

Elegant Violence: The Promise and Peril of a New ‘Feminine’ Sport Ethic

Berg A, Duffy D, and DuBois S: Department of Kinesiology; University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Context: We assess how a team of female rugby players understood experiences with serious head injuries.

Research paradigm: The study follows the basic tenet of feminist theory and discourse analysis. It also employs hegemonic masculinity theory and its association with the pain principle. We view gender as a performance and as a socially constructed system of oppression formed through language as well as physical practices.

Methods: Findings are based on focus group interviews with a total of nineteen female college rugby players after a game in which eighteen players from the interviewees’ team suffered a concussion or a concussive event. We asked in-depth semi-structured questions about athletic history, injury history, and experiences in the game mentioned above.

Data analysis: The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Responses were then separated into themes using ATLAS.ti software. Themes include feminized traits, violations of a “feminine” sport ethic, masculinized traits, and playing through serious (head) injuries

Quality of data and analysis: Two of the authors read and re-read the verbatim transcripts, employing their knowledge of socio-historical research on women’s sport to confirm or expand on themes.

Finding: We find interviewees embracing aspects of hegemonic masculinity while at the same time performing sport in traditionally ‘feminine’ ways. Feminine-related traits include valuing inclusivity (in athletic ability and social identity), the de-emphasis of competition, and a focus on family and friendships. Masculine-related traits include the celebration of physicality and aggression and playing through serious head injuries.

Application of critical thinking to analysis: Emergent transformations in gender taking place via rugby hold the kernels for gender equity and wellness while simultaneously enabling certain problematic aspects of hegemonic masculinity to remain and/or become normalized.

Transferability: The gendered performances observed broaden possibilities for women in the world of sport. They may even provide an informative model for all sportspeople – women and men – to follow. Nevertheless, the (re)gendering that seems to be taking place may, at the same time, be masking and thereby reinforcing norms that are detrimental to the long-term well-being of athletes.