the field." "There are also some laid back men's teams that are mostly interested in drinking beer and hanging out." And the conversation continued,

I find Western men's team to be a very social side they can go out and play really hard but they are so scattered because they are coming in and out of there constantly from deployment that they really can't manage any more than a social side. And so they take it a lot less seriously than say other people do.

Again it is almost innately the case that men's teams take it far more seriously than women's teams. And then you have the level of women's teams that take it far more seriously. And then you have the teams that are just out there for the social aspect of things and enjoy the physical activity and if we win that is great.

These examples show the binaries that the women felt they were torn between. They felt compelled to choose between being heterosexual or lesbian, attractive or unattractive. Not only are individuals forced into one category or another but entire teams are also categorized, they are either social or competitive, a men's team or women's team. This separation is not only about who is on the team but how those individuals play, specifically the level of intensity played with. By taking part in this classifying the participants are allowing themselves to be categorized by others. The ideologies represented within sport are being reproduced as opposed to being challenged. The participants are agreeing to an either/ or classification instead creating new visions. Yet as discussed previously women's rugby is not just a site for reproductive work, there is also resistive work occurring.

Bridging

As mentioned earlier, bridging has two meanings. It is a physical act that athletes use on the pitch during a rugby match. They grasp a teammate who is on the ground and bind their bodies together over the ball, in order to secure possession of the ball. It is technically an infraction of the law, meaning it is illegal, but the act is seldom acknowledged by the referee. Within this project bridging is also used to describe the ideological work taking place by the women playing rugby. The women are bridging opposing visions of sport. For example, they are bringing together the misogynistic world of rugby and an innovative and possibly feminist view of sport.

Within the game of rugby bridging brings two or more bodies together. The women within this study were connecting multiple ethos of sport. They were bridging a

patriarchal space and a feminist space. As stated by an Atlantic City participant “rugby is the ultimate in traditional.” For example, there is a win at-all-cost attitude that could even be considered an abusive form of sport. On the other hand, as the same participant stated rugby is also “subversive.” They were aware that they were existing in two worlds simultaneously; they were bridging two forms of sport. It seems they were not just crossing boundaries or occupying a third space, but they are occupying many spaces at once. They were aware of how problematic this is, and therefore left themselves enough space to alter their position. They were not willing to place themselves fully in one location, but wanted their options open to take up space wherever is comfortable and significant at the time.

Multiple instances of bridging visions of sport were described throughout the discussions. For example, they have found a way to bring together two concepts previously understood to be mutually exclusive. Generally in sport, you work with your team and compete against the opponent. Theberge (1987) argues that a feminist analysis of sport requires that competition, and in turn sport, must be redefined. She asserts that competition is not about dominating others but instead encouraging and empowering others to strive for the development of new skills. Included in this work are examples of women changing the meaning of power in sport from strength and supremacy over others to the development of a shared experience of support and teamwork. They did not talk about dominating or harming others or even proving their superiority through physically acting on others. Their competition was very much about playing with the other team.

I think part of it is just the competitiveness ...I played soccer forever in college and played after college and it was totally different. There was nothing competitive. We played indoor soccer. I think we won the championship game 10-0. I mean it was not fun; you couldn't find people to play with your caliber and have enough teams from both sides. And if you did, if you were lucky enough to find that, you would be playing the same people over and over and over again. So it was kind of fun to come to something and do something brand new (rugby). To do something you don't know quite what you were doing ...so just the sheer joy of doing something new and being competitive at it and facing competition who is just as serious and were as good as you if not better.

The women playing rugby may have found a way to focus on both the competition and cooperation at the same time. It was not just what was said but what was not said. The women never talked about hurting or dominating others; instead they discussed the chance to tackle and to compete.

The women in the Midwestern Mustangs focus group talked about bridging a vision of professional sport with that of rugby, which has a reputation of being more about the party than the game. They discussed developing their team along the same lines of what could be considered the status quo of sports in the United States; the importance is placed on playing well which is measured by wins and losses. They were also molding the team along their own ideals and have changed what rugby and women's sport is about, at least in their small part of the world. These women were changing what it means to play rugby. They weren't just interested in getting drunk, they were interested in competing and competing at the highest level with other women.

Right now everything is good, the team is doing well. We are conducting ourselves professionally and we are nationally ranked and we want people to take us seriously. We want people to say "Yeah the

Mustangs are a nationally ranked team and they are good and they are just a great team and they are organized and yeah they might go.”

Although bridging is not specifically defined in the law book, it is illegal to have your head below your hips and bridging requires this (USA Rugby, 2003). However, you are penalized only if you are caught. Being caught is dependent on the referee and the obviousness of the infraction. An analogy can be made comparing bridging in a game to the bridging discussed previously. Taking part in resistant activities is by its very nature taboo. The women were participating in a highly misogynistic sport, and this action itself could be resistive. However, it is only when the activities become obvious that they are contested. As long as women’s rugby and the transformative actions of the participants do not appear to directly affect the larger world of sport, they will not be contested. Provided that women playing rugby continues to be a subculture with little outside recognition or awareness it is not challenged at least not beyond an individual level.

It could be argued that by keeping these actions at a local level, the larger world of sport will not be impacted. However, the athletes involved in sporting environments, which lend themselves to resistant activities, are being affected. An example of this is the participant’s new found ability to critique stereotypes which lends support for the feminist motto the “personal is political.” These individual changes lead to changes in the sporting environments of the individuals, which in turn can lead to changes in the larger realm of sport. Yet, the potential for social change is diffused when women become incorporated into the male-identified structure of rugby. The potential for social change within women’s rugby is great, however it is still an unachieved potential.

The term feminist unconsciousness was used by Birrell and Richter (1987) to describe women involved in a softball community. Feminist unconsciousness is used to describe women on the verge of purposefully acting create change. They are doing feminist work but are either unaware of this or refute this label. The women in this project may also have a feminist unconsciousness. They may not always be mindful of their decisions but they are active in making these decisions. Whether or not the participants label these actions as feminist is irrelevant; they are creating a sporting environment that fits their needs and is effecting change in a cultural practice.

One may conclude that the increase of acceptance of female athletes has had a positive effect on the opportunities for females. There has been a large increase in the number of females playing sports but there have also been negative repercussions. Most importantly is the decrease in control that women hold in the creation of their sports. Rugby provides a unique environment where the women have a great deal of control over their sporting experience. It is one where they are taking part in the development of the team ethics. They are well aware that outsiders question them and their choice in sporting activities yet they continue their involvement regardless. They have changed the meaning of sport and are resisting the socially defined meanings of sport and what women playing sports means.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following specific recommendations for future research could further the understanding of the experiences of women in rugby. First, different methods could be used, which might generate different conclusions. Individual interviews could be

employed as well as focus groups with participants from different teams. In addition, gaining knowledge of the experiences of women with different vantage points may also be fruitful. For example, discussions with women who have left rugby, to uncover why it did not fit their needs, would be valuable.

Much of the previous work has placed a great deal of importance on physicality and empowerment. In this work the physical nature of the sport did not come up nearly as much as was expected. This is an issue worthy of further study, especially in a sport setting such as rugby with an intense level of physical contact. This work could more clearly answer the call made by Hall (1999), “ We also need more studies in which women athletes are asked to reflect upon the significance of the body and physicality to their experience of sport” (p. 65). Through continued study, a deeper understanding of what physicality means to these women could be attained.

Physicality and women’s understanding of it could be more directly addressed through individual interviews where the conversation could be directed to a greater extent. It may also be helpful to recruit women who have played for many years and to start by asking these women to discuss the physicality of rugby. Additional questions specifically addressing the physicality would also aid in this, including: What is enjoyable about tackling? What does it feel like to tackle? What does it feel like to play rugby?

Summary

This work took place in order to gain an understanding of how women experience rugby. Through focus groups, women described these experiences and the meanings they

attribute to rugby. Additionally, it was found that the women who took part in this research were changed through their participation in rugby. Most notably they described two transformations. In the course of playing rugby the confidence of the women was increased and this increase in confidence positively affected them outside of rugby. The participants also noted specific ways in which they had created change in their own team and how their involvement was transforming rugby. The women provided examples such as asking team leaders to leave because of unacceptable behaviors and taking part in the development of team goals.

The participants also felt that through their participation they challenged the meaning of rugby. Although there was by no means a consensus that playing women's rugby is a feminist action, there was an understanding that women's rugby is a setting in which stereotypes can be challenged. The participants were proud of their association with rugby, yet their denial of the stereotypes reflected an attempt to align with more acceptable forms of femininity rather than challenge these stereotypes. The concepts of binaries and bridging have also been utilized to clarify the experiences of these women. Binaries describe the dualistic relationships the women have found themselves in. It was difficult for them to resolve these dualisms. Resolving these dualisms was in part done through bridging. Bridging not only illuminates the process of resolving dualisms but also describes the process the women are going through and mirrors the meanings it has within the game.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF DEFINITIONS OF FEMINISM

Actively politically involved in promoting women's rights.

Actively wants equal treatment of women in comparison to men in our society.

Active advancement of women's rights (social, political, workplace).

Left blank

Equal rights, equal opportunity.

Equal rights to both male and females in any situation. Against oppression of women.

Equal rights between men and women.

Someone who advocates women's equal rights and women's equality.

There are different levels of feminism but I think it basically centers around equality. Equal pay equal opportunity for jobs, schooling etc.. I think extreme feminism tries to go a bit beyond equal and gives women an unfair advantage but I also think that's not as prevalent as more moderate views.

I don't.

Agreeing and supporting that only which promotes and benefits women's rights.

Advocacy of increased political rights of women.

Uncertain of this label.

APPENDIX B

INITIAL RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Dear Ruggers,

Hi my name is Jeanine Scrogum, and I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Exercise and Sport Science. I am currently conducting research exploring the perceived benefits of rugby for women, or how women feel they benefit by playing rugby. This information will be found through group interviews involving women who currently play rugby and have played for at least 1 year. These group interviews will last approximately 90 minutes and food will be provided. It is hoped that through this research a better understanding of the benefits of rugby will be gained.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. The time and place for these group interviews will depend on those who would like to participate. Within the next few weeks I will be contacting those interested and arranging times and places for the group interviews. If you are interested or have further questions about this research please feel free to contact me at:

Email: jscrogum@hotmail.com

Phone: (336) 545-0602

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Jeanine Scrogum

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: **Perceived Benefits of Rugby by Female Participants: A Feminist Analysis**

Project Director: Jeanine E. Scrogum

Participant's Name: _____

Date of Consent: _____

DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES:

The overall goal of this research project is to explore the perceived benefits of rugby participation by females. You are being asked to contribute to the research by participating in a focus group. The information that you provide will aid in the greater understanding of women's experiences in sport in general and rugby specifically. It is hoped that the information gained will add to the knowledge of women's sports and be used to develop new programs and improve existing programs.

Participants for this research project must be women currently participating in rugby. Participants also must be at least 18 years of age. Participants must also be able to meet during the prearranged time and places. These focus groups will take approximately 90 minutes each.

Your participation in this project is voluntary and you are free to discontinue participation at any time. All information that you provide is confidential. Names or personally identifying information will not be included in any presentation of the results. Demographic questionnaires, tapes and any other records will be retained for three years after data are coded or transcribed, and destroyed after that. The research poses no risks or discomforts, and it is hoped that the project will improve women's sports. Your participation in this research project is not part of your particular rugby program and will have no effect on your participation in that program. I will be glad to answer any questions now. If you have questions later, you may contact Jeanine Scrogum at (336) 545-0602 or jscrogum@hotmail.com.

If you are willing to help by participating in the research project, please sign the consent form on the next page.

CONSENT:

By signing this consent form, you agree that you understand the procedures and any risks and benefits involved in this research. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty or prejudice; your participation is entirely voluntary. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant in this project.

The research and this consent form have been approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board, which insures that research involving people follows federal regulations. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project can be answered by calling Eric Allen at (336) 256-1482. Questions regarding the research itself will be answered by Jeanine Scrogum at (336) 545-0602. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the project described to you by Jeanine Scrogum. Please print your name and sign below, with today's date.

Print your name

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Age: _____

Race/Ethnic Identification: African American Asian/Pacific Islander
European/Caucasian Hispanic/ Latina Native American/Indian
Other If other, please explain _____

Do you have any physical disability that affects your participation?
No Yes If yes, please describe _____

Sexual Identification: Lesbian Bisexual Heterosexual
Other If other, please explain _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Less than High School High School/ GED
Vocational/ Associates/ 2 year degree Bachelors/ 4 year degree
Graduate degree

Are you currently enrolled as an undergraduate student? Yes No
Are you currently enrolled as a graduate student? Yes No

Are you currently employed full-time? Yes No If yes, please identify your
title/ position: _____

Would you describe yourself as a feminist? Yes No

How do you define feminism?

SPORTS EXPERIENCE:

Please list sports other than rugby in which you have participated and approximate number of seasons in which you participated.

Sport	# of Seasons	Level (ex. youth, high school, AAU)
<u>EX. Basketball</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>High school</u>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Please list other types of physical activity/ exercise you have participated in regularly (at least once a week for at least 6 months) and the number of years in which you have participated in these.

Physical activity	Number of Years
<u>EX. Weight lifting</u>	<u>10</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

RUGBY EXPERIENCE

Name of current team:

Please circle the division at which your current team competes:

Collegiate-Div I Collegiate-Div II Club-Div I Club-Div II

How many seasons have you played rugby? _____

If applicable, please list other teams you have played on and the number of seasons for each: _____

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION:

Hi everyone, I am thrilled you have agreed to participate in this conversation and share your views on rugby. I am working on a project aimed at understanding how women experience rugby. Specifically I am interested in what women gain through participating in rugby. That is what skills, values, and attitudes are developed through rugby. I am also interested if women think that by playing rugby they affect rugby and sports. Before we start I want to review what we are going to do today. First, you are the experts so it is important that everyone has a chance to be heard. Also everything you say in here will be kept confidential. The information will not be attached to your name in any way (other than for me to contact you for follow-up). Even though I will be asking questions this is a discussion so you are encouraged respond to others and even ask your own related question. Are there any questions about this process?

First, I would appreciate it if you could fill out this demographic sheet. It also includes a brief history of your experiences in sports and physical activity.

Any other questions before we begin?

To get warmed up let's start by talking about what brought you to rugby.

- What made you decide to go to practice for the first time?
- What other reasons do you think women have for starting?

My first big question is why do women choose to play rugby and stay involved; what do they get out of it?

- What do you enjoy about rugby as a sport?
- Why do you stay involved?
- What do you say about the game when trying to recruit other women?
- What is it about the game that seems to hook women?
- Are there things about it off the field you enjoy?

What is rugby about to you?

- What are some of the core values of (women's) rugby?
- Describe what rugby means to you/ is about in a few words.
- Can you think of examples where women changed something about rugby to make it fit their values (coaching style, selections, change songs)?
- Does rugby influence other aspects of your life?
- Have you changed due to participating?

Taking a broader perspective what does it mean to play rugby?

- Does it mean something different for men and women?
- What do your friends and family who don't play say about you playing?
- What do people say when you tell them you (women) play rugby?
- What do you tell people who are surprised that you play?
- Is there an image or reputation associated with rugby /women's rugby?

Well time has run out but before we end I would like to take a few minutes to review what has been discussed. *Researcher will review main points and ask for brief clarification and concurrence on the topics discussed.*

Is there anything else you want to add?

Thank you again for your time and sharing your knowledge.