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Canadian Women's Experiences in Mixed-Sex Sport: Wheelchair Rugby

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Kinesiology

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Abstract

Wheelchair rugby exploded in popularity after the documentary *Murderball* was released in 2005. The sport was developed in Canada in the 1970s and named an official Paralympic sport in 2000 (Litchke et al., 2012). Wheelchair rugby is one of the few Paralympic or Olympic sports that includes mixed-sex participation. Where historically women with disabilities have had limited access to elite sporting competition (DePauw, 1997), wheelchair rugby provides the opportunity for women to represent themselves as competitive and physical beings, capable of the physicality and aggressive nature of the sport alongside men (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Yet there is a paucity of research in considering women's experiences' in these potentially highly gendered sport settings. This study uses a thematic analysis approach to explore female athletes' lived experiences of participation in wheelchair rugby. Five provincial athletes were interviewed and shared their complex experiences competing in wheelchair rugby.

Keywords

Wheelchair rugby, mixed-sex sport, women's experiences, narrative, disability sport

Summary for Lay Audience

While there are a wide range of studies examining women's involvement in sport, research has predominantly focused on men's experiences, even when the research is on mixed-sex sports. Wheelchair rugby is one of few mixed-sex sports and men and women compete on the same teams from the recreational level up to the international stage. Given the popularity of the 2005 documentary *Murderball*, wheelchair rugby has become more commonly known and as a result, many studies were developed on this sport after the documentary was released. However, the majority of these studies examine the masculinity in the sport, focusing primarily on men. The current research attempts to fill this gap created by examining the experience of Canadian female wheelchair rugby players. Themes from the interviews that are discussed include aggressive communication; forms of identity; feelings of belonging; and independence. This research is a glimpse into the complex lived experiences of these players and their experiences playing high-level wheelchair rugby with their mostly male teammates. This research contributes to the novel area of understanding lived experiences of women who compete in mixed-sex sporting competitions.

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

Wheelchair rugby was developed in Canada in the 1970s and named a Paralympic sport in 2000. The sport exploded in popularity after the documentary *Murderball* was released in the year 2005. *Murderball* documented the Canadian-American wheelchair rugby rivalry leading up to the 2004 Paralympic Games (Litchke et al., 2012). Despite this surge in popularity, little research has since been devoted to the experiences of these athletes, especially in the cases of female athletes within the sport and the ways in which gender influences their participation. This is not an anomaly, as little research has been completed at all on cis-gendered or otherwise identified women in disability sport (Blinde & McAllister, 1999; Seal, 2014; Richard, Joncheray, & Dugas, 2017; Hardin, 2007). Sport is gendered, meaning certain sports and characteristics associated with them are often viewed as masculine or feminine. Masculine sports are often considered to be those including heavy contact and physicality, such as rugby and hockey, whereas feminine sports are often associated with aesthetically pleasing sports, such as gymnastics or figure skating (Messner, 1988; Béki & Gál, 2013). Negative stereotypes have existed for athletes who participate in non-gender appropriate activities, such as women competing in rugby or men in gymnastics (Metheny, 1965). Rugby is one of the most physical sports a person can participate in and is therefore considered extremely masculine (Cahn, 2015; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Fallon & Jome, 2007). Traits associated with masculinity that permeate rugby are aggression, physicality, competitiveness, and power. Coincidentally, these qualities also represent forms of hegemonic masculinity, a “pattern of practice” that allows men’s dominance over women to continue (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity is dualistic and does not allow for the dynamic fluidity of relationships in contemporary sport cultures (Thorpe, 2010). The term ‘gendered sporting body’ is inclusive of male domination that is “reinforced and naturalized through sporting culture” (Thorpe, 2010, p. 179). These qualities of the gendered sporting body typically create a culture that is contained within the sport since most sports are segregated by gender. Wheelchair rugby presents a different dynamic, and unique research opportunity because it is a mixed-sex sport: both women and men compete together on the same teams. Though it is officially a mixed-sex sport, females are grossly underrepresented at the Paralympic Games. Of the 96 wheelchair rugby athletes listed in the most recent Paralympic Summer Games in 2016, only two were women (International Paralympic Committee, 2019).

Research Purpose

My research examined the experiences of female wheelchair rugby athletes and provided an opportunity for them to share their stories regarding their experiences playing the sport. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of women participating in the mixed-sex sport of wheelchair rugby in Canada. The following research question guided my research:

a) What is the lived experience of competitive female wheelchair rugby players participating in mixed-sex competition environments?

1.1 Gender as a Social Construction

At the outset, it is important to define terms such as ‘female’, ‘femininity’, ‘woman’, ‘male’, ‘men’, and ‘masculinity’. Femininity, associated with women, is a socially constructed concept “that defines how women should look and act and what they should value” (Hardy, 2015, p. 155). This includes fulfilling the roles society has historically shaped women to value, such as raising families and demonstrating feminine characteristics like submissiveness, gentleness, and compassion. When considered within the context of disability, these stereotypical feminine traits tend to disappear. Disabled females are often seen as nonsexual and non-gendered (Richard et al., 2017). Femininity is located at the opposite end of a gender continuum from masculinity, associated with men. Hartmann (2003) also defined masculinity as a socially constructed concept, centered around the connection of “sports to the body, physical activity, and material results” (p. 16). This defines how men should act and what they should value, such as athleticism, competitiveness, aggression, and power. These masculine values align with many combative sports, including wheelchair rugby.

This study proceeded with the understanding that gender and associated qualities of femininity and masculinity are socially constructed concepts whereas men and women are sex-based, biological definitions (Cahn, 2015; What is gender? What is sex? n.d.; Béki & Gál, 2013). I note this to specify the differences between terminologies commonly used. It should be noted that though I agree with researchers Cahn (2015) and Béki & Gál (2013) that gender is socially constructed, I will use the terms female and woman/women interchangeably throughout this paper, as with male and man/men. This

is not to discount other socially constructed or self-identified versions of gender, but rather to follow the gender-based definitions used in the sporting context.

1.2 Review of Literature

There is a definite gap in the literature on women's experiences in mixed-sex sporting competitions. I did not find any work that was completed exclusively on the women's experiences of competing in wheelchair rugby. This research aims to fill that gap and to add more broadly to the lack of research investigating women's experiences in mixed-gender sports. In order to best position my research within existing literature, I completed a literature review of relevant gender and sport histories and contemporary studies. The following section will outline relevant literature from three areas: a) women's involvement and identity in sport; b) Canadian disability sport and history of wheelchair rugby; and c) contemporary studies of wheelchair rugby.

1.2.1 Women's involvement and identity in sport

In order to contextualize this research, I started by considering research of women in sport, with a particular focus on experience in sport and mixed-sex competition to fully appreciate the findings from this study.

Organized sport has historically been a male-dominated field (Messner, 1988) and has also acted as a field to reinforce oppositional gender norms of masculinity and femininity (Channon et al., 2015; Fallon & Jome, 2007). Though female involvement in sport has grown over the last century, women still participate less frequently than men (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Historically, sports that were considered appropriate for women to participate in had characteristics that reflected the femininity of the fairer sex and

valued appearance and grace. These included figure skating, synchronized swimming, and gymnastics (Béki & Gál, 2013). In the early 1900s women's participation in sport at any level was met with opposition and seemed to oppose the true idea of femininity (Messner, 1988). It was generally accepted that team-based, organized sport in the 1900s was for men and was an opportunity to firmly demonstrate their masculinity and superiority over women (Messner, 1988).

English's (1978) work on "Sex Equality of Sport" (p. 276) was ahead of its time in discussing equal representation of the sexes in sport and arguing that sport itself contains a male bias. Sport has traditionally valued the strongest, fastest, and most powerful athletes who were usually men, as Stuntz and colleagues discuss in their 2011 work. Sport previously used two common strategies to work towards a fair playing field to accommodate for "physiologically disadvantaged groups" (p. 271): the first strategy was to create competition levels based on weight, age, or sex. The second strategy was to separate individuals by ability level, though those competing in recreational levels tend to be lesser valued than those who compete in the higher, more competitive, sporting leagues. English argued that women fell into the physiologically disadvantaged group and thus proposed a third strategy to level out the playing field: create a variety of sports. She described that though women were inferior in some biological traits needed in sports valued by society, such as football, they have other, superior traits, that allowed them to excel in sports such as dance or gymnastics. Creating a variety of sports would create the opportunity for women to be the best, without the stipulation that they are the best *woman*, which insinuated that men are always the better athlete. English (1978) argued society should work to create an environment where women experience success through a

variety of sports valuing traits commonly attributed to women, rather than creating sub-leagues of typically male-dominated sports where women experienced limited success.

Metheny (1965) sorted sports into a typology that exist across a spectrum with three distinct categories. Women's participation in sports is spread between these three categories, all differing in their social acceptance. One end of the spectrum is masculine sports, not recommended or socially acceptable for women. These could include contact sports requiring physical aggression such as ice hockey or rugby. On the opposite end of the spectrum are explicitly feminine sports, considered socially acceptable and encouraged for women such as figure skating and gymnastics. These sports include particular focus on aesthetic appearance. In the middle are all other sports considered neutral, such as swimming or certain athletics events (Metheny, 1965; Béki & Gál, 2013).

Metheny's sport spectrum links closely with Fallon and Jome's (2007) work on the gender-role conflict theory. This theory proposed that women participating in traditionally masculine sports such as rugby may experience gender-role conflict through pressure to fulfill both masculine and feminine roles (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Within this theory, conflict arose if women felt they could not fill either role completely, both as athlete (masculine) and traditional gender-role (feminine). Fallon and Jome (2007) studied female rugby players to address if there were any gender-role conflicts among the athletes and if there were conflicts, how the athletes addressed them. The athletes interviewed experienced some discrepant messaging from peers, family and friends around their appearance; sexual orientation; body type; and physicality, amongst other characteristics. The athletes experienced gender-role conflict, mainly around emphasizing their heterosexuality, as many women who participate in masculine sport are assumed to

be gay (Fallon & Jome, 2007). The study found that athletes responded to these discrepant messages by creating a support network within their rugby community. It was concluded that women who play rugby did experience gender-role conflict but minimized distress via support networks.

Mixed-Sex Participation

Little work has been completed in the area of females competing in mixed-sex sport (Fink et al., 2016). Since sport is often used to reinforce gender norms, it is to be expected that there is a conflict within mixed-sex sport. Stuntz and colleagues (2011) studied how mixed versus same-sex sport affected athletes' social support and perceived competence. Post-adolescence, men typically outperform women in physical tasks, which may lead to perceived incompetence among women in mixed-sex teams. The researchers reported that women found more support from other women in mixed-sex teams than in same-sex teams (Stuntz et al., 2011). This builds off Fallon and Jome's (2007) gender-role conflict research which demonstrated that women seek out other women for support networks. Stuntz and colleagues (2011) research supports the idea that gender, regardless if it is in a mixed or a same-sex sport setting, affects how athletes perceive their own abilities in that sport.

Many women report a preference for same-sex teams in sport participation (Channon et al., 2015). It has been suggested that women, as the subordinate and minority group in sport, should be able to choose between competing in a mixed-sex team or in an all-women's league (Channon et al., 2015). Sport continues to reinforce the gendered sporting body by using objective measures (height, weight, times) to compare

men and women. These measures unfairly favour men due to biologic composition, but spectators use them to compare men's and women's sports. This comparison results in male sports being perceived as more exciting and worthy, while women's sports are perceived as tame and inferior (Fink et al., 2016). Fink and colleagues (2016) utilize Kane's (1995) idea of a sport continuum, where "many women outperform men in a variety of athletic endeavours" (as cited in Fink et al., 2016, p. 1318). A sport continuum challenges set beliefs that men are superior or more athletic than women.

Theberge (1998) is one of few researchers to study integration within a masculine contact sport. Theberge also built off of Kane's (1995) idea of a sport continuum and the idea that research completed on women competing in primarily male, contact, team sports would prove that women are able to outperform many men. Theberge's (1998) research worked to dismantle the binary-gender composition that determines masculinity/men equals athleticism. She interviewed Canadian female hockey players who had experience playing on a mixed-sex team. Gender segregation can be a method for challenging the gendered sporting body but can also act as a "vehicle for continued oppression" (Theberge, 1998, p. 185). Female participation in hockey continues to increase, but girls commonly play on boys' teams due to lack of organized female leagues or because they assume it will be more competitive. Theberge's results were mixed: some players reported feeling welcomed on the mixed team at first, then followed by feelings of marginalisation. Other females had only positive experiences, where many agreed that they would not be able to compete against the top men in hockey leagues for social and cultural, but mainly physical reasons (Theberge, 1998). Theberge concluded the sport continuum is limited because it does not address or change the values in masculine sport.

There is also no widespread agreement surrounding mixed-sex sports, evidenced by women's comments in the interviews. While some women enjoyed participating in mixed-sex leagues, some faced unwelcoming environments to the point where it was easier to stick with women's teams. There is no clear answer to gender integration in sport, but the underlying values and ideologies held by patriarchal sport leagues does not help.

1.2.2 Canadian disability sport and history of wheelchair rugby

Disability sport is relatively new and began as a rehabilitation process for injured persons after the culmination of World War II (Howe, 2013). Dr. Ludwig Guttman, commonly attributed as the father of the Paralympic movement, treated individuals with spinal cord injuries (SCI) at the Stoke-Mandeville Hospital in England in the late 1940s (Mason, 2012). He was an advocate for sport as rehabilitation, and many wheelchair-based sports were created out of this time, to the point where the first Stoke-Mandeville Games were held in 1948. The games grew in size and number of sports, leading to the inaugural Olympiad for the Disabled (now known as the Paralympics) in Rome in 1960. Several hundred athletes from twenty-two countries took part, though Canada would not join until 1968 (Mason, 2012).

Wheelchair rugby was invented in Canada in 1977 by a group of quadriplegic athletes who wanted a sport that allowed for varying levels of upper body function to participate equally. This was in contrast to wheelchair basketball, the most popular sport available for individuals with SCI at the time, which favoured those with higher upper

body functioning (Litchke et al., 2012). Wheelchair rugby was originally known as murderball and was an alternative sport for those with reduced upper body functioning (Altmann et al., 2014; About the sport, 2018). The unique athlete-created basis of the sport sets it apart from many other adapted sports which are often created by able-bodied individuals for disabled athletes. Wheelchair rugby prides itself in challenging ableist assumptions about what individuals with SCI or other disabilities are capable of (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). The history of disability sport is entrenched in able-bodied individuals attempting to fix the disabled body. DePauw (1997) described the historical inequality of bodies in sport. Traditionally, the female and the disabled body were marginalized and excluded from sport and the able, masculine body was heralded as the desirable state. Individuals are taught from a young age that having a disability is to be considered “less than” (Campbell, 2009, p. 17), to the point where we can be considered to experience internalized ableism (Campbell, 2009). The phrasing of physical disability as “millions of individual natural disasters” by Titchkosky (2012, p. 92) demonstrates the negative attributes associated with disability. Titchkosky (2012) comments that many would agree physical disability is the inability to do things “in a way considered normal” (p. 89). This is a start to the definition of ableism: the perspective that the able-bodied experience is dominant; the belief that the able body is desirable; and all should work towards achieving this state (Linton, 1998; DePauw, 1997). Campbell (2001) defined ableism as “a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (p. 44). Athletes who cannot participate

in able-bodied- that is, normal- sport compete in disability sport, creating an ableist hierarchy of the types of sports.

Wheelchair rugby attempts to counter the messaging that athletes in disability sport are not as capable as their able-bodied peers (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). It is not integrated, meaning athletes must have a classifiable disability in order to compete (International Wheelchair Rugby Federation, 2019). Athletes are classed from 0.5 to 3.5, wherein lower classification indicates lower levels of physical function. The classification 4.0 indicates individuals are too high functioning to compete in wheelchair rugby at international events, though they may still compete at a club level (Altmann et al., 2014). Classifiers observe and test athletes' limb power and movement; trunk impairment; ball handling; and wheelchair skills to determine their classification (International Wheelchair Rugby Federation, 2019). Wheelchair rugby teams are comprised of four athletes on the court at one time, where their classification is cumulatively considered. Collectively, the athletes' classifications on the court may not exceed 8.0, leading to strategic decisions about lineups (Altmann et al., 2014). Men and women compete on the same teams, but female athletes receive a 0.5 deduction from their classification (About the sport, 2018). For example, women who are classed at a 0.5 then compete as a 0, representing zero points on the court and offering opportunity to include higher functioning athletes.

Wheelchair rugby first appeared as a full-medal sport at the Sydney Paralympic Games in 2000 (About the sport, 2018). Despite its name, wheelchair rugby is a sport comprised of unique elements from several sports including rugby, basketball, hockey and handball (Introduction to wheelchair rugby, 2020; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). All

players compete in wheelchairs, regardless if their disability requires them to use one outside of sport. Four players are on the court at one time per team and work to carry the ball across their opponent's goal line. Full contact between chairs is permitted. Different class levels refer to different roles that players may hold on the court. Lower class levels, also known as low-pointers (i.e. 0.5-1.5) often act as blockers while higher class levels, also known as high-pointers (i.e. 2.0-3.5) are often ball handlers (Litchke et al., 2012).

1.2.3 Current literature on wheelchair rugby

Scholars have previously examined the masculinity within wheelchair rugby itself, particularly after the documentary *Murderball* came out in 2005 (Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Litchke et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2009). Authors Lindemann and Cherney (2008) described the communication practices and the hyper-masculine culture of wheelchair rugby. The authors observed sideline and locker room talk amongst athletes. They analyzed how “macho” communication between players helped to manage disability stigma; framed meanings about disability and masculinity; and helped organizations with athlete rehabilitation (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 108). The authors emphasized the masculinity of the sport and how the athletes worked to overcome stereotypes about disability, particularly how men are eager to play the sport to prove their masculinity post-SCI recovery (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). Players described how they are willing to sacrifice their already-injured bodies for the sake of the game, such as diving after a loose ball. These characteristics of sacrifice and toughness are reflective of masculine culture and demonstrate how athletes reinforce masculinity through the sport. Lindemann and Cherney (2008) argue that the sport challenges “ableist assumptions about what persons with quadriplegia can do” (p. 108).

They spoke to three female players, who acknowledged that they are few and far between and who reiterate the sport's toughness. The women downplayed the intense masculine practices they have experienced in the sport but agree that they must demonstrate their toughness for male athletes to accept them. Athletes used communicative practices to downplay physical contact in wheelchair rugby, reflecting a common masculine practice to act unbothered by potential stress or injury to the body (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). The female athletes interviewed described how they must demonstrate they are not afraid to take a hit for them to be seen as "one of the guys" (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 115). This study reinforced gender hierarchies and ableist, masculine norms that are emphasized throughout wheelchair rugby.

Gard and Fitzgerald's (2008) work focused on dissecting disability representation in the *Murderball* documentary. The authors discussed disability representation in the media: disabled individuals are usually portrayed as undesirable and unfortunate, prone to pity; or heralded as saint-like. In either representation, those who are disabled are categorized as the 'other'. The authors identify the documentary about being more than wheelchair rugby; it is a rampant show of masculinity. Gard and Fitzgerald (2008) conclude that while the documentary demonstrated how masculine these players are, the athletes needed to overtly emphasize this by constantly reiterating parts of their lives that are hyper-masculine to the viewers, such as their physical aggression. Within a short but explicit section addressing player sexuality, Gard and Fitzgerald (2008) determined the need to link "wheelchair rugby players to symbols of hegemonic, straight, non-disabled masculinity" (p. 135), much like DePauw's (1997) description of the ideal body as able and masculine. In the documentary, players work to distance themselves from other

disability sports, insisting that wheelchair rugby is different due to the seemingly cutthroat selection process in order to make the national team, and the reiteration that this is not a sport that just anyone can play. The authors' largest critique of *Murderball* is that it appears that in the process of wanting to raise its image and awareness in mainstream media; it stomps on other, often marginalized populations in order to get there (Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008).

Litchke and colleagues (2012) interviewed five male wheelchair rugby athletes about the personal meaning of competing in the sport. All players interviewed commented on the positive outcomes of their involvement playing wheelchair rugby. Their participation improved their physical and mental health, and independence in everyday life. The men explained how they relied on more experienced teammates to teach them everyday skills such as transferring in and out of their chairs independently. Litchke and colleagues (2012) completed field observations and interviews and observed that many players continued to be social with their teammates outside of the sport. Athletes insisted on being seen as an athlete first and foremost, and not being pitied for their SCI. The five athletes consistently discussed wheelchair rugby's physicality and the sense of empowerment that it gave them (Litchke et al., 2012). Hitting and even tipping over an opponent was a way to show physical and emotional dominance on the court. Conversely, being tipped is a hit to the ego for athletes. The athletes' enjoyed the experience of social bonding that doling out and receiving hits created.

Authors Goodwin and colleagues (2009) studied the sense of community within wheelchair rugby by interviewing eleven national players, one of whom was a woman. The athletes described how important the rugby community was to them, not only in

understanding what life was like as a quadriplegic athlete (which all eleven athletes interviewed were) but also in increasing independence such as transfer skills and pushing extra chairs on their own (Goodwin et al., 2009). The authors also described how medical advice is widely ignored; doctors told the athletes to save their shoulders and use a power chair, and athletes were instead influenced by their teammate's independence in manual chairs (Goodwin et al., 2009). The men interviewed described how open the rugby community was, and their extreme sense of belonging. They could talk about anything, particularly issues unique to SCI (Goodwin et al., 2009). As previously mentioned, wheelchair rugby is a disability sport created by quadriplegic athletes, not able-bodied individuals, and that seems to influence the sport's culture. The athletes interviewed in Goodwin and colleagues (2009) work valued the impact that wheelchair rugby had on changing the perception of SCI in the general population and felt that the hard-hitting, full-contact nature of the sport worked to challenge general assumptions about individuals with SCI. Goodwin and colleagues (2012) concluded with the determination that wheelchair rugby provides a much-needed sense of community for its athletes.

Most literature on wheelchair rugby has focused on the male athletes and/or the masculine culture of the sport (Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Litchke et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2009). There is a gap in the literature regarding gender within a mixed-sex activity (Richard et al., 2017; Fink et al., 2016), as well as female athletes in elite disability sport (Seal, 2014). My research filled this gap by examining the lived experience of competitive female wheelchair rugby players participating in mixed-sex sport. There is a concern that women may be driven away

from the sport due to the intense masculine culture and instead drawn to other sports where they can be on a team with exclusively female teammates.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

I utilized Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field to frame my research and findings (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's habitus is a concept about the unconscious systems that lead to the establishment of people's internal values and norms (Purdue & Howe, 2015; Kitchin & Howe, 2013). Habitus is the basic lens through which people view and interact with the social world (Laberge & Kay, 2002). The way we are raised, our social interactions, and the values we are exposed to as we grow all shape habitus.

Bourdieu's concept of field is intrinsically linked with habitus. Hierarchies of social organizations create a field, based on common interests that force groups to interact. An example of this is a sports team where individuals, all with their own values and norms from their own habitus, come to interact in a "social arena" known as a field (Kitchin & Howe, 2013, p. 125). In my research, individuals interested in competing in wheelchair rugby come together to compete within individual teams: club, provincial, and national. Each individual team is made up of different individuals, therefore each team has its own unique culture and values. Different athletes on the same team may report different perceptions on the team's culture, based on the athlete's own habitus (e.g. values, etc). Relationships and interactions are fraught with both obvious and underlying signs and struggles of power. Field is an area of goods, services, or status "centered around a particular issue...and the network (or configuration) of historical relations of

power between positions held by individuals, social groups or institutions” (Laberge and Kay, 2002, p. 253).

Capital refers to the power an individual holds (Laberge & Kay, 2002). There are different levels and forms of capital. Social capital refers to social values or resources an individual possesses that raise or lower their status within a particular social group (Kitchin & Howe, 2013). An athlete’s gender could affect their social capital within a mixed-sex sport team. Since it is a masculinized sport, females could be considered to hold less social capital than male teammates. Wheelchair rugby athletes with higher classification may hold more ability and therefore power, and could be more readily accepted than athletes with lower classifications. This could be flipped for women, where female players who have lower classifications could be viewed as holding more capital from their teammates because of their additional 0.5 point deduction.

Bourdieu was criticized for omitting gender from his work on habitus (Brown, 2006; Thorpe, 2009), leading to an essay titled *Masculine Domination* (Krais, 2006). Several researchers have since used Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to examine gender and sport (Mennesson, 2012; Thorpe, 2009; Thorpe, 2010). Thorpe theorized that when utilizing Bourdieu, scholars often frame his theories in sporting contexts to talk about gendered norms and values. Krais (2006) identified that gender is so embodied into our identity from the time we are born that we interpret the world via these gendered views, therefore demonstrating gender is an essential part of habitus. Bourdieu’s habitus is an ideal lens to interpret my data through because sporting culture tends to reinforce gender roles humans learn about from birth. Sport teams have strong cultures and subcultures, and these cultures force newcomers to “assimilate” quickly, or be left out (Lindemann &

Cherney, 2008, p. 110). Athletes reinforce this culture by participating in the sport, and therefore accepting the existing values and culture. If athletes participate, but do not buy in to the team or sport culture, they risk being an outsider and not being accepted by their teammates. Athletes joining a team quickly learn what role to portray in the field to avoid being excluded and to gain capital with their teammates. Gendered habitus also helped to inform my research agenda and interpretation of data. There are fewer females competing in wheelchair rugby and less is known about their experiences, even though they are also part of what has been referred to as a masculine environment. The aim of this project is to better understand the female narratives of being involved in a masculine sport by framing their stories in a gendered habitus lens.

Contemporary Studies with Bourdieu and Gender

Thorpe (2010) used Bourdieu's habitus to discuss gender embodiment and masculinity in snowboarding culture across the globe. She found that female snowboarders who excelled in their physical capabilities were accepted by their male peers, whereas newer female snowboarders who were not as capable were not accepted. Thorpe used Bourdieu's habitus to frame conventional images of men and women that are echoed in snowboarders' assumptions about male and female skill level. Female snowboarders negatively spoke about their skill in comparison to their male counterparts because gendered habitus instilled in childhood informed them males are athletically superior (Thorpe, 2010). Mennesson (2012) utilized gendered habitus to analyze behaviour within women's soccer and boxing participation in France, by interviewing female boxers who competed in a mixed-sex environment. Mennesson (2012) noted that the female boxers typically accept the feminine gender stereotypes thrust upon them by

their male training groups to gain respect. Soccer is also considered a primarily masculine domain and is segregated by sex. Mennesson (2012) also found that female soccer leagues remain marginalized and not nearly as popular as men's soccer because the players were not considered feminine enough for men's attention. This work demonstrates use of Bourdieu's habitus within a gendered realm to frame gender in sport, which establishes a frame for me to use within gender, sport, and disability for this study.

Field, the internal power relations of individuals engaged in the same activity, was used by several feminist scholars to explain gender norms and interactions between men and women. Thorpe (2009) used Bourdieu's field in her work on gender within snowboarding. Thorpe (2009) examined how female snowboarders held distinct identities within the snowboarding culture (professionals, weekend warriors, and poseurs) but described that gender is a secondary factor in power relations (capital) within a group. Thorpe (2009) argued that ability and commitment to the sport is the first factor for power relations. If a snowboarder is talented, regardless of gender, they are more likely to be accepted by their peers and be unofficially higher on the social hierarchy, or field. Only after talent is considered does gender count as a factor in the power relations social hierarchy. According to Thorpe (2009), a talented female snowboarder may earn the respect of her male peers if she is a dedicated professional and demonstrates excellent skill, but if she is a recreational weekend snowboarder, she may be identified first by her gender, rather than her skill. She would theoretically hold a lower position in the snowboarding field based on her talent and gender.

These researchers used Bourdieu's habitus and field to establish a framework regarding gender in sport, setting up a successful frame to use within my research.

Additionally, the researchers considered cultural factors and individual power relations when they analyzed data. Though little research has been done with female disability sport athletes, research exists surrounding habitus, field and capital within female athletes in general, and these studies helped to further frame and guide my analysis.

The aim of this study was to research women's athletic experiences and consider relations of power within the disability field. I used Bourdieu's gendered habitus, capital and field as a lens to interpret the data I gathered. Using these concepts to guide my research and helped to interpret individual life stories of female wheelchair rugby athletes.

Chapter 2

2 Methodology

This thematic analysis is framed in an interpretive research paradigm. The aim of interpretive research is to understand participant's experiences and interpret their meanings (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). This was accomplished through understanding the athletes' lived experiences competing in a mixed-sex sporting environment and interpreting their meanings via the theoretical framework. I maintained a relativist ontology, where reality is socially constructed and individuals believe there are multiple meanings of the world, based on their own experiences (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). This ontological viewpoint aligned itself well with thematic work, as each participant had their own reality based on their own experiences. I held a subjectivist epistemology, which believes that the researcher is involved in the research, and therefore cannot be neutral in their beliefs (Thorpe & Olive, 2016).

2.1 Positionality of the Researcher

It is essential to note my own positionality with regards to the research. I am an able-bodied female rugby player and have participated for ten years. Able-bodied rugby is segregated, and though rugby clubs have both men's and women's teams, I have not had the experience of playing full-contact mixed-sex rugby. Typically, the only opportunity for the men's and women's teams to play together is in a game of touch rugby (no tackling) for warm-up. Although the women's coaches have always encouraged this, telling them that playing with the men will improve their skills, I have never enjoyed playing touch rugby with men. My experiences have been that the top players on the men's team dominate the game, usually refusing to pass to the women

unless the women have proven themselves to be of excellent skill level. While observing these touch games, it is common to see men taking up the middle of the field while women find themselves pushed out to the outside. Outside of university teams, I have played for seven rugby clubs and have seen the men's teams receive preferential treatment in every club. Men's teams carry higher numbers and therefore field more teams. They tend to play on better fields, receive more promotion, and overall receive more funding.

I was interested in examining the experiences of women who do not have the choice of playing with men, but have to due to the sport. Wheelchair rugby is an incredible sport to watch and, in my limited experience, to play as well. In the opportunities I have had to watch wheelchair rugby, I do not recall seeing any women compete on the court. I was curious to note if the women who play wheelchair rugby shared any of my experiences playing touch rugby with men's teams. As a firm believer in equality in sport, I was interested to hear the experiences of women who play wheelchair rugby, which drove the creation of my research question.

2.2 Approach to Research

An exploratory approach that gives voice to the participants via their narratives is the best method to explore the lived experiences of female wheelchair rugby athletes. I identified this approach as the method for representing stories from a minority population because it is an excellent method identified for researchers completing thematic analysis of descriptive work (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). These athletes' experiences may be very different from others and is reflective of their reality. Sandelowski (1995) stated that the main goal of deciding upon a sample size of participants to interview is "to ensure

that the sample size is small enough to manage the material and large enough to provide a ‘new and richly textured understanding of experience’” (p. 183). I targeted five to eight athletes for this study. This small sample size reflected the pool of eligible participants across Canada, as well as the intricacies of narrative work.

Participants

Emails were sent to 55 wheelchair rugby clubs, disability sport clubs, and individuals related to these organizations across Canada. All email addresses were publicly available via websites. The email indicated that participants were actively being recruited for this study if they had played wheelchair rugby at the provincial or national level within the past two years. As described in the introduction, female players at competitive levels in Canada are limited, and therefore it was desirable to gain their perspective on being a minority in the sport. Of the 55 emails sent, six players responded indicating their interest in participating in the study. Five athletes were ultimately interviewed for this study, as one athlete did not end up participating in the study.

Athletes were deemed eligible for this study if they had competed at the provincial or national level within the past two years, in order to ensure the most accurate data. All athletes interested in participating in the study were required to be fluent in English and be at least thirteen years of age to participate. Athletes who participate at the provincial level are assumed to be independent and at a capacity to consent for themselves to participate in this research. There was not an official age maximum, as the inclusion criteria of competing within the last two years naturally narrowed the ages of athletes available.

Players reported having between three to six years of playing experience. All players currently compete at the club and provincial level on two teams. The demographics, as well as years played, are presented in Table 1. For privacy reasons, I have not listed their ages; disability; or whether their disability is congenital or acquired.

Table 1

Summary of playing experience

Athlete Pseudonym	Years Played- Club	Years Played- Provincial	Total Years Played
Mary	3	2	3
Felicia	3	3	3
Charlotte	4	3	4
Nadia	6	2	6
Gail	5	2	5

Data Collection

Ethics approval was acquired from the Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board prior to participant recruitment and data collection (see Appendix A). As previously stated, recruitment emails were sent out to wheelchair sport clubs; wheelchair rugby clubs; and individuals related to these organizations (see Appendix B). My contact information was included in the email, and asked contacts to forward the email, including the letter of information, to eligible athletes (see Appendix C). Interested athletes contacted me and, upon confirmation of eligibility criteria, an initial interview was scheduled. During the first interview I explained the nature and the purpose of the

study. All athletes were provided with a letter of information and consent form. Four athletes provided verbal consent during the interview and one provided written consent prior. All athletes agreed to have their interviews audio-recorded and all agreed to a follow-up interview, for a total of ten interviews (two per athlete). Participants were informed that they would be assigned a pseudonym and that no identifying details would be used in the dissemination of the research. Four participants chose to conduct their interviews on the phone, and one participant chose to have her interviews on a video conferencing system. Initial interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 26-65 minutes (initial interview guide can be found in Appendix D). Follow-up interviews, also semi-structured and based upon themes from the initial interviews, lasted between 14-26 minutes (follow-up interview guide can be found in Appendix E). I transcribed all initial interviews and highlighted key themes and notable pieces of information that I wanted to inquire further about in the follow-up interview. Additionally, I noted if there was anything the athlete said that I did not fully comprehend in the first interview, to be followed up in the second interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Athletes were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Certain information was not shared as it may compromise their identity due to the small population these athletes belong to. The objective of data analysis was not to find consistent themes across the athletes' diverse stories, but to analyze experiences in relation to a common factor and to identify patterns related to a common issue (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Thematic analysis allows for threads between stories to be linked under common patterns to develop stories (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016).

I followed Braun, Clarke and Weate's (2016) guide for how to complete thematic analysis. The guide has six steps and is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Braun, Clarke & Weate (2016) Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1 Familiarization	Re-read interview transcripts and listen to recorded interviews to completely immerse and familiarize yourself with the data
2 Coding	Code interesting data related to the research question
3 Theme development	Cluster codes to find higher-level themes
4 Theme refinement	Check codes and analysis work well within the whole dataset and you are representing the story; check if the story you're telling is a compelling and coherent way of addressing the research question
5 Theme naming	Identifying the essence of each theme and generating clear definitions and names (or quotes) for the themes
6 Writing up	Continue writing (should be doing it through entire process) and compile, develop, and edit existing analytic writing. Work for a balance between data extracts and analytic commentary.

I started to write my literature review and theoretical framework prior to conducting interviews, which aided later analysis. I transcribed all interviews immediately after conducting them and began familiarizing myself with the data, noting emerging ideas I had while reviewing the interview, to help with coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These

memos served as a tool to start seeing the interviews as a whole, and to link ideas between narratives. I created an online spreadsheet with a separate sheet for each participant and interview, in order to organize the data and keep participant information separate. After re-reading transcriptions and listening to audio recordings, I highlighted key phrases and made short notes about my own interpretations of data before organizing these into different themes in the spreadsheets. I consulted with my advisor regarding the initial themes to ensure validity and to minimize personal bias. Discussing themes with my advisor allowed for alternative interpretations to the data. The themes were broad enough that one name or title was not enough to encapsulate the breadth of the athletes' stories. I identified general commonalities to describe the themes for the reader in the start of the results section, but selected athlete quotes to title each section, in order to provide a more thorough introduction of the complexities of the narratives. I then worked to write an analysis that reflected the complex athlete experiences, with an attempted balance at the rich data extracts and my own commentary.

Chapter 3

3 Results

Utilizing thematic analysis allowed insight into the layered lived experiences of these five athletes. Instead of forcing their stories into themes which may have left out key elements of their stories, I identified several commonalities across their stories and used quotes to introduce and represent each section, which discuss these commonalities. These commonalities included communication; forms of identity; feelings of belonging; and independence.

3.1 “I can also take the criticism better because I am older, right. So people yell at me right, and I’m not like, crying anymore”

A common thread throughout the interviews was the aggression within the sporting environment. Players such as Charlotte talked about how wheelchair rugby is a strategic sport: it requires both strategy and finesse to be competitive on the court. Understanding the strategy comes with experience, which results in the more experienced players sharing feedback with the newer players, though not always in an acceptable manner. Nadia spoke to her positive experience on the court, related to her ability to understand what is expected of her: “I find that I’ve been respected. You know, the coach and the players, just because I know my place, I know what I’m supposed to do, and I can be there.” She continued to explain that she is of value to her team on the court through understanding her role, which gained her respect from her mostly male teammates:

The same guy who told people to ‘eff off’, I got mad at him quite a few times in the past for non-rugby related stuff, he called me his super shadow all weekend

because every time he turned around I was there to block for him...that's what it's all about, it's about the game instead of sex.

Nadia spoke to the intensity of the sport and the aggression required to hold your own in a sport where the guys, simply “don't give a shit if they hit you too hard, spin you or flip you on the ground.” According to her as well as other athletes, it is easier to join this sport if you have experience in a masculine environment, like growing up with brothers or being a self-expressed ‘tomboy’. Women who join the sport expecting to be welcomed or to have the sport accommodate their various levels of athleticism have often quit.

Nadia talked about two women who joined her team, one of whom did not last very long:

Whereas the girl only came out for the one year...she grew up with all females around her...so if she got hit hard or told to, you know, fucking hurry up by some of the older guys, and the language they use and some of the dirty jokes they like to talk about, she's not used to [that].

However, Nadia also talked about how attractive the sport is to her because of this culture, saying that “they [her teammates] will tell you straight out ‘hey you know, don't be lazy, don't make an excuse not to come out’...the encouragement and the experience and they don't take your bullshit.” Several other athletes interviewed felt that new players, particularly women, had to endure whatever the sport threw at them in order to gain acceptance from their peers.

A notable outlier in this theme is Mary who, like other athletes, spoke quite highly of her team and how welcoming they have been, particularly since her switch from an individual sport to this team-based sport. “I'm really lucky. People are so nice to

me...they really want to try to help me,” and “they really want to try to help me so that’s one thing- I haven’t really experienced any sexism in the sport.” Mary was emphatic throughout her interviews that her teammates’ honesty and vulnerability created a tight-knit group; she did not mention anything about aggressive or masculine talk amongst the team, as other athletes spoke to. She went as far to say that, “people just treat each other as another athlete who they want to learn from and get better with.”

Felicia also spoke about the aggressive communication in wheelchair rugby. Felicia was involved in masculine sports most of her life and was quite matter of fact when she discussed her team’s culture:

Any competitive team that I’ve ever played on I’ve had to earn my spot and I’ve had to prove myself. If not like, you know, people don’t even talk to you really because you don’t have value to them, so I’m not quite sure that’s a gender thing. I think definitely you’re behind the 8-ball because you’re a woman, you’ve really got to prove yourself.

This is a somewhat different situation than Nadia talked about. Felicia acknowledged that many of the masculinized sports she has been involved with have a common thread, where fellow athletes ignore you until you prove your worth. Though she said it is not a gender issue, she went on to say that because she is a female, she naturally started even further away from gaining teammates’ respect than male athletes would. Felicia’s experience in the masculine sports world is clear when she talks about receiving coaching and feedback from her team: “I’m not someone that’s going to sit there and get defensive

and come up with excuses every time my coach tells me something, I'm going to nod my head and pull up my fucking socks.”

Finally, Charlotte's casual comment that “I also can take the criticism better because I am older, right. So people yell at you, yell at me, and I'm not like, crying anymore.” Charlotte reflected that she is quite hard on herself, as she thinks many women are. She also acknowledged that some women like to be coached differently than men, which can present a challenge in mixed-sex sport. She prefers positive encouragement, something she noted that “men don't necessarily like...they, you know, can be a bit jelly.”

There were unique experiences with aggressive communication between these five athletes. Brianna commented that she responded well to this type of communication by, “pulling up her...socks” when told to do something differently by her coach. Mary spoke to how tight-knit and welcoming her team had been and made no mention of aggressive or masculinized communication, other than to praise her teammates for their honesty and vulnerability. Nadia, though she acknowledged that it takes a certain woman to be in this sport to deal with the aggressiveness, talked about being respected while at the same time being told to ‘eff off’ by a teammate. The experiences of these women demonstrate that wheelchair rugby is rife with aggressive and often vulgar communication between players, something these athletes freely admit, and embrace.

3.2 “So they’re more likely to take female players in if you’re a low pointer, because that doesn’t affect the game as much”

All five athletes spoke to some degree about their identities as a female within a mixed-sex sport and the complexities that accompany this role. Several shared their thoughts around the automatic 0.5 point deduction in their classification for female players, which is recognized within North America but not globally; and their thoughts about playing in a male-dominated sport.

To begin, two athletes stated matter-of-factly that there has never been a female on the American or Canadian national team who is not a low-pointer. Felicia described that:

If you look at the history of the US women’s team or the Canadian women’s team, the only players that are women that made the team are low-pointers, even like a 0.5 because then they’re playing, they’re a zero...the coaches call them their unicorns because we...represent zero points on the court.

Mary echoed this when talking about national team selections: “so they’re more likely to take female players in if you’re a low-pointer because that doesn’t affect the game as much.” All five women interviewed are high-level competitive athletes, having played a minimum of two years on their respective provincial teams. Two of the athletes interviewed expressed desire or interest in playing for the national team, though they acknowledged that the sport is stacked against them. These athletes will not be identified for privacy purposes. The fact that only women who have been low-pointers have made the national team is one part of the uphill struggle to achieve their goals. Another

challenge to not just playing on the national team but competing on a mixed-sex sport in general, is perceived as biological in nature. Felicia bluntly stated, “I’m a woman trying to gain the muscle mass of a man, which is basically impossible,” and later saying that if “you put two of my arms together it’s one of their arms.” This does not bode well in a sport where, according to Mary, “you need two big things: you need power and you need speed. And with how you know, female and male bodies are built, DNA-wise genetically men just can generate more power and speed.”

Acknowledging the constant game of catch-up that female wheelchair rugby athletes play is just part of the sport, according to these athletes. Nadia admitted that “at first I didn’t like the 0.5 deduction but...it sort of levels us to their playing field...we’re still weaker, we’re slower.” As female athletes, regardless of how skilled or elite they are, they have the 0.5 deduction taken off their official classification level, which every athlete reported having changed over the years due to a variety of reasons. Intense training to improve performance can create a negative perception of the athlete’s true classification level, as Felicia is quite frustrated with:

It’s okay when all the other girls get a half point off because you know, they’re floating around like a pylon, and there’s other girls that are having an impact on the sport it’s like ‘whoa wait a second, there’s no way that can possibly be...it’s impossible they could be athletic, there’s gotta be something else going on here’.

Felicia trains twice a week with her team and multiple times a week with a trainer at a gym to improve her strength and abilities on the court but described how this extra training has backfired and her classification has come into question because of it. She

expressed her frustrations with the classification system, both personally and on behalf of a friend in the sport:

He [the classifier] told her that her function was a 1.5, but because she had too much dominance on the court, he had to put her up to a 2, and that was because the other girls at the time getting classed were poor athletes, whereas she is super competitive and she's an awesome player. So basically what's happening now is we're almost getting penalized if you're a competitive player in the sport.

Felicia also faced accusations of cheating from her own teammates:

There's not as many people I guess that have the same sort of athletic resume or background as I have, I think. And I think sometimes that becomes threatening for the guys because you know, lots of the guys are going well- 'if she's improving this quickly, then she has to either be cheating or she has to have more function than she does'.

Mary also discussed how her classification had changed as a result of one tournament where she "played extremely well, probably one of the best games I've played so far in my career up until now" and that happened to be a tournament a classifier was watching her at. As a result, her classification was changed which significantly impacted her effectiveness in the sport. It took an official protest and video demonstration for Mary to be able to be re-classed to a more appropriate level. Gail spoke to being re-classed as an athlete and how this benefitted her. She joked of how "I'm a really crappy 3 but I'm a good 2.5" (actual classifications have been changed to protect identity). Nadia said the

same thing upon being re-classed: “I think I would’ve been played a little more harsh and gotten a little more court time if I was classed correctly in the first place.”

3.3 “I do lots of other sports now that have me in a wheelchair, but not one that I have found to be like rugby...that gives you so much information and unconditional acceptance”

The athletes spoke highly of the sport and its’ many attributes, particularly the sense of belonging it brings them despite being a minority. They also spoke to the multiple roles many of them fulfill through being full-time working mothers as well as high-level athletes. Nadia spoke the above quote as a main reason she continues to play the sport. Many discussed how great wheelchair rugby is for stress management and clearing the mind. Mary perhaps said it best:

It’s so fun, it gets the adrenaline kicking, it’s intensive, it’s exciting and one thing I love- honestly, obviously the team dynamic is very good and everything, but one thing I love the most is that if you’re really stressed out from a day of work...you do the whole practice ...everything just feels so much better.

Charlotte continually referred to how strategic the game is, forcing players to rely on their mind just as much as their body: “great fitness, challenging, and very strategic...and I always like the social stuff.”

When asked about the number of women in the sport, most said they were hugely outnumbered. Some explained that this is unique to disability sport in general, as there are not as many females with a disability as there are men. Felicia laughed as she attempted to explain this phenomenon:

There's only like 4% representation of girls in the sport. Now obviously, there's less women in general that play male-dominated sports or like, contact sports, that's just in able-bodied too, it would be the same parallel. The same reason there's just a smaller group of us in this sport because there's even less women that are disabled. Um...I don't know, we just think that girls do less dumb shit!

Gail concurred with Felicia's statement and summarized: "I think as a statistic there are more males injured than females." There are more men who have acquired injuries than women due to higher probability for men to engage in risky behavior, akin to Felicia's comments. Mary was the one athlete who agreed there may be more males than females but insisted there were actually more females playing than originally thought: "there's a lot more females than we tend to think that there are...we actually have quite good numbers." Despite being outnumbered, athletes were audibly excited when they spoke of opportunities to play with other females. Several athletes recently attended an all-female camp in Houston. Gail was one of those athletes and stated, "it was incredible...the support of it was very empowering, the environment was a very unique and positive experience." Most athletes also expressed their hopes of being able to create a Wonder Women touring team. Gail said, "I'd love for there to be a Wonder Women Canadian or North American team that we could actually send around," and Nadia said that the one time she got to play on an all-women's line up it was "awesome."

Athletes were asked about the mixed-sex wheelchair rugby environment, and whether they would ever see or support a future in the sport with a separate women's league. The overwhelming consensus was negative. Gail attributed this to numbers and said that "I would like to see more female- all female teams, but as far as a league on our

own, no, I just don't see it as a reality." Charlotte concurred "I'd like to do both [mixed and female league]...we tried putting together a team because there's some women's only competitions...we just couldn't find the funding to do it." She acknowledged the geographical constraints of attempting a female-only league: "it would obviously have to be a Canada thing." Her excitement was clear about the potential of a female team: "I would be excited about having a women's team, because I think it's a different kind of woman [who plays wheelchair rugby] who isn't kind of back stabby or whatever...I'm being very stereotypical right now."

Other athletes expressed concern at affecting the spirit of wheelchair rugby if a women's league were created. Nadia in particular was concerned at such a change and said that a female league would turn the level of the game "down a notch." She worried that everything from the speed, the hits, the game play, and the rationale would change with a female league, and also expressed concern that "a female version of this particular sport won't attract as much media or supporters or sponsors as the male ones would." She went on to express that if a women's team were to form, it would likely have women who have not played before and "the sports will downgrade by quite a bit because the girls are not used to hitting, they aren't excited about hitting, worried about injuries." Mary acknowledged that from a biologic standpoint a female league "would be fair...but I don't know if I would like that because definitely we have a good dynamic going here" and went on to say that "men still would be able to get their recognition but I don't know if females necessarily are going to get the same level of recognition." Several athletes expressed that playing with men increased their skills and their level of play. Nadia said that:

I think the exciting part, I mean, when guys are playing, they're faster than us so [that] drives us to speed up to catch them. They've been in the game longer than most of us, so they know the positions, the game play, how things are, they have more tricks up their sleeves. Of course, in time that can be learned.

Gail said that "I like it because you know, they tend to push me a little bit more. And I mean, they're the majority in the sport so they're the people who...are leading the way or charging the way." Wheelchair rugby is a unique sport that, as Mary described, has "parts of wheelchair basketball, parts of rugby in there, you can see parts of hockey" and has rules from "a mixture of different, other sports- kind of complicated." As a result, it can be a tough sport to pick up. Charlotte talked about women's experiences with learning:

I don't know how women now, when they're growing up, are taught about failure. Men seem to be able to kind of, get up a lot faster and try again, and maybe they just have that bit of a competitive nature about them and always have. And generally speaking, I think women tend to- if they fail, it's like well I'm never going to do that again!

As a result, Charlotte went on to talk about how she tried to be extra encouraging to women who are coming out and trying wheelchair rugby for the first time.

Trying wheelchair rugby for the first time can be intimidating, but according to Nadia and Felicia, it really takes a certain type of woman to enjoy and stick with the sport. As previously mentioned, Nadia said she grew up a self-identified tomboy which helped with fitting in: "so either I have to suck it up and deal with everything I'm dealt by the guys- I grew up a tomboy so I didn't really care about some of the antics they did- but

most girls aren't." Within the women who stick with the sport, there tends to be distinct differences. Felicia was also in attendance at the Houston all-women's camp and reported that "there was a core group of like 10-15 girls who are super intense, competitive, we hit hard and you know, we run with the guys and the rest of them just like...you know." Felicia went on to say that she has enjoyed her experience in the sport thus far, but specified that:

The guys in wheelchair rugby are super welcoming and they're really nice and everything but you can tell um, you know, the difference between if you're being respected or if...they're being nice to you because you know, you're playing this sport and it's cute.

Nadia seemed to agree with this, saying that "most the girls...I've seen that are playing all either have experience living and growing up with all brothers or...lean towards the tomboy kind of childhood growing up." She remembered a woman who came out to her club: "And another girl came out to play...as much as I could do for her, she's not improving as well as the other players, especially the guys, so she quit after a year."

Many of the athletes interviewed have families, and freely spoke of the unique role this puts them in. Nadia was firm in her stance that "I am a mother first, and at this time a player second," though expressed frustration that "these guys, they don't understand hey, I need time for my baby, and I need to give my husband a break." Wheelchair rugby competitions often consist of weekend-long tournaments, taking players away from their families. Nadia continued to explain the multiple roles she plays "we were away last weekend and we came home...it's pretty selfish of me to go away

and my husband's not happy with me, you know, sort of taking myself out [from her family]." Gail summarized it by saying "that's why getting away for tournaments on the weekend is really great, I get to just hang out and just be me without the mom part." The athletes face the unique complexities of competing as an athlete while also being a working mother. For the most part these women's male teammates do not share the same roles and responsibilities since mothers are typically primary caretakers. Nadia went so far as to say that "it's a negative factor and that's why a lot of female players don't come back." She talked about how her male teammates do not seem to understand her need to prioritize her family:

Sometimes having to miss practice or tournaments, the rest of the guys they just don't get it. And the response that I got has put a pretty ugly taste in my mouth. From my teammates. And basically, last month, I told them to fuck off.

Charlotte also played a dual role of working full-time mom and athlete. She described it a little more gently and said, "I definitely sometimes feel I should like, I should be going and making more of an effort," but said she felt she is in the "middle of the ground" in terms of commitment on her team with how she balances family and athletics. "Some people are more dedicated than others, for sure...there's some people that I see that are, you know, won't ever miss a practice. There are, you know, people that I never see."

Gail was quite open about balancing these roles as well. "Sometimes...I'm just beat by the end of the day, I come home, I make dinner, and it's, sometimes you know, my laziness takes over and wins and I'm like I'm not having it today". She spoke highly

of her team, “everybody understands and first and foremost, we have to prioritize our health.” Gail also spoke to her family’s support of her playing and described how her husband supports her playing as he “notices a huge difference in me sort of, post-rugby and he knows how good it is for me.”

Finally, many of the athletes described how despite anything else they said, they get along well with their teammates. Charlotte said “you know, I mean I’ve always sort of gotten along probably better with men than most women,” which Nadia echoed: “I don’t like girls getting together, they either bitch around or gossip about other people...I don’t have that many...girls as friends.” Both expressed how much they enjoyed the mixed-sex company. Though some athletes acknowledged they are very aware at tournaments of being in the minority, Nadia said she feels “even though there’s not that many girls out, we’re just...one of the guys.” Charlotte acknowledged some changes in wheelchair rugby since she started playing the sport:

It’s less beer league, it’s more people really appreciating the exercise, so I think that’s sort of changed the dynamic a little bit. So I don’t find that I’m treated any differently and you know, than they [the men] treated anybody else.

Felicia agreed and said “I guess all my sports are all, like, male-dominated, like contact-intensive sports that I played before...I wouldn’t be happy doing a sport like basketball or volleyball or anything that’s non-contact.” She said she was comfortable in this environment due to all her sports throughout her life being male-dominated and very masculine in nature. Similar to Nadia’s sentiments earlier that athletes who may have

identified as tomboys or grown up in a masculine environment may find joining the sport easier, Felicia said:

I'm a tomboy so they, they uh, I can chirp back at them kind of thing so...it's easier for them to understand when they can still continue up the jokes and act like they would any other guys on the team, so I've never had any trouble fitting in that way.

The ability to joke around and tease teammates seems to help in for athletes to fit into wheelchair rugby.

3.4 “I used to get my parents to come to my tournaments and push my extra chair I had...until they [the guys] started chirping me”

A common message across all interviews was the independence and skills wheelchair rugby has taught the athletes. Nadia and Gail both spoke to the skills they learned through traveling with their teams. Gail said that “traveling alone is so much easier...I have so much less anxiety after traveling with a team,” and Nadia commented that “the skills you learn from traveling with other players is- you can't learn that from school, you can't learn that from rehab.”

A frequent comment from all the athletes was how playing wheelchair rugby helped them gain independence, to the point where they no longer needed parents to assist them at practices or games (Felicia) or were able to move to a more independent mode of wheelchair (Nadia). Felicia mentioned how it was teasing from her teammates that helped her realize her own independence:

I used to get my parents to come to my tournaments and push my [extra] chair...once they [the guys] got to know me, they started chirping me because lots of them were you know, completely paralyzed from the waist down let's say, and they were still doing all this stuff. So it kind of motivates you to be like, 'wait a second you know, I'm not totally useless, I can do lots of things'.

Nadia echoed this idea, saying that:

You see these guys, these C5 guys, they're transferring in and out of wheelchairs from the floors to chairs, like it's second nature. You really want to learn from them and they are so open with sharing information with you about how it's done, the things that failed, that didn't work out, the things that worked out really well, how they managed you know, to get back up when there was no one else there to help.

She said she had not touched her previous chair in over a year and left it in the garage after learning skills from her teammates. Nadia in particular heralded the sport for being unique in how open everyone is about sharing information and tips to become more independent, and said that "everyone is so open with information sharing and not because I'm a girl or because they're boys, but more of in rugby, we're just one of the guys." She had experience with other adaptive sports, and said that:

When I was downhill skiing and you know...you're off away from everybody else and if you fall...you only have an able-bodied person to tell you it's okay. And then you don't take that the same as you know, from somebody who's done that, been there.

Nadia openly admitted that it took time to learn skills from her teammates and said “I learned. I listened, they showed me, you know, sometimes more than once, just slowly bit by little bit,” which to her is important. “I think that mentality, and to have that mentality early in rehab, it’s a great way to start your life as a quad.” Nadia went on to say, “I do lots of other sports now that have me in a wheelchair, but not one that I have found to be like rugby...that gives you so much information and unconditional acceptance.”

Nadia was not the only athlete to speak highly of her fellow athletes with regards to their willingness to share skills they learned or be impressed by their athleticism or independence. Gail stated, “I’m always humbled by the other quads with a higher level than me, or less function, who are just killing me on the court and uh, just killing it in life.” Felicia spoke quite a bit about her teammates and competitors and how they have taught her to be independent:

I don’t have sort of the same sympathy now that I’m in a wheelchair, and I’m still busting my balls and finding a way to stay active. When I see other people that are you know, completely useless in a wheelchair, or even driving around in a...remote wheelchair, I’m going ‘give me a break, you know, like you don’t need one of those’.

Felicia went on to say that all of her teammates have experienced trauma and are “survivors for whatever reason.” They all ended up in a wheelchair, and “you can use it as a crutch or you can use it to you know, to make yourself stronger and to fight, and to overcome it, and still find some enjoyment in your life.” She linked this to her dissatisfaction with the classification system, and stated that:

There's so much respect I have for all these guys that are deciding to still fight for something, you know, and we spend half our time arguing over who's got what function, and the classification system and the politics behind it.

Felicia felt quite strongly about this and continued to say that "it's almost like you're treated like a criminal, you know what I mean, you're interrogated and treated like a criminal, and your whole body is looked at up and down like, 'oh are you faking this disability?'" She concluded her thought by saying that "I have piles of medical documentation, pretty sure twenty doctors didn't fuck this up, so your little physio degree and your five years of OT experience is- you know, you guys aren't doctors."

Charlotte also described a level of discomfort with regards to the classification process:

They really do need to fix the classification system, like when you're getting classified because I don't think they appreciate you have to take your top off in front of a whole bunch of people...when you're getting classified it's like this process... think about that, like the comfort level or you know, maybe some people would be uncomfortable if there are men there.

Mary stated her disability "compared to the other athletes is quite minimal...so it helped me jump into the sport really fast and play you know, decently really quickly," and agreed that in her experience, for newly-injured athletes "normally the parents step up and help out until you can come independently." Asking teammates or staff to assist is preferable for Charlotte, who said that "getting my chair in and out of my car- I can't

do myself, and little things like that, or getting into my rugby chair, I can't do myself...I hate having to ask like, random people.”

Nadia summed it up well with her experience in gaining skills and independence from her teammates:

So for me, whether I'm a girly-girl or a manly-girl, or a strong girl, whatever type of girl that person may be, I always try to tell them that you know, this sport may not be your long-term sport, but come and give it a good chance, give it a try for a couple practices...you know, even though there's not that many girls out...we're just one of, like, one of the guys.

Chapter 4

4 Discussion

The athletes interviewed provided detailed insight into their lived experiences as competitive female wheelchair rugby players participating in a mixed-sex competition environment. The rich stories from ten interviews provided an array of varied perspectives about female athletes in disability sport. The findings here are discussed through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field, and draw upon the disability sport and women's participatory research. These stories are complex and layered, and often represent a multiplicity of identities. As such, my discussion does not follow the same sections as the results, but rather demonstrates the complexity of narratives and interplay between the aspects of habitus, capital and field. I start by discussing the communicative practices the athletes described in wheelchair rugby before moving onto classification and multiple identities, then female sporting leagues and ideas of ableism.

Contact sports are considered a masculine environment (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008; Litchke et al., 2012; and Goodwin et al., 2009). Masculine traits include athleticism, competitiveness, aggression, and power (Hartmann, 2003). As Charlotte's quote about being yelled at indicates, the communication in wheelchair rugby emulates masculine traits, and reflects the gendered sporting body. This links to Lindemann and Cherney's (2008) work on masculinity and communication within wheelchair rugby. The masculine communication in that study directly reflected male athletes working to regain their sense of masculinity from pre-SCI. Often, a person's habitus is built on assumptions in childhood that feminine emotions include those that reveal any sort of vulnerability, such as crying. These are then considered

inferior to masculine emotions, and individuals who demonstrate these traits hold less capital (Béki & Gál, 2013). As noted by the participants, the overwhelming characteristics of the sport are masculine, and they perpetuate the gendered sporting body. Athletes, especially women, who play wheelchair rugby but who do not respond to aggressive forms of communication or feedback quickly leave the sport.

According to Connell (1987), genders tend to be positioned in terms of the power one has over the other, and typically, men hold dominance over women. As Fink and colleagues (2016) described, this dominance plays out in men's sports being more popular than women's. This creates a unique position when men and women are brought together in mixed-sex sporting environments. Men tend to hold more capital than women in a sporting context because men's sports are viewed with more value than women's (Fink et al., 2016). This capital also plays out in the field of wheelchair rugby where masculinized communication is dominant. The athletes interviewed acknowledged that this results in a lot of swearing and dirty jokes, but also honest feedback and encouragement. Though Nadia expressed frustration at times with how she was spoken to, ultimately none of the athletes problematized being yelled or sworn at. All five women played the sport for a minimum of three years which may have acclimatized them to the hyper-masculine communication culture and demonstrates perhaps why they did not problematize a culture that allowed them to play.

Women who have grown up in traditionally masculine environments have developed a habitus where they are more accustomed to traits that Nadia talks about, like vulgar language or jokes. Charlotte and Nadia both stated they had more male than female friends. Individuals who grew up in a masculine environment gravitate to

situations reflective of their 'normal' due to habitus. Neither Charlotte nor Nadia however reported a particularly masculine upbringing. Nadia spoke to how unathletic she was growing up, and Charlotte described trying a number of sports before finally finding one later in life she liked. Competing in a mixed-sex sport may make them feel they have less patience for traditionally female qualities.

A key narrative from the interviews was how wheelchair rugby seems to undervalue its female athletes. The athletes interviewed seemed to acknowledge there was a devaluing of women, particularly in classification, but accepted it because it allowed them to play. This links directly with Stuntz and colleagues (2011) work on mixed-sex sporting environments where as adults, men usually outperform women in physical tasks which could lead to perceived incompetence amongst women. The athletes in this study did not consider themselves incompetent compared to their male teammates, but most accept that they will never physically be able to catch up, particularly if they are classified as a high-pointer. They may never be strong enough to compete with their top male teammates who have a physical advantage, and this is the rationalization that they use when talking about their 0.5 classification deduction. An exception is Felicia, who was an elite athlete most of her life in masculine sports and spoke to this experience aiding in her wheelchair rugby. Some male teammates assumed she cheats or has more function than she reported because of her rapid improvement and skill. This is related to Kane's (1995) idea of a sport continuum where sex does not result in binary sport performances in which men always outperform women. Women will -and do- outperform many men in many sport environments. A well-known example is Billie Jean King beating Bobby Riggs in their 1978 'Battle of the Sexes' tennis match (Spencer, 2000).

Felicia is an excellent example of this outperformance. However, because the sporting and in particular the wheelchair rugby habitus has dictated a belief that women cannot outperform men, Felicia had to deal with accusations of cheating instead of acceptance that she is an elite athlete and works to improve her skills.

Athletes in wheelchair rugby with a higher level of disability have lower classification. Women seem to hold more capital with their teams if they are a low-pointer, especially a 1.0 or a 0.5 because they get an additional 0.5 point reduction off their classification. Felicia noted that coaches call these athletes their unicorns. At a 0.5 or a 1.0 classification, function is low enough that there is little difference between men and women's performance. Appreciation for women's athletic ability seems to come more freely when women are lower functioning because in addition to performing similarly to other (male) low-pointers, they benefit the team with reducing the overall class on the court by 0.5 points. These athletes may have gained capital with their team via point deduction, but the sporting habitus that dictates that women cannot be as athletic as men still prevails. Considering athletic abilities on a sport continuum challenges set beliefs about gender and sport: some women may outperform men in wheelchair rugby, and that should be normalized.

Many athletes interviewed had families and, since a gendered habitus about male and female roles dictates the female parent typically carries most of the caregiver role, many of these players carry multiple identities. Several athletes are full-time working mothers who are also elite athletes. The fact that they are mothers- a role usually associated with feminine qualities such as gentleness, love, warmth, and kindness- may weaken their capital with their team members. Nadia emphasized that some of her

teammates have not respected her need to play dual roles. This is in contradiction with the gender-role conflict proposed by Fallon and Jome (2007). Fallon and Jome (2007) proposed that if athletes were not able to fulfill both athlete and gender roles, athletes would experience discontent. In this case, athlete roles referred to the more masculine athleticism in wheelchair rugby and gender roles referred to being able to fulfill roles expected of them as a woman. However, all players interviewed indicated that they felt able to fulfill their roles at home, work, and on the court with minimal discontent. Nadia was the one exception who indicated her frustration with her teammates and their lack of understanding for her need to be a mother first.

There was a contradiction in terms of identity and desires to grow the sport of wheelchair rugby for women. Several athletes expressed the desire to field an all-women lineup at tournaments; send a *Wonder Women* team on tour; and shared excitement at recently attending the all-female camp in Houston, Texas. Despite this, there was little desire for a female-only wheelchair rugby league. There seemed to be a fear amongst the women that they will lose their acceptance and sense of identity if a new female league were created. The athletes all spoke to fitting into their team's culture. As Lindemann and Cherney (2008) described, sport teams have strong cultures and newcomers are forced to assimilate quickly or be left out. These athletes assimilated into their team cultures to be accepted and leaving to a female-only league would thus disrupt their stable-state habitus. Nadia and Gail explained how men tend to be stronger and faster than women, which betters their skills more than if they were in a segregated setting. Theberge's (1998) work with female hockey players who competed on mixed-sex teams endorsed girls playing with men until they could no longer keep up, saying it would improve their skills more

than playing exclusively with women. Theberge (1998) also discussed the conundrum that if a female-only hockey league were available, the best female players would still abandon the league to compete with men. There was concern from interviewees that the quality of the game would be reduced if women's league were created, and there was also a concern that such a league would not get the same level of recognition. Habitus has informed us that women's sport is inferior to men's, demonstrated in these comments. Fink and colleagues (2016) demonstrated how sport reinforces hegemonic masculinity by using objective measures to compare men and women, which unfairly favour men. Mary's reflections sum up the perspective that wheelchair rugby requires power and speed, both of which men can typically generate at higher volumes than women. Within the small group of women who play, Felicia described there being only a small number who are truly competitive.

A commonality between all interviews was the shared description of being able to fit in with the men, who make up the majority of the players and drive the habitus of wheelchair rugby. Though there were some athletes who voiced concerns about small grievances with their teammates, most women thoroughly enjoyed the time they spend playing with men and commented that they feel they get along better with men than women. Men clearly hold more capital in the field of wheelchair rugby, as newcomers need to gain acceptance and respect from the men, which links with Lindemann and Cherney's work (2008).

Felicia's description of being able to tell the difference if a player is respected by the men or if the men are being nice because it is "cute" that the women are playing is indicative of a sport where players have to conform to fit into the sport. The sport does

not adapt its culture to fit different sporting personalities. It appears that women are considered to have less capital in sport and must prove themselves in order to compete and be accepted by the men. Women must demonstrate they have the necessary physical prowess to compete alongside the men, enough to be an asset to the team but not enough to be considered a risk to replacing a man's spot on the court. Despite complementary comments that the athletes had for the sport and their teammates, due to the masculinity of the sport and habitus that has been ingrained about men's athletic superiority, the women still very much have to prove themselves above and beyond that of a man's ability in order to gain acceptance. This links to Litchke and colleagues (2012) work about the personal meaning of competing in wheelchair rugby. The athletes in that study described that hitting and tipping over an opponent is a way to show physical and emotional dominance on the court. They said that the physicality of the sport empowered them to represent themselves as an athlete, not as someone with a disability. Two athletes interviewed in that study discussed tipping each other over on the court when on opposing teams and how it led to them bonding. They argued that women tend to be physically smaller and therefore less able to tip over an opponent, and more likely to be tipped over from a hard hit. Women are often left out of team building and team bonding activities that develop between teammates, as Litchke and colleagues (2012) described. Men continue to develop bonding social capital via their physicality, which naturally creates barriers that exclude others, often women (Kitchin & Howe, 2013). This contributes even more to women's lack of capital in wheelchair rugby and exacerbates the power divide. Because men experience the social bonding and the physicality of

doling out and receiving hits, the women are described being less able to participate in the intense physicality of competing against men.

There was a common message about gaining independence and learning skills from more experienced teammates throughout all the interviews, which can be interpreted as ableism. This idea of ableism continually cropped up in the interviews with the athletes. The habitus instilled in many since childhood is that the able body is “superior” (Misener et al., 2018, p. 109), which further perpetuates ableism. Habitus dictates that if the body is impaired, that person has even less capital than someone who is female. The heterosexual, masculine body is the ideal typical (DePauw, 1997). Naturally, many of these athletes want to regain their independence and return to being as close to the able-bodied normal as possible. As a result, they learn as much as they can from their teammates about independently being able to transfer; move from a power chair to a manual chair; and overall require less support. They spoke incredulously about the days when they used to get help from parents or other loved ones. Felicia offered an example of how her teammates teased her into realizing that she was not useless and could push her own extra chair rather than needing assistance. She admitted that she used to have sympathy for people who used a wheelchair but does not anymore, because she demonstrated how she subscribes to the ableist philosophy that simply working hard is the way to regain as much ability as possible. The notion that disability means dependence is problematized by these women, but in a way that demonstrates their tacit approval ableist approach. Charlotte discussed that she does not like to ask for help because she does not want to be seen as anything other than independent. The sporting environment perpetuates ableist thinking and the male teammates reinforced these ideas

by cajoling the women to be more independent. Dependence on anyone, whether it be assistance in transferring or helping with loading and unloading extra chairs, seems to be equated to weakness and therefore results in lower capital.

The findings above directly link to Lindemann and Cherney's (2008) work on wheelchair rugby. Athletes in their research prided themselves in challenging ableist assumptions about what individuals with SCI or other disabilities can do. Wheelchair rugby is an anomaly in the world of disability sport since it was created by a group of quadriplegic athletes instead of able-bodied medical professionals. However, it is still considered to be lesser than able-bodied sport, similar to how the female and/or the disabled body have less capital than the able, masculine body. Athletes participating in wheelchair rugby perpetuate ableist thinking by attempting to prove themselves as able-bodied and independent as possible, reinforcing dependence as problematic.

Though wheelchair rugby was created by athletes with a disability, able-bodied individuals like classifiers are still a large part of the sport. There is a systemic power hierarchy in an able-bodied individual determining how disabled an athlete is. Felicia described feeling like a criminal while classifiers critiqued her capabilities and compared her to other women in the sport. Charlotte spoke to how uncomfortable the classification process can be, emphasizing the power divide between able-bodied classifiers examining and labelling a disabled body.

Typically, the closer an athlete is to being able-bodied, the more capital they hold. Women are an anomaly to this. Women are more likely to be accepted in this sport if they are lower functioning, to the point where they can represent zero points on the court.

Brianna and Mary both discussed how only low-point women have ever made Team Canada, demonstrating where women are rewarded for being less able because a high-pointer woman is not taking a spot away from a man (hence the sporting male habitus). This reinforces the gender hierarchy. In addition, less able women are further 'rewarded' by receiving an additional half point off their classification, lowering their perceived ability even further. This is not problematized by any of the athletes because habitus dictates that this is a normalized part of the wheelchair rugby culture. Players who already hold less capital because they are a minority (such as women in a mixed-sex sport) rarely speak up to change a culture. There was widespread encouragement from all athletes throughout the interviews for women to come out and try the sport, but this encouragement was situated within the male sporting habitus. This is evident in the way that Nadia insisted that this sport may not be for everyone but encouraged women to give it a try and said, "we're just one of the guys." This description may discourage women who want to try the sport if they planned to seek out support networks of other women, a mechanism which Stuntz and colleagues (2011) reported females preferring.

All of the athletes interviewed spoke to the independence wheelchair rugby has taught them. This links directly with Goodwin and colleagues (2009) work on the sense of community within the sport. Specifically, the athletes talked about the many transfer skills they attained, and the independence of pushing their extra chair on their own. Athletes across this study and past research have all commented on how much wheelchair rugby has helped them gain their independence back, therefore becoming as close to able-bodied as they can get.

From the research conducted, it is evident that there are many different experiences of females competing in wheelchair rugby in Canada. It is also evident that there is an obvious gap in the literature on mixed-sex sporting participation, particularly in disability sport. Within a thematic analysis methodology, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field provided a framework to allow for these athlete's stories to be shared.

Chapter 5

5 Conclusion

This study worked to bridge the gap in the literature on women's experiences in mixed-sex sporting competitions. These findings revealed some insights into the complex lived experiences of female wheelchair rugby athletes in Canada. The lived experiences of these five athletes are by no means a representation of every female athlete in a mixed-sex sporting environment, yet their rich narratives are hopefully a start to future research in this area. The understanding that sport is gendered is central to understanding the masculine culture, or habitus, of wheelchair rugby. Traits associated with masculinity and wheelchair rugby include aggression, physicality, and power. These qualities represent forms of masculinity and the gendered sporting body, which perpetuates men's dominance over women. English's (1978) work on sex equality in sports proposed that the majority of sports were designed for men to succeed, based on physiological differences between the two genders. Strategies proposed to bridge the physiological gap included separating sports by weight, age, and sex; and by ability levels. However, the natural design of divisions such as these ensure that the most powerful, most skilled athletes continue to reap rewards. Physiologically, this means men will see the most success. As a minority group in sport, women identify strongly with other women's success. It is hard to see this success when women, or any disadvantaged groups, are competing in the same level as men. As English described, this created "men and women to think of women as naturally inferior" (English, 1978, p. 273). Men have enjoyed a physiological and social advantage to sport success for so long that they, as a major social group, have come to mutually identify themselves as such, which "affects respect they

get from others” (English, 1978, p. 273). Women do not have the chance to see themselves experience success because of this dominant social group in sport controlled by men. This leads to English’s argument that a variety of sports should be created, for a variety of physical body types and strengths. Using this logic, the argument could be made for a women’s wheelchair rugby league, open to all abilities considering the smaller population of disabled women. The 0.5 classification deduction women receive when competing in wheelchair rugby can be considered a “handicap”, therefore cementing the thought of women as a physiologically disadvantaged group. Taking into consideration English’s remarks and arguments, mixed-sex competitions could be seen as detrimental to female athletic success, contrary to the athlete narratives from this study.

Athletes interviewed in this study spoke highly of the sport, describing the strategy and the physicality of wheelchair rugby as two reasons why they love it. They also acknowledged inherent problems, such as the fact that no woman who is not a low-pointer has ever made the Team Canada or Team USA roster. Women receive an additional 0.5 deduction off their classification and therefore low-pointer women are recruited to act as ‘unicorns’ - a player representing zero points on the court. However, when women train to improve their game they are often questioned about their abilities and get re-classed because they are strong athletes in addition to receiving a half point off. There is a dichotomy between wanting to improve and become better at the game but not wanting to be accused of cheating. Women are often unfairly compared to one another, having their classification questioned because another woman with their same classification is not performing as well. This comparison can be linked to Kane’s (1995) idea of a sport continuum. Instead of an unyielding belief that men are more athletic than

women, a continuum offered the understanding that though men benefit from physiological advantages, many women outperform men in a variety of athletic endeavors. Felicia spoke to her impressive athletic background and intense training she has undergone to improve her performance, yet also said she has been accused of cheating because of this. Her classification has come into question not only because she is outperforming women of similar class but outperforming some men as well. As the dominant group who forms the habitus of the sport this seemed to shake the underlying belief that men are the more athletic sex. If we utilize the idea of a sport continuum, this success is to be expected, as many women outperform many men in a variety of athletic endeavors.

Wheelchair rugby is also rife with aggressive communication practices. Athletes seemed matter of fact when talking about being yelled at to the point of tears or being told off by their male teammates. No athlete proposed any changes to this practice however, instead speaking to how they have all adjusted and become ‘one of the guys’, which makes putting up with this communication easier. These athletes seem to have internalized the habitus that makes aggressive communication acceptable, as demonstrated by the main social group. The women interviewed have not problematized this practice because of desire to gain capital and fit into the habitus of the team.

It is notable that athletes from different clubs and provinces report similar communicative practices, signaling the strong gendered sporting body that appears to have dominated the sport since its inception in 1977. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field can be clearly seen here. Habitus- values and norms individuals grow up with- dominated the discussion in this study. When individuals with similar values and

interests come together, such as in the development of a sport, a strong sporting habitus is developed. Wheelchair rugby was developed by men wanting an alternative to wheelchair basketball. As it was a sport mainly for quadriplegic athletes, it naturally attracted athletes who were interested in the heavy physical contact. It was previously mentioned that men are more prone to risky behaviours and as such, more prone to acquired injuries leading to disability. The sport had a strong habitus from the beginning as a physically demanding sport filled with contact and aggression. Though it is a mixed-sex sport, wheelchair rugby appears to have done little to adjust habitus to welcome athletes who may not identify with the values of those who originally created the sport. Nadia spoke to feeling like an outcast when she attempted to sway from the norm by being a mother and prioritizing herself and her family. Sports traditionally have extremely strong cultures that newcomers are forced to adopt or be left out and treated like an outsider (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008).

Despite the athletes speaking about the overt aggressive communication and some struggles to attain national-team status, they all raved about how much wheelchair rugby has changed their lives. Teammates have taught them to be more independent; to be confident traveling solo; and to work so hard they are able to move into more independent chairs. None of the athletes problematized any of the nuances of wheelchair rugby, from receiving 0.5 off their classification to being encouraged to be as able-bodied or independent as possible, which demonstrates their acclimatization to the sporting habitus. Individuals from a young age are taught that being disabled means to be “less than” (Campbell, 2009, p. 17). Disability may be tolerated and occasionally celebrated, like in disability sport, but is often considered inherently negative (Campbell, 2009).

Many athletes competing in wheelchair rugby have acquired disabilities and have therefore lived a portion of their life as an able-bodied person. Playing disability sport provides a strategy for athletes to work to overcome their disability and be independent and able-bodied, a status that is heralded as desirable and positive because of internalized ableism many people learn from a young age.

Overall, this research presented the complex lived experiences of female wheelchair rugby athletes competing in a mixed-sex sporting competition. Though wheelchair rugby is mixed-sex, men and women are not equally represented and women are subject to the dominant masculinity of the sport, having to either join and assimilate into the culture, be considered an outsider by their teammates, or quit.

5.1 Implications

Previous literature completed on wheelchair rugby has focused on the masculinity of the sport and mainly interviewed male athletes (Gard & Fitzgerald, 2008; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Litchke et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2009). Research focused on women's participation in mixed-sex sport has forefronted women's experiences in comparison to playing with men and was framed around perceived competence and social support in sport (Stuntz et al., 2011). Any research found on females in mixed-sex sporting environments were completed on able-bodied athletes. This research offers an insight into a niche area of sport. Disability sport is often looked down upon, like how internalized ableism creates a world where we look down on those who are disabled (Campbell, 2009). Completing further research on disability sport, already considered the minority in the sport world, would be of benefit to address internalized ableism and begin to understand the experiences of these athletes. Further, interviewing a population who

are considered the minority in disability sport is an important way to hear the experiences of athletes who would often go unnoticed. There are more parallels between able bodied sport and disability sport than many realize. Female able-bodied athletes will likely identify with many experiences of athletes with disabilities. The need to display extraordinary talent in order to be accepted by male teammates; the “handicap” assigned to ensure a level playing field; and feeling pressure to fit in by being seen as ‘one of the guys’ are common experiences, based on this research and previous literature on mixed-sex participation. Further research in this area can bridge the gap between sports and perhaps allow for more understanding and flow of resources within various sporting leagues.

The athlete narratives can serve as a tool for sport coaches, administrators, and players to reflect on the ways they may consciously or unconsciously contribute to the overwhelming masculinity of sports and the creation of the gendered sporting body. It could act as a tool for the creation of a female-only wheelchair rugby league. Though the number of males playing greatly outnumber females, if classification restrictions were loosened for club players i.e. allowing able-bodied athletes to play, this may allow for trial female leagues to be created. From a research perspective, this study can act as a catalyst for more studies to be completed on females in mixed-sex disability sports.

5.2 Future Directions

This research is an important first step to documenting and investigating the complex lived experiences of women in mixed-sex sporting environments. Future research could examine similar populations but for athletes who compete at exclusively a

recreational or a club level, or who have previously competed in wheelchair rugby but have left the sport or stopped playing.

Interviewing these five athletes gave a rich insight into their experiences, but future studies should work to interview more women. There is no number researchers should work towards to interview, but as per Sandelowski's recommendations, should ensure that a sample size of participants is small enough to manage the insight and data, and large enough to provide new and rich understanding of experiences (1995).

Additionally, future research could interview men and women who compete on the same mixed-sex teams, and compare their experiences and interpretation of events.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval



Date: 7 November 2019

To: Dr. Laura Misener

Project ID: 114107

Study Title: Women's Experiences in Wheelchair Rugby

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: December 6 2019

Date Approval Issued: 07/Nov/2019

REB Approval Expiry Date: 07/Nov/2020

Dear Dr. Laura Misener

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Interview Guide for Wheelchair Rugby Athletes	Interview Guide	09/Oct/2019	1.0
LOI Oct 30	Written Consent/Assent	30/Oct/2019	2.0
Observation Guide for Wheelchair Rugby Athletes	Non-Participant Observation Guide	09/Oct/2019	1.0
Recruitment Email for Wheelchair Rugby Athletes	Recruitment Materials	30/Oct/2019	2.0
Second Interview Guide for Wheelchair Rugby Athletes	Interview Guide	09/Oct/2019	1.0
Verbal Consent Oct 30	Verbal Consent/Assent	30/Oct/2019	2.0

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Email Script for Recruitment:

Women's Experiences in Wheelchair Rugby

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research

Hello,

We have received your email address from an online search of wheelchair rugby clubs across Canada. I am a Master's student at Western University. I, along with my supervisor Dr. Laura Misener, am conducting research involving female wheelchair rugby players who have competed at the provincial or national level within the past two years. Briefly, the study involves interviewing Canadian female wheelchair rugby players for approximately 60 minutes at a time and location of their choosing and will ask about their experiences playing wheelchair rugby. A follow-up interview may be requested to clarify some of the concepts that emerged during the first interview.

Can you please forward this email to all female wheelchair rugby athletes involved in your club? I have attached the Letter of Information, outlining further details of the study, to this email.

I will send two reminder emails to this address regarding this invitation to participate in research. The first reminder email will be sent in one week, and the final reminder will be sent in two weeks.

If you or the athletes would like more information on this study, or would like to participate, please contact Bronwyn Corrigan at the contact information given below.

Thank you,

Bronwyn Corrigan, Western University Dr. Laura Misener, Western University

Appendix C: Letter of Information and Consent



Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title

Women's Experiences in Wheelchair Rugby

Document Title

Letter of Information and Consent

Bronwyn Corrigan, MA Candidate

Western University, School of Kinesiology

Principal Investigator

Dr. Laura Misener

Western University, School of Kinesiology

1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study about the experiences of Canadian female wheelchair rugby players. Specifically, we are interested in hearing about your experiences because you currently compete or have competed in wheelchair rugby at the provincial level within the past two years.

2. Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of women participating in the mixed-sex sport of wheelchair rugby in Canada. The research question associated with this study are:

- a) What is the lived experience of competitive female wheelchair rugby players participating in mixed-sex competition environments?

3. How long will you be in this study?

It is expected that your involvement in the study will be for the duration of one (1) interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. There is a potential for a request for one (1) follow-up interview, which will last approximately 20-30 minutes and will be used to clarify some of the concepts that emerged during the first interview.

4. What are the study procedures?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to participate in a 60 minute interview at a time and location of your convenience regarding your involvement in wheelchair rugby. Audio-recording will be used; however, you can choose to not be audio-recorded and still participate in this study. A follow-up interview may be requested, which will once again take place at a time and location of your convenience. There is an opportunity for Bronwyn Corrigan, the co-researcher, to observe a wheelchair rugby practice or game at your convenience. This observation will assist in understanding the experience of female wheelchair rugby player in mixed-sex environments.

5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

Social risks involve the participants experiencing anger, embarrassment, frustration, or other heightened emotion due to athletic experiences they are asked to share. This research will focus on the participant's experiences engaging in wheelchair rugby in Canada but may extend to discuss other sport involvement as well. Participants may recall issues of harassment and/or abuse in sport. If participants feel uncomfortable with any line of questioning, they can choose to decline to provide a response and can also remove themselves from the research study. Canada's Safe Sport hotline (1-888-83-SPORT) will be provided as a resource to all participants.

6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

This study will provide society with a better understanding of the female narrative of wheelchair rugby athletes. Wheelchair rugby is a mixed-sex sport, but females are grossly underrepresented. By better understanding the experience of female athletes in this sport, we can attempt to start creating a more inclusive and welcoming sport for females to participate in.

7. Can participants choose to leave the study?

Participants may decide to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request a withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please send an email to Bronwyn Corrigan requesting removal of your data.

8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law, the researchers are obliged to report this information to the appropriate institution. To guarantee confidentiality of the participants no names will be released with the results. As such no references to names will be made within the data. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed, at which time a generic title will be assigned to your data. This information will only be accessible by the members of the research team. A list with the link between the generic title and the identifiers will be kept separate from the data, in a secure OneDrive file. The audio files will be destroyed when transcribing is completed. The transcribed interviews will be copied on a secure password protected server and stored for seven (7) years, after which all data will be destroyed.

9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

10. What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time there will be no future repercussions.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form

11. Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact the Principal Investigator at [REDACTED]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, email: ethics@uwo.ca.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.



Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title

Women's Experiences in Wheelchair Rugby

Principal Investigator

Dr. Laura Misener, PhD

Director, School of Kinesiology

Associate Professor and Faculty Scholar

Western University

Co-Researcher

Bronwyn Corrigan

Master of Arts Student, School of Kinesiology

Western University

12. Written Consent.

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio-recorded.

YES NO

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of research.

YES NO

Print Name of Participant

Signature

Date (DD-MMM-YYYY)

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Print Name of Person Signature

Date (DD-MMM-YYYY)

Obtaining Consent

Appendix D: Initial Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your athletic experience growing up.
 - What sports were you involved in?
 - If not applicable, why didn't you participate in sport as a child?

2. Tell me about how you got involved with wheelchair rugby.
 - What/who got you involved with the sport?
 - How did you find the club/organization you play for?
 - Think about the first time you tried out the sport. What were your thoughts?
 - Are there any other women on your team?

3. Wheelchair rugby is a mixed-sex sport and many more men participate than women. Why do you think that is?
 - Have you noticed that more men play than women?
 - How would you describe your experience playing wheelchair rugby with men?

4. What are (if any) recommendations you would give Wheelchair Rugby Canada to encourage more women to play?
 - Would you encourage a female friend to take up the sport?

5. Will you continue to play wheelchair rugby? (if applicable) Why or why not?
 - If not, will you continue to be physically active in any other activities or sports?
 - If you will continue to play, is there anything you would change?

Appendix E: Follow-Up Interview Guide

1. You described X experience in our last meeting. Can you tell me more about how you navigated this situation?

2. Can you me a bit more about your experience in working with coaches/trainers/therapists/athletes (as discussed in first interview) in the mixed-sex environment of the wheelchair rugby?

3. Are there any other experiences or moments you would like to share?

4. Would you ever want to change wheelchair rugby to be a gender-based sport? Why or why not?

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Bronwyn Corrigan

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
2009-2013 B.A. Honours in Health Studies

Honours and Awards: Queen's University Excellence Scholarship
2009

Academic All-Canadian
2018

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
Western University
2018-2020

Administrative and Research Assistant
Ontario Parasport Collective
2018-2019