

**The experiences of Springbok Women's
Sevens rugby players regarding identity and
perceived on-field performance**

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PREFACE

This dissertation is compiled in article format in accordance with the guidelines prescribed by the **2016 edition of the Manual for Postgraduate Studies, North-West University**. Technical editing and compilation of this final document was guided by the prescriptions set out in Chapter 6 of the Manual. The American Psychological Association's [APA] 6th edition referencing style was applied in Section A and C.

The article in Section B will be submitted to *Sex Roles*, a Springer Journal, and is formatted according to the provided author guidelines which are available in Appendix 3.

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SUMMARY

The study explored identity and on-field performance from a social constructionist perspective, where identity is interpreted as largely determined by the context in which it occurs. Interactions within a specific group or social setting are seen as a crucial determinant of identity configuration. In addition to the social setting, norms are also an essential facet affecting identity configuration at an internal level and, ultimately, the expression of identity. Understanding the mutually influential nature of internal and external factors enables interpretations of behaviours characterised as non-normative, such as those evident in females engaging in predominantly male sports like rugby, as this sport is still largely associated with behaviours considered normative for men.

Throughout the study, an exploration of identity and on-field performance amongst Women's Sevens rugby players is presented to determine identity configuration and expression as influenced by the situational demands of the high-performance environment. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven members of the elite sporting group of female Sevens rugby players. Traditionally the realm of rugby has been associated with the male gender and interpreted as a platform for male identity expression and formation. While this realm is becoming more open to accepting women, findings reveal predominantly masculine ideals associated with the sport, which could affect the individual and social identities of female rugby players.

Data from the interviews was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Themes informed the findings and discussion. The first theme centres on the internal factors affecting identity configuration and on-field performance, whereas the second theme focuses on the external factors affecting identity configuration and on-field performance. Within the first main theme, there are three identified subthemes that include: conscious adaptation and other necessary mental characteristics, the required physical attributes, and beneficial

experiences within the Sevens environment. The second theme hosts four subthemes, including: structural difficulties, team dynamics and coaching, comparison to better performing teams, and expectations, perceptions and stereotypes. The themes indicate that the aim of exploring identity and on-field performance amongst Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players, was successfully achieved.

The findings from this research will contribute to an enhanced understanding of how identity configuration and expression affect – and are affected by on-field performance amongst this elite sports group. This study may also catalyse other studies regarding females in sports perceived as being predominantly male such as cricket or soccer.

Keywords: athletic identity, identity-configuration, gender, on-field performance, rugby Sevens, South Africa, Springbok, women

OPSOMMING

Die studie het identiteit en veldprestasie, vanuit 'n sosiale konstruksionistiese perspektief ondersoek. Identiteit word geïnterpreteer as iets wat hoofsaaklik beïnvloed word deur die konteks waarin dit voorkom, en interaksie binne 'n spesifieke groep of sosiale omgewing word gesien as 'n belangrike bepaler van identiteitsvorming. Benewens die sosiale omgewing, is norme 'n noodsaaklike faset wat identiteitsvorming op 'n interne vlak bepaal en uiteindelik manifesteer dit op 'n eksterne vlak. Begrip van die wedersydse invloed van interne en eksterne faktore stel die navorser in staat om interpretasies te maak van gedrag wat nie as normatief beskou word nie. Dit is veral van toepassing op vroue wat deelneem aan manlik-gedomineerde sporte, soos rugby, aangesien die sport nog sterk geassosieer word met gedrag wat normatief beskou word vir mans.

In hierdie studie word identiteit en veldprestasie verken onder vroue Sewes rugby spelers om identiteitsvorming en uitdrukking te bepaal, soos beïnvloed deur die eise van die hoë-prestasie omgewing. Data is ingesamel deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met elf lede van die vroue Springbok Sewes rugbyspan. Rugby is tradisioneel geassosieer met die manlike geslag en word dus gesien as 'n platform vir manlike identiteitsvorming en uitdrukking. Terwyl daar meer ruimte geskep word vir vroue binne rugby, toon bevindings dat manlike ideale nogsteeds dominant verbind word aan die sport, wat 'n impak kan hê op die individuele en sosiale identiteit van vroue rugby spelers.

Data van die onderhoude is getransskrebeer en geanaliseer, deur middel van tematiese analise. Bevindings en besprekings was ingelig deur die temas, wat dui op die interne faktore wat identiteit en veldprestasie beïnvloed soos bespreek in die eerste tema, en in die tweede tema, eksterne faktore wat identiteit en veldprestasie beïnvloed. Die eerste hooftema bevat drie subtemas insluitend bewustelike aanpassing en ander verstandelike eienskappe; die vereiste fisiese eienskappe en die voordelige ervarings binne die Sewes omgewing. Die

tweede hoofteema het vier subtemas: strukturele probleme, groepsdinamika en afrigting, vergelyking met beter spanne, en verwagtinge, persepsies en stereotipes. Die temas dui daarop dat die verkenning van identiteit en veldprestasie onder Springbok vroue Sewes rugby spelers suksesvol was.

Die bevindings van hierdie navorsing sal lei tot 'n beter begrip van hoe identiteitsvorming en uitdrukking 'n invloed het op veldprestasie en hoe dit deur veldprestasie beïnvloed word. Hierdie studie kan ook ander studies, gemik op vrouens in manlike-gedomineerde sporte, soos krieket of sokker, tot gevolg hê.

Sleutelwoorde: atletiese identiteit, identiteitsvorming, geslag, Sewes rugby, Springbok, Suid-Afrika, veldprestasie, vrouens

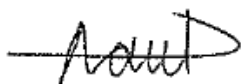
DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I, Amori du Plessis, herewith declare that the dissertation entitled: *The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance*, which I submit to the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, is my own work and that all references used or quotes are indicated and acknowledged.

I declare that this document has been language edited, as prescribed by the university guidelines. The dissertation has not been submitted to any other university for examination.

I understand and accept that the copies submitted for examination become the property of the university.

Disclaimer: The content of this dissertation is focused on traditional male and female biological sex categories requiring a display of so-called “traditional gender roles”. Hence other genders are excluded from the dialogue for logical reasons.



Amori du Plessis

14 November 2018

DECLARATION BY EDITOR

I, Karin Petersen, have proofread and edited this submission for language according to South African/UK English language standards. No amendments have been made to content nor to meaning. Where such interpretive challenges presented themselves, edit notes were sent to the writer for clarification and amendments to translation, in order to ensure retention of the integrity of her content and meaning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karin Petersen', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Karin Petersen

11 November 2018

SECTION A: Orientation to the Research

The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and
perceived on-field performance

Introduction

The current study is an independent investigation into the experiences of Women's Sevens athletes and their definition of the self (identity), which is also affected by traits, characteristics, roles, social relations and social membership (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Additionally, researchers are interested in the manner in which identity is related to perceived on-field performance, which is defined as the output of each individual player on-field, which is typically characterised by the number of tries and points scored by and against a team (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012). The output relates to their displayed behaviour on-field and according to Cameron (2015), behaviour is evaluated and controlled by the powerful system of normativity. As such, masculinity and femininity are positioned at opposite sides of the spectrum (Coakley, 2014). As sport is a display of culture and gender, its evaluations are more prominent as it is accessible to a larger audience (Bogopa, 2001).

Additionally, relevant literature reveals the inherent difficulties of being a female athlete (Ellison, 2002; Halim, Lamikanara, & Sutton, 2016; Zeilinger, 2015). In Section A the researcher focuses on contextualising the research problem by drawing on topic-related literature and explaining the main theoretical frameworks, and finally arrives at the problem identified statement. Subsequently the methodology, data collection, analysis and relevant ethics are discussed. Section B contains the article format of the dissertation, which will be submitted to the *Sex Roles* journal for publication. Finally, Section C includes the critical reflection regarding the research and the research process and Section D, the appropriate appendices.

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to understand some of the key constructs within the literature as evident in the section on prominent definitions.

Prominent Definitions

The researcher's understanding of key constructs related to the identified research problem is crucial in contextualising the research that follows. This understanding was informed by scholarly sources and is presented by a combination of the prominent definitions below:

Femininity – “affection, helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, nurturance and gentleness” (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p.783).

Gender – Gender and sex are often used interchangeably but they are not synonymous terms. Gender is the psychological experience of being male, female or other, and it also relates to identity and social roles. Sex on the other hand is based on physiological characteristics which determines the assignment of a biological sex category at birth (Ghosh, 2015).

Gender roles – “shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex” (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p.783).

Heteronormativity – a belief system where individuals fall into distinct and complementary genders (male and female) with accompanying natural roles (Ingraham, 2002).

Identity - For the purposes of this research endeavour, identity is defined as the manner in which individuals define themselves in relation to the social setting within which they are embedded and the individuals with whom they interact (Erikson, 1968; Geukes, Harvey, Tresize, & Mesango, 2017; Joncheray, Level, & Richard, 2016).

Identity configuration – identity formation is a lifelong and dynamic process of continual configuration (Erikson, 1968)

Masculinity – “assertiveness, control and confidence.” (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Stereotypes - category-based cognitive responses underpinned by specific beliefs as determined by group membership (Fiske, 1993, 2000).

Literature Review

Sport is generally accepted as an institution and an element of culture where gender is put on display (Bogopa, 2001). Russell (2002) builds on this by asserting that sport is reflective of significant cultural practices in the construction of gender. Gender relations and reigning ideologies may have a critical impact on the organisation and performance of sport (Ming, Simpson, & Rosenberg, 2016). Gender is a powerful system of normativity by which behaviour is evaluated and controlled (Cameron, 2015). As such, there are ascribed characteristics or ideologies for each gender, positioning masculinity and femininity on opposite sides of the spectrum (Coakley, 2014). Gender forms a part of the different dimensions of identity and its outcome is the process of a timely social reflection (Joncheray et al., 2016). This suggests its longstanding embedding in social and political structures.

Histories and social situations are vital when considering identity formation and expression in females: more specifically female athletes, as identity is engendered by socialisation processes (Mennesson, 2000). This is seen in Prentice and Carranza’s (2002) assertion that traditional views maintain continued centrality and societal prescriptions demand the presence of gender-appropriate behaviours and desired qualities. These so-called gender-appropriate behaviour is largely contingent on heteronormative ideals which are socially defined.

In the light of the above, the following literature review will, firstly, examine the realities of female athletes in general. It will then specifically cover rugby as a male-dominant sport, whereafter a discussion regarding rugby’s relation to the South African social

climate will follow. Lastly, the prominent theories substantiating the research endeavour will be explored, finally arriving at an explanation of the problem statement.

Athletic identity. The term athletic identity refers to the extent and strength with which individuals identify themselves as athletes (Geukes et al., 2017; Reifsteck, Gill, & Labban, 2016). Athletic identity forms part of an individual's overall identity and contributes to self-esteem and levels of value (Ahmadabadi, Shjojaei, & Dansehfar, 2014). While an athletes's personality traits may remain stable, performance is situational and dependent on the strength of identification in the athlete role (Geukes et al., 2017). Strong athletic identities are reflected in high levels of commitment and ultimately performance, indicating that strong athletic identities are crucial for optimal levels of athletic performance (Ahmadabadi, et al., 2014).

Geukes et al. (2017) asserts that a stable athletic identity has the potential to foster stable on-field performance which reinforces the above argument. This is confirmed by Ahmadabadi et al. (2014) whose findings suggest that the maintenance of optimal athletic identity is a strong predictor for athletic performance during competitions or tournaments. Since Springbok rugby is generally regarded as an advanced level of sport, a strong athletic identity may be crucial for optimal performance. Krane (2001) makes the assertion that females have to go out of their way to prove their athletic competencies. Given the constraints on female athletes in general, performance may be compromised as a result of their being unable to express a solid sense of identity within this realm. Since society continually attempts to feminise female athletes, stable performance levels will be impossible (Engh & Potgieter, 2016). Feminisation is the process of viewing women in light of gendered norms and expecting them to display appropriate female behaviour (Engh & Potgieter, 2016). Feminisation may manifest as specific thoughts regarding - and accompanying - behaviours of female athletes, specifically those in male dominated sports.

Such thoughts may increase the experiences of the “paradox of dual identities” as catalysed by the prescriptions and gender norms in South Africa (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004). The aforementioned relates to societies in general holding onto the fear that participation in sport will encourage homosexuality and prevent women from fulfilling their stereotypical maternal and domestic roles (Knight & Guiliano, 2003). Females who do not conform to these prescriptions are stereotyped, particularly females in male-dominated sports like rugby, as it may make them appear less feminine and more androgynous (Engh & Potgieter, 2016; Knight & Guiliano, 2003; Wilde, 2015). Stereotypes as a form of dysfunctional norms, are sometimes internalised cognitions and serve as a means to control specific groups of individuals within society (Fiske, 1993). These internalised norms related to perceptions regarding specific groups within society (Gilovich, Keltner, Chen, & Nisbett, 2013).

Stereotypical and rigid thinking can lead to schemas and in order to better understand the self and those around us, individuals tend to apply schemas. Schemas are necessary for knowledge and underpin inferences and judgements about behaviours (Gilovich et al., 2013). Augoustinos and Walker (1996) refer to schemas as knowledge structures harboured in relation to shared norms and specific role behaviours in society. Their structural nature helps individuals navigate the complexity of social life, positioning schemas as necessary for social interactions. Embedded schemas like gender roles might have fixed manifestations in society at large. Sandra Bem refers to gender related schemas as the gender schema theory (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). This social cognitive theory is based on the notion that people are subjected to gendered thinking from an early age. As a result, gendered schemas enforce culturally constructed categories of gender, namely, masculinity and femininity. Cultural classifications of gender appropriateness reject behaviour that doesn't align with biological sex (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). Such classifications are predecessors of stereotypes. Known

stereotypes and schemas of females in male-dominated sports like rugby, are homosexual labels, being characterised as “butch” and practicing behaviour not seen as “ladylike” (Engh & Potgieter, 2016; Knight & Guiliano, 2003; Wilde, 2015).

In addition to being victims of stereotyping, female athletes face problems not faced by their male counterparts. To begin with, the majority of media publications related to women’s sport tend to emphasise their expected gender roles, rather than their sport performance and athleticism (Ellison, 2002, as cited in Hardy, 2014). A 2017 content analysis of female athletes reveal the continued sexualisation and objectification of female athletes in popular American sports magazines (Frisby, 2017). The analysis revealed that women appeared on less covers, had more posed shots and less action shots, and were pictured in sports uniforms less frequently than men. Two similar studies conducted in the South African context revealed similar results. In these studies, television and magazine portrayals of women typically depicted them as sex objects, mothers/nurturers and decorative objects (Holtzhausen, 2010; Holtzhausen, Jordaan & North, 2011). This reflects the degradation of women in general and specifically within the sport arena (Maley, 2012), and as reinforcement for outdated norms and could negatively affect the expression of identity, particularly in female rugby players. Additionally, these representations serve as a model that exercises and reinforces power in society, as the media tends to deny power to female athletes (Scruton & Flintoff, 2002). This is reflective of female as well as male athletes being continually sexualised and objectified, which has implications for their athletic identity (Zeilinger, 2015). As such, gender role stereotypes relate to both the roles of female and athlete are reinforced, as females are continually seen as sex symbols, whereas those with more muscular bodies are perceived as unnatural (Engh & Potgieter, 2016).

Furthermore, female athletes in general are subjected to a possible wage gap based on interests from sponsors and spectators (Zeilinger, 2015). This is problematic due to the

audience having a significant impact on approval, validation, respect, and material rewards - all of which impact on performance. Additionally, unstable levels of performance may lead to lesser provision of necessary resources to optimise performance (Zeilinger, 2015). While this may be the case within the South African context, a recent newspaper article revealed that the Australian male and female Sevens teams will be subject to equal salaries (Steger, 2018). In addition to the possible wage gap female athletes in general also face physical problems, in the pursuit of meeting performance expectations. This included, among others, eating disorders and increased vulnerability for bone-related injury as well as menstrual disturbances (Halim et al., 2016). As such the complexity of attaining a solid sense of athletic identity for women is implied, as they are operating in a domain not considered “natural” according to their prescribed gender roles. This could affect their actual - as well as perceived - on-field performance.

The reality of female athlete identity in general. Based on the dichotomous nature of heteronormative ideals, women who participate in traditionally male dominated sports may challenge socially and culturally accepted behaviours typically associated with the female gender, leading to a gender role conflict (Ming, Simpson, & Rosenberg, 2016). This relates to the historical position of women’s sports being characterised by prejudices, struggles, rejection and slow recognition (Joncheray & Tili, 2013). These heteronormative ideals require both genders to display characteristics that represent femininity or masculinity regardless of which arena they are in. Gender roles refer to the “shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex” (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p.783). Consequentially a gender role conflict (femininity versus masculinity) may arise if these prescriptions are not adhered to. Femininity is identified as affection, helpfulness, sympathy, kindness, nurturance and gentleness (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Masculinity on the other hand is reflected in assertiveness, control and confidence (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Qualities classified as typically masculine are desirable within the realm of sport, which complicates the position of female athletes across sports but especially within rugby (Hardy, 2014). As such, within the domain of sport, male and maleness are the most cherished characteristics (Joncheray & Tili, 2013). This is prominent in Krane et al.'s (2004) statement that the global culture of sport is inherently masculine and femininity is a celebrated part of women's identities. Martiny et al. (2015) assert that emphasising a woman's gender identity may activate negative stereotypes about her athletic identity, which is a form of role identity.

Delamater, Myers, and Collett (2014) postulate that role identities depend on the available social positions within a given context. Social positions tend to be hierarchical and are mostly present in vocational choices, family relations and group membership (Delamater et al., 2014). This, in turn, relates to social identities which manifest differently in different categories like gender, nationality, sexual preference and so on. Complex gender hierarchies within sport is a prime example of where role identities typically manifest. Specifically pertaining to these identities are implicit norms and ideals such as heteronormativity which is embedded in socialisation processes and which constitute determinants of behaviour. As such, female athletes may be expected to display specific behaviours within their professional capacity which contradict "appropriate" feminine behaviours. Internalisations related to gender are another component and a major determinant of individual thoughts and feelings which act as predecessors for actions. This process becomes prominent when an individual declares membership to a specific group or when membership is assumed by external parties (Delamater et al., 2014). The need to understand internal processes, like identity, becomes

crucial within a high-performance environment, as there is an interdependence between performance and internal identity-related processes like identity configuration.

Traditional role identities would define women as the female homemaker and males as the breadwinner (Mac An Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). Therefore, perceptions regarding vocational choice may still be influenced by traditional role identities and in spite of the aspirations for progressive thought, gender roles may remain the subject of static interpretations as they are connected with traditional social roles and power inequalities (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). As a result, female athletes engaging in male-dominated sport may be deemed to be acting inappropriately, on the basis of traditional role identities.

According to the gender-role conflict theory, female athletes experience conflicts in their roles as athletes, when they attempt to enact both masculine and gender roles (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Sport participation is typically associated with masculine traits including aggression, strength, power, dominance and violence which coincide with the masculine traits mentioned earlier (Hardy, 2014). The unacceptability of sport for women is based on the premise of intense physicality, particularly in sports that are considered male dominant (Russell, 2002). Rugby, cricket and boxing are prime examples of sports considered male-dominant but that have gained increased popularity among women (Mennesson, 2000; Russell, 2002).

The role of sport in breaking fixed thought patterns relating to female athlete identity. In contemporary society, sport in general is considered a platform which enables women to exercise personal power, mobilising resistance against imposed gender-related constraints and constrictions (Liechty, Willfond, & Sveinson, 2016). Changes in fixed thought patterns related to “traditional” norms and ideologies are infiltrating societies in general, creating a platform for the process of social liberalism (Augoustinos & Walker,

1996). Participating specifically in rugby, proves to empower women to resist ideal concepts of female bodies by pursuit of physical goals instead (Liechty et al., 2016).

This is indicative of the social cognition theory, where individuals are classified as self-organising and self-reflecting beings (Bandura, 1989). This enables some features of identity to develop from agentic tendencies which represent interests fuelled by intrinsic motivation (Schutte & McNeil, 2015). These agentic tendencies refer to individuals' abilities to be self-organising, self-reflective and self-regulating (Bandura, 1989). Self-motivated vocational choice, such as sport participation, holds the potential for empowerment and in turn heightens intrinsic motivation as highlighted by various studies (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012; Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010; Wat & Shaffer, 2005). This indicates a positive relationship between contextual performance and empowerment (Li, Wei, Ren, & Di, 2015).

While empowerment may serve as a platform for liberation, navigating social expectations may still be a complex task that can negatively affect the stability of performance. These expectations manifest as external pressures and might force extrinsically motivated features of identity (Schutte & McNeil, 2015). In relation to performance, externally motivated behaviour might not be the ideal conditions for stability and persistence. This becomes even more intricate within South Africa as rugby is regarded as a typically masculine sport, which may affect overall group dynamics.

Group dynamics and on-field performance. Groups have a specific purpose of existence and normally members share a specific goal (Levi, 2014). Group interactions are also regulated by rules (formal or informal), as well as internal and external norms (Levi, 2014). Evidently broader societal norms and intrinsic norms simultaneously affect group behaviour or social identity.

A team can be classified as a structured group that work together in an organised manner towards goal attainment (Levi, 2014). This draws on a combination of each member's unique skills, knowledge and abilities (Levi, 2014). External factors such as spectators can affect a team and determine the manner in which it is able to perform. Levi (2014) refers to this as *social facilitation* which involves the capacity of other people to facilitate or even increase performance. Given the team classification associated with the Women's Sevens Rugby squad, social facilitation has definite implications for their team performance.

In Sevens rugby (as in rugby union and most other high impact ball sports) on-field performance refers to the output of the individual player during a game and team performance refers specifically to the number of tries and points scored for and against as well as games won or lost etc. (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012). Sevens rugby is referred to as an open-skill game based on the dynamic and unpredictable environment of play (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012). Performance in the game of Sevens rugby is linked in particular to scoring more tries than the opposing team on a full-sized rugby field (Vescovi & Goodale, 2015). The game is played by seven players at a time, who engage in two seven minutes halves of playtime (Vescovi & Goodale, 2015). What contributes to the difficulties of the game is its classification as high impact, based on the physical nature of the sport, and players being subjected to non-stop action; meaning they have to display prolonged concentration (Suarez-Arrones, Nuñez, Portilla, Mendez-Villaneuva, 2011; Van Rooyen & Lombard, 2008). In order to cope with the requirements of the sport, female rugby players are expected to possess certain features, not only physical, but mental as well (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012).

Gardner and Moore (2006) claim that there are four different, interrelated variables that affect athletic performance on an internal level; *instrumental competencies*, *environmental stimuli and performance demands*, *dispositional characteristics* and

behavioural self-regulation. Instrumental competencies refer to the athlete's physical and sensorimotor abilities such as coordination, muscle tone, as well as mental toughness where environmental stimuli refer specifically to the situational challenges and competition the athlete may experience (Gardner & Moore, 2006). Dispositional characteristics refer to interpersonal aspects such as coping and mental toughness, whereas behavioural self-regulation refers to the process within individuals that leads to goal-directed behaviours like performance. Self-regulation also refers to the ability to adapt to the behaviour of others, anticipating reactions and selecting personal actions on the basis of this (Schlenker, 2012). This is linked to athletic identity based on its influence on an athlete's self-presentation and ultimately, their on-field performance (Geukes et al., 2017).

Based on Sevens rugby being a team sport, the personality (individual identity) of each player, as well as their personal experience and history, has an effect on overall team performance and is seen in the behavioural self-regulation they display on-field. This ultimately affects the achievement of reaching a mutual goal, such as winning a tournament (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012; Schlenker, 2012). This is also indicative of the psychological aspects related to performance, as opposed to being merely physical. While a female athlete may possess the correct physical attributes, if there are flaws in certain psychological aspects, then performance may be compromised (Geukes et al., 2017). These psychological aspects may be affected by the social perception of rugby in South Africa.

Rugby as a male dominated sport. Rugby is considered to be a typically masculine sport due to the high degree of physicality (Hardy, 2014). This is based on the players being required to tackle, hit, grab and attempt to control others, using their bodies (Hardy, 2014). Rugby is a sport that requires physical confrontation, perseverance and skill (Allen, 2014). The intense physicality within the game of rugby is perceived as a risk as it may lead to injury (Joncheray & Tili, 2013). Another identified risk is the social risk, where women who

engage in rugby appear more masculine than feminine, based on the required physical attributes (Joncheray & Tili, 2013). Joncheray and Tili (2013) elaborate on this by asserting that “rugby shatters femininity” (p.724) as women are characterised as fragile, ornamental and precious, which makes them unsuitable for the muscular force required in rugby. Evidently the demands of rugby, do not align with what is socially acceptable for women (Hardy, 2014). Women who participate in this sport tend to transgress dominant representation of women in general, but more specifically what is expected of athletic women, as this contradicts prescriptions of the “ideal-female body” (Chananie-Hill, McGrath, & Stoll, 2012; Joncheray & Tili, 2013).

In spite of rugby’s gendered nature, there was an increase of 267,000 female rugby players internationally between 2013 and 2014 which indicates a substantial degree of interest from females in the sport (Birch, 2015). Women’s Sevens rugby is currently also the fastest growing sport in the world, according to a report commissioned by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation [HSBC] (2016), a prominent sports sponsor. However, women who choose to pursue a career in rugby still face certain obstacles, especially in South Africa. The structures for women’s rugby in South Africa are not nearly as advanced as those of men’s rugby (Posthumus, 2013), whereas in other countries including New Zealand, Australia, England, Canada, France and Hong Kong, the situation is very different. In these countries, rugby is regarded as a unisex sport and young girls start to play rugby alongside boys from an early age (Posthumus, 2013). This reflects a structural problem which is embedded in the origins of the sport within South Africa. Some have argued that this can be traced back to the Springbok brand mostly being associated with white male national heritage (Grundlingh, 2015).

Rugby in relation to the social climate in South Africa. Despite women’s rugby receiving more attention in recent years, it enjoys considerably less heritage and historical

prominence than what may be considered “mainstream male-dominated rugby” (Grundlingh, 2015). As South Africans - in many respects - still tend to conform to a combination of Western and nationalist gender norms, it affects the manner in which female rugby players are evaluated by society; which in turn affects behaviour (Cameron, 2015). According to Dolly Mavumengwana, one of the country’s most experienced female rugby players, people are surprised at the mention of her career and at the sight of her training hard in the gym and doing “men’s stuff” (“It’s not easy”, 2013, para. 1). This reflects that South African society at large is still influenced by stereotypical and dated norms despite women having proven to be equally physical and capable to men, particularly in the realm of sport. Alongside weight and religion, gender is one of the realms most typically subjected to stereotypical thinking (Baumeister & Bushman, 2017).

Within the South African context, rugby is mainly centred around men, while women remain on the periphery. This emphasises the hierarchy of social relations within rugby as a vocational choice (Delamater et al., 2014). This was mobilised by the reigning ideologies of nationalism and learnt Western gender norms (Allen, 2014). In addition to the constraints of Western gender norms, South African women were constrained by the idea of the “*Volkmoeder*” or “Mother of the Nation” which forced women to display “ideal womanhood” (Allen, 2014, p.466). Ideal womanhood is a reflection of heteronormative and Western gender norms, as it positions women solely as mothers with a central focus on family and an infatuation with domesticity (Allen, 2014). Family and domesticity are therefore identified as the realms most strongly associated with a woman’s identity and have been embedded in various socialisation processes from an early age (Joncheray et al., 2016). Conversely for men, rugby represented the opportunity for identity creation and recognition (Allen, 2014). In spite of the gendered nature of rugby, women are choosing to enter this domain and reconfigure their identities to be inclusive of the rugby player role.

Theoretical Frameworks

The succeeding theories act as a framework for the research to follow and underpin the arguments and interpretations of the collected data.

Identity theory. Identity is defined by Oyserman et al. (2012) as the traits, characteristics, roles, social relations and social membership, which define who and what a person is. Erikson (1968) defines identity as the way humans see themselves and identity formation or configuration as dependent on the socio-cultural milieu in which it occurs (Osborne, 2009; Sandhu, Singh, Tung, & Kundra, 2012). As such integration of societal demands with personal convictions are crucial in the identity formation and configuration process (Erikson, 1968). Identity configuration involves synthesis and re-synthesis of the ego (self), where the central components in this process are individual needs and ascribed ideologies like heteronormativity (Erikson, 1968).

The self and identity configuration. The self is another component of identity which is expressed through behaviour and is indicative of the manner in which individuals would like to be seen by others (Erikson, 1968). The self is therefore identified as a source and an object of behaviour requiring reflection, observation and integration (Delamater et al., 2014; Erikson, 1968). The reflexive element of the self is evident in an individual's ability to plan, observe, guide and respond to their own behaviour in relation to others (Delamater et al., 2014). This alludes to Bandura's Social Cognition Theory [SCT], where individuals are seen as self-organising and self-reflecting beings (Bandura, 1989). Individuals are neither viewed as autonomous agents nor mechanistic conveyers imitating environmental influences. Individuals are rather viewed as engaging in causal cognitions and behaviours which are a result of a combination of self-motivation and environmental influences (Bandura, 1989).

Evidently the self and individual identity constitute a range of interactive and unique processes. Both internal processes and external cues lead to a state of self-configuration

(Polster, 2005). A seemingly fixed identity is maintained by these dynamic processes involving continual adjustment and is dependent on the cultural setting within which it occurs. This is also seen in Bourdieu's notion of habitus which encompasses apparently durable patterns of thought and behaviours, which are linked to social structures, as well as one's position in relation to others (Howson, 2015). Values, thoughts - and ultimately, behaviours - are mobilised by cues in social environments which portray continual modifications of an individual's identity (Menesson, 2000). This reflects the essentiality of the environment or social setting and its interdependency and influence on individual identity.

The social constructionist perspective. Within the given framework, identity configuration is viewed from a social constructionist perspective, alluding to the importance of the environment in determining identity expression (Adams, Van de Vijver, & De Bruin, 2012). Identity and environmental influences are seemingly interdependent and mutually influential factors. Additionally, identity formation requires reciprocal interaction between the individual, social groups and the environment (Erikson, 1968). Social influences are seen as central in psychological processes like identity configuration, as learning about the social world occurs through interactions within a specific group or context (Galbin, 2014). Bandura's social learning theory [SLT] is an appropriate framework for interpreting social behaviour, as it acknowledges the dependent relationship between the environment and the individual (Bandura, 1977). Identity is therefore interpreted as a product of continuous internal negotiation as influenced by social norms (Galbin, 2014). This divides identity into individual identity and social identity.

Individual identity refers to the characteristics and traits unique to individuals, which are inclusive of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and race (Alberts, Mbalo, & Ackerman, 2003). Social identity interprets social and group membership as an overt exhibition of

individual identity (Crisp & Turner, 2010). These groups create platforms for the expression of identity within specific realms (e.g. sport) and in relation to cultural prescriptions (Watson, 2008). The social self is relatively similar to the situated self, where individuals use self-evaluations to determine context-appropriate behaviour (Polster, 2005; Hewit, 1997 as cited in Delamater et al., 2014). Self-evaluations have a positive or negative connotation which is usually linked to competencies, self-determinations, moral worth and unity (Delamater et al., 2014). Evidently, the environment and social interactions also affect an individual's self-concept as they relate directly to the behaviours they display and their descriptions of themselves (Oyserman et al., 2012).

The notion of the situated self also relates to Polster's (2005) reference to *point/counterpoint relatedness* as an internal dynamic of the self. This process refers to the collection of selves harboured by an individual, only revealing the true self when the situation is appropriate (Polster, 2005).

The necessity of relational and environmental context is reiterated as they are crucial factors in the expression of the self as consciousness and selfhood grows in relation to context (Philippson, 2009). Consequently, the assumption is made that the self differs from one situation to the next, based on internalisations of acceptable behaviour. Delamater et al. (2014) stipulate that social setting affects an individual's social identity and that this is contingent upon racial heritage and norms. Culture and socialisation are emphasised as key processes for identity formation and configuration. The environment and its constituents (language, culture, meaning etc.) play a crucial role in determining the kind of socialisation individuals receive and, ultimately, the behaviour they display; as such groups are distinct, based on shared meanings (Delamater et al., 2014). This is based on a shared acceptance of behaviours within a specific environment or context. As such, the individual uses both personal and social identities in an attempt to define themselves and an identity is constantly

in the process of configuration, substantiating the researcher's belief that identity is shaped by interactions with the social world and is therefore a dynamic process of configuration as individuals strive to achieve harmony between their individual and social identities (Erikson, 1968). Evidently the self and ultimately the individual identity, are products of complex and interactive processes.

Gender role conflict theory. Based on gender being such a large component of identity, identity also consists of meanings that define an individual in the context of gender roles (Strachan, Perras, Brawley, & Spink, 2016). Gender role conflict [GRC] may occur when rigid, sexist or restrictive gender roles lead to devaluation or violation of the self and others (O'Niel, 2008). O'Niel, Denke and Blazina (2016) define the GRC as a psychological state wherein socialised gender roles lead to negative consequences for individuals, or those around them.

GRC pertains to identity within the sporting environment, as it can negatively impact self-concept. The negative impact stems from emphasising discrepancies between feminine characteristics that are considered natural for the female gender role and masculine characteristics within the role of an athlete (Allison, 1991 as cited in Fallon and Jome (2007). This conflict may result in the restriction of human potential, specifically within the domain of sport. Additionally, GRC manifests on an interpersonal level, affecting internalisations (e.g. identity) and relationships (O'Niel et al., 2016).

As the realm of sport is engendered by masculine ideals, this could be problematic for women in sport, as it affects the criteria by which they are judged (Krane, 2001). Additionally, the masculine ideals typically related to sport, contradicts traditional notions of femininity as prescribed by Westernised and nationalistic norms (Allen, 2014; Krane, 2001). This may lead to confusion, as professional sportswomen might experience a "paradox of dual identities" catalysed by GRC (Krane et al., 2004, p. 315). The phenomenon refers to a

split between the role of female and the role as athlete (Krane et al., 2004). This could also see female athletes mentally splitting their bodies into the performing body on one hand and the social body on the other (Russell, 2004). The foregoing statement reiterates the effect of the environment on identity and performance. This, in turn, could have an effect on the manner in which a female athlete defines her athletic identity and the extent of her performance, particularly in male-dominated sports such as Sevens rugby and rugby union.

Gender schema theory. The theory specifically relates to gender schemas and is a social cognitive theory that stipulates individuals learn gendered thinking from an early age (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). These thinking patterns manifest into certain expectations regarding biological sex categories (male and female), which are known as masculinity and femininity. Hereby cultural or context specific classifications create checklist for gender appropriate behaviour. If this behaviour does not align with an individual's biological sex, the behaviour is seen as deviant which reinforces masculine and feminine categories of gender (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016).

Problem Statement

The foregoing literature review reveals that previous studies have explored the realities among female athletes participating in predominantly male sport from different perspectives including gender construction and gender roles (masculinity and femininity); gender conformity; social barriers to women's rugby; socialisation processes (Hardy, 2014; Joncheray & Tili, 2013; Joncheray et al., 2016; Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Mennesson, 2000); women in sport (Cameron, 2015; Coakley, 2014; Ming et al., 2016); sport as an element of culture (Bogopa, 2001); self-esteem; body satisfaction and the gender role conflict (Fallon & Jome, 2007; Russell, 2004); physical game analysis and match statistics and demands within the Sevens environment (Suarez-Arrones et al., 2011; Van Rooyen & Lombaard, 2008; Vescovi & Gooddale, 2015); statistics on female rugby players (Birch,

2015); empowerment of women in sport (Liechty et al., 2016); negative stereotyping of women in sport (Martiny et al., 2015) exercise identity and self-efficacy (Strachan et al., 2016) and athletic identity (Geukes et al., 2017). The majority of the referenced studies conducted research among female athletes in Canada and France and no studies among the Springbok Women's Sevens team have been conducted to date. The referenced studies also indicate a lack of studies focusing on identity and perceived on-field performance as mutually influential factors, especially within the South African context. More specifically there is little research that has been undertaken which provides qualitative insights into gender identity formation in female rugby players. (Gratton & Jones, 2015).

Additionally, there is gap in the literature relating to individual factors that influence athletic and team performance (Geukes et al., 2017; Reifsteck et al., 2016). Since identity forms part of individual factors, exploring the experience of identity in relation to perceived on-field performance in South African Women's Sevens rugby players is justified. This is strengthened by the fact that there is a gap in research pertaining to psychological constructs (including identity) of rugby players within the South African context (Payne, 2016).

Identity expression in the realm of sport is split into two main parts: individual (women) and athletic identity, which leads to certain discrepancies in genderising (Krane et al., 2004). The research will therefore focus on the internalisations and expression of these two main parts. Understanding the two main parts will be undertaken in an attempt to enhance self-understanding and ultimately, overall team performance. The researcher believes that this will enhance the understanding of the realities of fellow teammates, as well as individual players' (psychological) positions in the team. The aforementioned implies that this investigation is the first of its kind in South Africa and is in no way related to a larger study.

The investigation was primarily guided by the principles of qualitative methodology, which arose from the need for more qualitative insights within the realm of sport, particularly with female athletes (Gratton & Jones, 2015). Draper (2009) reflects on the usefulness of using qualitative research methods to investigate contextual factors and their impact on physical activity and performance.

Research Question and Aim

The appropriate research question given the identified problem statement was as follows: *What are the experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance?* The aims of a study are described by Creswell (2007) as the preferred outcomes of the study as established by the researcher. An aim or aims of any research endeavour includes the researcher's intentions as being indicative of the entire research picture. The aim that guided the research among Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players was *to explore the experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance.*

Literature Review

The reviewed literature was mainly acquired through the use of Google Scholar. Other platforms that were used include the North-West University's online library, and the North-West PsycINFO, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and PsycARTICLES. Books and dissertations were also obtained from the North-West University's library, situated in Potchefstroom. The keywords used to filter these databases included: *athletic identity, identity, interpretive description, gender roles, qualitative research, on-field performance, rugby Sevens, South Africa, Springbok, female rugby players.*

Methodology

Research context. The research was conducted at the Stellenbosch Academy of Sports' administrative building, within the Western Cape region, as this is where the players

are situated for training purposes. Qualitative research was the primary investigatory method applied within this context through the application of semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule appears in Appendix 2.

Inclusion criteria was identified by using the principles of the purposive sampling method, which was the main sampling method for this endeavour. The sample was specifically tailored to the needs of the research, focusing on only a small number of identified research participants (Sarantakos, 2013). The identified inclusion criteria for the study were:

- Participants had to be professional female Sevens athletes, as they transgress traditional gender roles by competing in a so-called “masculine sport”
- Participants had to be competing at an international level, and had therefore to be contracted to the South African Rugby Union [SARU] as Springbok Women’s Sevens Rugby players
- Participants had to voluntarily agree to participate in the research, which was verified by their signing of the informed consent document. The researcher was therefore reassured of the players’ conscious and anonymous decision making (c.f. Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

There were minimal exclusion criteria for the study:

- Male athletes were excluded on the premise that the research solely focused on capturing the experience of female athletes.

The research team consisted of the student researcher and two supervising researchers. The researcher is pursuing a Master’s degree in Research Psychology and is also registered as an Intern Research Psychologist with the Health Profession Council of South Africa [HPCSA]. Both research supervisors are also registered at the HPCSA in the Research and Clinical Psychology categories. The researchers have all been trained in the

administration of qualitative interviews, thereby ensuring the utmost integrity in the research outputs. Furthermore, the participants completed a short biographical questionnaire (Appendix 1) which was integrated into the discussion and results sections, as a means to increase the understanding of the realities faced by South African Women's Sevens rugby players. The final number of interviews conducted was 11.

Research approach and design. A qualitative approach was chosen for the research endeavour as it is believed to have optimised the findings of the identified research question. Its applicability in this instance was emphasised by the majority of studies within the realm of sport being quantitative in nature, neglecting to produce information regarding the experiences, feelings and emotions of athletes (Gratton & Jones, 2015). The nature of qualitative research accommodates constructionism and interpretivism as meta-theoretical bases. Constructionist philosophers highlight the importance of culture and history in the creation and re-creation of knowledge (Guest, Namey, & Mitchel, 2012). Therefore, the researcher interacted closely with the research participants and collected data of a verbal nature, which was used to describe the unique realities of the identified research participants. This is indicative of "social actors" creating meaning through their interaction with the world (Grix, 2002).

Reality is therefore something neither objective nor fixed, but rather, meaning is created when social actors interact with the world (Sarantakos, 2013). This substantiates the researcher's viewpoint that identity is shaped by the interactions an individual has with the world, which draws on the basic principles of the social constructionist theory. Identity is therefore a construct that can be explored at a particular point in time and this exploration can provide accurate conclusions. Similarly, interpretivism is based on the assumption that knowledge is unique to every individual and therefore knowledge of reality is differently defined by different individuals (Guest et al., 2012). As such meanings are subjective and

distinctive (Grix, 2002). This indicates that identity and knowledge of identity within Springbok Sevens rugby differed between individuals

Adhering to a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to interpret and understand the meanings attached to identity as described by Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players (Creswell, 2009). This is based on qualitative research having the ability to provide answers to many complex, compelling and contextually fixed questions relevant to health and human functioning (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magree, 2004). This facilitated a research process that is beneficial to society (particularly women's rugby) and the larger sporting community. Furthermore, the use of qualitative research assisted in interpreting the context within which this behaviour occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This particularly applies in the realm of sport as it is an element of culture and a product of complex socialisation processes, which are all context-bound (Bogopa, 2001). For these reasons a qualitative framework was considered to be the best and most comprehensive for the given study.

An interpretive descriptive design was adhered to, to enable the interpretation and description of the unique realities of the individual female Sevens rugby players. Blignault and Ritchie (2009) claim that one of the functions of qualitative research is to "explore participants' understanding and interpretations of social phenomena in the way that captures their inherent nature" (p. 28). In addition, by exploring these interpretations, the researcher also aimed to describe the unique realities of each of the individual female rugby players.

Individuals who have already experienced a certain situation are identified as the best sources of expert knowledge of that situation (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997); the situation in this instance being the role of a female athlete in a predominantly male sport. Additionally, the design rests on the assumption that individuals weave their subjective experience into the narrative which makes the experience unique to each individual (Thorne

et al., 1997). This allowed the researcher to view the similarities and differences between the experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study enabled the researcher to establish the underlying motivations of attitudes and beliefs of the individuals' behaviours (Blignault & Ritchie, 2009), which in turn permitted the researcher to establish a possible relationship between identity and the perception of on-field performance. The effectiveness of applying interpretive description within health research is reiterated by Thorne (2008), who asserts that this design capitalises on health-related phenomena, of which psychological health is a sub-category. As such the design promoted greater understanding of social group interaction and the core of human experience within the context of rugby Sevens (Thorne, 2008).

Participants and sampling. Purposive sampling was used, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned in the previous section. This method of sampling enabled the researcher to identify a sample specifically tailored to the needs and aims of the research (Sarantakos, 2013). However, the application of non-probability sampling implied that not everyone had an equal chance of being included within the current research endeavour due to the need for a specific sample frame. This need specifically related to establishing the manner in which Springbok Women's Sevens athletes construct their personal and athletic identity (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). The relevance of using this method is extended based on it being the most appropriate method of sampling within the interpretive descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000). Based on the elite nature of the chosen population and the chosen method of sampling, a small sample size is justified: hence one that is not statistically determined (Sarantakos, 2013).

As such, the researcher recognises the interviewed sample as being informationally representative of the small population as determined by the administration of semi-structured interviews and relevant probes (Barnett, Vasileiou, Thorpe, & Young, 2015). A total of

eleven (11) female participants took part in this study and the majority of them have been involved in playing rugby for 4 years, with 8 years being the longest time period of involvement in the sport. More than half of the sample were black female athletes with isiXhosa being the most common home language, followed by English and Afrikaans. Of the 11 participants, 7 are recruited as forward players while the rest (4) play in the backline.

Research procedure and recruitment. Preliminary permission to conduct the study was obtained by an informal discussion with the team's head coach during 2017 to determine the plausibility of the study. This discussion was conducted by Prof. Kobus du Plooy, a North-West University [NWU] staff member at the Institute for Psychological Wellbeing [IPW] and co-study leader, as well as the team's former performance consultant and a registered Clinical Psychologist. In this discussion, the nature and the outline of the study was briefly described, as well as the details of all the parties involved. The proposal was then reviewed by a small group within the Psychology Department, with a subsequent review by the scientific committee from the Community Psychosocial Research entity [COMPRES] at the North-West University. Lastly, the proposal was submitted to the Health Research Ethics Committee [HREC: NWU-00123-17-S1] at the North-West University.

Upon the relevant approvals from the university-related committees, the head coach and the South African Rugby Union [SARU] were provided with goodwill permission letters and they signed these before the study commenced. After the relevant parties had signed these documents, the coach provided the researcher with specific dates of training camps during which time the interviews could be held. He also provided the researcher with the necessary contact information of each player. Emails containing information about the research and the informed consent document was then sent to each participant individually on Friday 22 June 2018. The identified time was 25 – 29 June 2018 and the interviews were conducted at the administration building of the Stellenbosch Academy of Sport [SAS].

On Monday the 25th of June 2018, participants, attended an information session which was presented at SAS by the researcher herself. During this session the background of the study was discussed in more depth with the participants and any relevant questions were answered by the researcher. Directly after the information session, an independent person Miss Nadia van Niekerk, went through the informed consent documentation with each of the players, countersigned as the witness and scheduled convenient times with the players who agreed to participate. Ms van Niekerk is currently completing her Honours degree in Physiology and during her undergraduate studies, she was exposed to ethics, specifically within the Psychological sphere of inquiry. Ms van Niekerk therefore ensured that players were not coerced into participating in this study and stressed the voluntary nature of participation.

Data collection. Data was collected from 25 – 29 June 2018, using the semi-structured interview method as well as a short biographical questionnaire (Appendix 1), which provided the researcher with a short background overview of each of the players.

Semi-structured interviews. The chosen method for data collection was semi-structured individual interviews. The interviews were conducted in a secure office at the administration building of SAS and lasted between 30 to 70 minutes. Pre-determined questions were developed and presented in an open and adaptable manner (c.f. Nieuwenhuis, 2016). This type of setting enabled ongoing interaction between the participant and the researcher (c.f. Yeo et al., 2014). The interviews assisted the researcher in gaining deeper insights into lived realities and enabled clarification requests on unclear statements, as described by Sarantakos (2013). Through this, deeper insights into the subjective realities of the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players were gained. This method of data collection is also relevant within the chosen interpretive descriptive research design (Sandelowski, 2000).

The researcher also carefully observed non-verbal behaviours in relation to verbal statements and the funnel structure was adhered to in order to establish rapport with participants as recommended by Nieuwenhuis, (2016) and Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran (2009). The interview schedule can be found in Appendix 2.

Data analysis. Thematic analysis was used as the primary method of analysing data. Appendix 4 shows some of the documentation used in the process of the thematic analysis, including a small part of the transcribed and analysed interview, coding categories and journal excerpts. This type of analysis aligns with interpretive description as an inductive, bottom-up approach is used to analyse data as described by Sandelowksi (2000). The secondary method of data analysis involved compiling basic descriptive statistics on the information gathered from the biographical questionnaires. This information was mainly used to increase the understanding of the realities of Springbok Women's Sevens athletes. The student researcher was responsible for completing frequency analyses of the biographical questionnaire and the qualitative analysis on the data, as she has been trained in the execution of both.

The steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) were used as a guideline for analysing the transcribed semi-structured interviews. These steps include familiarisation, generating initial codes, grouping codes according to similarity, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes, and composing the final report. The fifth phase (defining and naming the themes) was when the researcher started to interpret the data.

Familiarisation of the data occurred when the researcher transcribed all the interviews by listening to the recordings made from the interviews. This enabled the researcher to informally review the interview and pick up certain statements that weren't possible during the interview. Upon finalisation of the transcribed interviews, the researcher read and re-read

the interviews to ensure thorough understanding of the statements made by participants as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2013).

Thorne et al. (1997) mention that repeated immersion is encouraged before analysis is undertaken as it will assist the researcher in establishing certain linkages within the data. During the second phase of re-reading the transcribed interviews, the researcher was able to generate initial categories that relate specifically to identity and on-field performance among female Seven's rugby players. These categories are explained by the prominent codes as displayed in Table 1 below:

Table 1:

Initial code categories pertaining to identity and on-field performance

Code groups (Initial categories)	<i>Codes explaining code group</i>
<i>Initial involvement in rugby</i>	Other sports (e.g. soccer, cricket, hockey, netball, athletics) Started at university level Approached by friends or coaches Brothers / cousins Touch rugby / 15's rugby
<i>Mental and physical attributes and characteristics</i>	Mental switch / switched on Grit / perseverance (physical and mental) Ambition / optimism / positivity Quick decision-making / learning Self-doubt Aggression Discipline Very hard on themselves Periods (menstruation) Animal-like behaviours when on the field
<i>Positives of being a female Seven's athlete</i>	Provides stability / viable career option Ability to be a role model Living out talent

	Doing what you love Finding your true self Travelling
<i>Difficulties of being a female Seven's athlete</i>	Comparison to males / rugby as male-dominated in South Africa System not as advanced / small pool of selection Difficult for new players Withheld sponsorship / support Lack of marketing of female rugby in general Lower salaries and benefits than males No set numbers like in 15's Lack of actual game time Not knowing what to do / frustration Injury / technique Expectations – giving 100%
<i>Conscious adaptation – withholding certain personality characteristics or “natural (female) qualities”</i>	Emotion – inability to show true feelings Pressure High performance environment
<i>Societal relations and external support (family and friends)</i>	Supportive Questioning choices Stereotypical beliefs Role models
<i>Team dynamics</i>	Communication (changing to become more communicative, as that is what the environment requires) Leadership Conflict Cultural / language diversity Sisterhood / family Friendships Prolonged physical proximity Understanding Team identity versus individual identity

<i>Coaching</i>	Coaching that elevates strengths Coaching that permits freedom versus coaching that enforces strict rules
<i>Global performance ranking (performance outputs)</i>	The World Series Comparison with big rugby playing nations (e.g. Australia and New Zealand)
<i>Very strong sense of responsibility</i>	Perform in order to pave the road for players to come
<i>Springbok rugby as a whole</i>	Pride Part of the “brand”

Subsequently, the researcher examined the codes and based on their prominence generated a suitable order and appropriate themes. The researcher also had the assistance of a co-coder in independently coding the transcribed interviews. The co-coder is currently employed as a post-doctorate researcher at COMPRES research unit. A consensus meeting was held to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis phase as prescribed by Clarke and Braun (2013). During this meeting, the themes of the coder and the co-coder were collated and it was ensured that the generated themes reflected the main research question. Through this, the process further enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by incorporating the peer review process during data analysis.

The consensus meeting mentioned above also assisted in defining and naming the themes based on the feedback of both the researcher and the co-coder. As evident in Table 1, the initial categories pertain specifically to internal and external factors that affect that interplay between the individual and the environment. The main themes, as discussed in Section B, are as follows: *individual realities relating to identity and on-field performance*, and *external pressures affecting identity and on-field performance*. The aim was to capture the essence of each individual theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly the themes were written

up with the identified subthemes and are seen in Section B as integrated with relevant literature to form a logical line of argumentation and storytelling (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness. There are various ways in which trustworthiness can be established within qualitative research. These include member checking; peer review, triangulation; code/re-code/co-code (multiple coding); prolonged engagement; dense description; stepwise replication; reflexivity and crystallisation (Brookes, 2007; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). The processes that were implemented in the current research endeavour included peer review; multiple coding; prolonged engagement with the data; dense description and reflexivity.

Peer reviewing (no access to data) was implemented throughout the entire research process and was conducted by the supervisor and co-supervisor of this study. Multiple coding, which involves having codes cross-checked by other researchers in the same field of expertise (Brookes, 2007), was performed by Dr Andrea Daniels who is a post-doctorate researcher at the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. She has also been involved in various research studies and has experience in coding. Her involvement is explained more in-depth in the previous section.

A strict timeline was developed for the purposes of this study and it reflects the commitment of the researcher over a 2-year period, which indicates prolonged engagement with the proposed research. This allowed sufficient time to reflect on all the relevant literature and understand what questions needed to be answered instead of following preconceptions, engaging with research participants in an effective manner, being able to pick up distortions in the collected data and producing a holistic and insightful report.

Based on the chosen qualitative framework, the researcher was able to gain “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) into the lived experience of participants, which is coupled with dense descriptions of the context in which this occurs.

Lastly the researcher applied reflexivity when conducting the individual interviews, analysing the data and compiling the research report, by keeping a reflective journal on personal experiences. Thorne et al. (1997) suggests that keeping a reflective journal allows researchers to determine their own bias upon the research and serves as an explicit tool of accountability for these biases. This enabled the researcher to reflect on her role within the research process and also enabled her to determine the cause and effect of certain phenomena without the influence of bias. Such biases can include the researcher's own beliefs and aspirational outcomes for the proposed study. Appendix 5 shows pages from the researcher's reflective journal, which guided and documented the encounters with participants (Thorne et al., 1997). Field notes were also made during the interviews. These notes will also appear in Section C as part of the critical reflection of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Consent. HREC provided ethical clearance for this single research study which forms part of a Master's degree in Research Psychology. The ethics approval number is as follows: NWU-00123-17-S1, and the approval letter appears in Appendix 7. Goodwill permission was sought from the relevant parties, namely SARU and the team's head coach (Appendix 8). Upon their approval, participants were approached and recruited for the study by means of email communication followed by a personal information session. Following the session, participants had the opportunity to voluntarily agree to participation in the study, in the presence of an independent person.

Risks and benefits. The chosen methodological approach emphasises subjective experiences and therefore required close interaction with the research participants. As such the study was characterised as medium risk, based on the qualitative approach and the sensitive nature of identity. Based on the close interaction with the research participants, the researcher had to carefully consider the manner in which these risks would be dealt with. In

this instance, risks refer to the possibility of harm or injury - physical, psychological, social, or economic - which might arise as a result of participation in research, as indicated by Israel (2015).

The researcher anticipated two possible risks namely psychological and social risk. These were foreseen based on the individualistic and personal nature of the chosen topic. As identity is an ongoing process starting from an early age, re-exploration of certain identity formation process in the context of nationalistic socialisation processes could have triggered secondary trauma. Additionally, the researcher's presence in the physical space of the participants, as well as the utilisation of certain probes could have made interviews emotionally tense which also represent a predecessor for possible psychological trauma.

Social risk was anticipated on the basis of the small and relatively elite sample size which might have put participants at risk of identification. Precautions were taken for the possible psychological and social harm by referring participants for debriefing, done by Dr. Irene Strydom, a trained Clinical Psychologist with whom the participants are familiar. Participants had the opportunity to contact Dr. Strydom at their own convenience and discretion. As such, the researcher was not aware of who contacted the psychologist, thus ensuring the anonymity and trustworthiness of these sessions.

Additionally, probes were applied with caution and the interviews were conducted in a sufficiently secluded room. Verbatim statements were carefully selected to avoid identification.

In spite of the identified risks, the researcher concluded that the identified benefits outweighed the risks. The possible and indirect benefits of the study include the provision of personalised feedback to the players and coaches in order to improve self-understanding and ultimately team dynamics and, possibly, overall team performance; thereby promoting

positive and more relevant player-coach interactions. Lastly there will be a beneficial increase in the general public's understanding of the realities faced by these athletes.

Anonymity and confidentiality. The consideration of anonymity and confidentiality are crucial parts of the research process. Confidentiality reassured participants that information collected during the interview, would not be made available to anyone not included in the sampling process. This also implies that individuals from SARU, as well as the team's coach would not be able to identify individual information from feedback reports and publications. The researcher used her discretion on data analysis and during the compilation phase, applied caution when selecting verbatim statements in order to avoid exposing specific participants. More specifically, the personal information of participants won't be shared with prospective researchers undertaking research of a similar topic (c.f. Babbie & Mouton, 2009). To ensure anonymity each participant was provided with a participant number. This ensured that the sample could not be targeted by any individual through involvement in the study, despite the sample competing at an international level.

Incentives. Participants received a Woolworth's voucher for the amount of R100 to thank them for participating in the study. Other than that, they did not receive any incentives. They were, however provided with water and light snacks during the course of the interviews. Furthermore, participation had no added costs for participants as the interviews were conducted at a venue where they were already engaged in training. This also meant that the time and inconvenience was kept to a minimum.

Storage of the Data (Electronic and Hard Copies). The interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the participants, to facilitate easy transcriptions. The researcher used an electronic recording device that has the function of converting the interviews into mp3 format. This was done to ease the process of listening and transcribing the interviews: the researcher typed the interviews word-for-word, verbatim. A short example of the

transcriptions can be found in Appendix 4. Full transcriptions were omitted from the final report to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of this elite sample. The original recordings were removed from the electronic recording device to avoid any risks that may be involved in digital and non-password protected data. This was done within two hours of conducting the interviews, at the end of each data collection day. Copies of the recordings are stored on the researcher's laptop and also on a cloud-based drive for backup and to ensure the necessary safeguarding thereof.

Hard copies of the interviews are sealed in paper envelopes and packed away in labelled holders, these holders are stored in a password protected safe. All data and information regarding the study, will be stored at the COMPRES entity at the North-West University in Potchefstroom for seven years. All the hard copies of the data will be shredded after the seven-year period. Additionally, upon the completion of her studies, the researcher will transfer any digital information on her laptop onto a password protected flash drive which will be stored alongside the hardcopies at the COMPRES entity.

Credibility of the researcher(s). The researcher is registered as a Research Psychology Masters student at the North-West University as well as an Intern Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA]. She also holds a Baccalareus Artium degree and two previous Honours Baccalareus Artium degrees. During her studies, the researcher had exposure to various research modules which equipped her with the necessary skills to be able to perform the semi-structured interviews. These modules include: PSYC312, SOCL312, SOCL612, SOCL671, PSYH671 and PSYC876. Of these modules SOCL671 provided the most practical experience, as it was a mini-dissertation completed as part of her Honours in Sociology. This was based on the researcher performing semi-structured interviews with participants regarding gender roles and leadership within academia. These interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and conclusions were

made based on these themes. In addition, the more academic and less practical modules equipped the researcher with the necessary knowledge to act as foundation for conducting these interviews. Being a student within the social sciences offered constant exposure to qualitative methodology, which is very relevant in this instance.

The researcher has also completed a three-day ethics training course, presented by HREC, which informed all the procedures undertaken and the maintenance of the highest ethical standards. The researcher was also in close collaboration with the study leader who is a Research Psychologist, also registered at the HPCSA as well as the co-study leader, a registered Clinical Psychologist at the HPCSA.

Choice and structure of report. Article format is the preferred structure, with the following title: *Towards new gender roles? Exploring identity configuration of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players*

- **Section A:** Orientation to the research, literature review and problem statement
- **Section B:** Article, according to the guidelines of *Sex Roles*
- **Section C:** Critical reflection (conclusion, limitations and recommendations)
- **Section D:** Appendices

Sex Roles (a Springer journal) has been selected as the journal for submission of the article.

The previous section includes the orientation to the research by drawing on construct relevant literature to contextualise the identified problem statement which relates to identity configuration, gender roles within the South African context, and the domain of rugby. Subsequently, the chosen methodology, scientific processes and ethical considerations underpinning the research endeavour, were discussed.

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SECTION B: Article

Article: Towards new gender roles? Exploring identity configuration of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players

Towards New Gender Roles? Exploring Identity configuration of Springbok Women's Sevens Rugby Players

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Abstract

In South Africa, rugby has predominantly been associated with the male gender. This relates to sport being a display of significant cultural practices of gender. Gender is identified as a dominant component of identity and competing in a predominantly male sport may have certain implications for identity configuration in female rugby players. There is a need for more qualitative insights regarding identity amongst female rugby players. The article explores the experiences of women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with players from the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby team. Findings suggest that there is a strong

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reciprocity between the mental and the environmental influences in the identity configuration process amongst the identified sample. Conscious adaptation, required physical attributes and beneficial experiences are prominent internal subthemes and the second theme pertaining to external factors is substantiated by the subthemes of structural difficulties, overall team dynamics and coaching, comparison and expectations, stereotypes, and perceptions, as such identity configuration occurs in relation to social interactions - and is largely influenced by social norms. The Sevens environment requires constant re-synthesis and configuration of the ego, as it specifically impacts performance and on-field outputs. Practically, the findings enabled increased self-reflection among individual players, and the development of strategies to enhance coaching practices and overall team dynamics.

Keywords: athletic identity, identity-configuration, gender roles, on-field performance, rugby Sevens, Springbok

Introduction

Rugby has traditionally been classified as a masculine sport based on the prominent physical nature thereof, which requires tackling, hitting, grabbing and controlling of other players using only body strength (Hardy 2014). Based on the dynamic and unpredictable environment of rugby Sevens, it is categorised as an open-skill game; requiring constant adaptation within the field of play (Gerber and Terblanche 2012). The skills therefore needed to compete in the game of rugby are not only physical but reside on a mental level as well (Gerber and Terblanche 2012).

Gender-appropriate behaviour is largely determined by society, and traditional views tend to remain central in determining desired qualities (Prentice and Caranza 2002). This becomes troublesome as Bogopa (2001) makes the assertion that sport is a display of gender, dependent on socially and culturally shared norms. Furthermore, the organisation and performance of sport are critically impacted by gender relations and reigning ideologies

(Ming et al. 2016). As a result embedded systems of normativity, such as gender, are applied to control and evaluate behaviour (Cameron 2015). As such, characteristics are ascribed to each gender, where masculinity and femininity are portrayed as polar opposites (Coakley 2014). Behaviours required within the game of rugby typically do not align with what is considered appropriate for females.

As a result, the heritage of women's rugby is lacking in comparison to "mainstream male-dominated rugby", as it has commonly been referred to (Grundlingh 2015). Within the South African context, structures for women's rugby are not nearly as advanced as those for men's rugby (Posthumus 2013). Countries like New Zealand, Australia, England, Canada, France and Hong Kong have started to implement equal structures for women and men within rugby, as girls play rugby from an early age, alongside boys (Posthumus 2013).

In spite of the limited heritage of female rugby, there was a global increase of 267,000 female rugby players between 2013 and 2014, indicating substantial growth in female participation within rugby as a whole (Birch 2015). In fact, Women's Sevens rugby has been classified as the fastest growing sport in the world according to a report published by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation [HSBC] (2016). Consistent with the introductory remarks, the article reports on the findings from a qualitative inquiry, seeking to explore experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and on-field performance.

On-field performance in Sevens rugby. Performance in the game of Sevens rugby is based on the number of tries and points scored for or against a team during a competitive match, resulting in winning or losing (Gerber and Terblanche 2012; Vescovi and Goodale 2015). Game time consists of two, seven-minute halves that are played by seven players at a time (Vescovi and Goodale 2015). The difficulty of this sport is related to its classification as high impact, due to the high degree of physicality and non-stop action which requires players

to engage in prolonged mental focus and display physical robustness (Suarez-Arrones et al. 2011; Van Rooyen and Lombard 2008). As such, women who participate in Sevens rugby are considered to be transgressing dominant representations of women, as the requisite characteristics and physical capabilities contradict the so-called “ideal female body” which may impact identity at individual and social level (Chananie-Hill et al. 2012; Joncheray and Tili 2013).

Evidently, on-field performance draws on the physical and mental strength of the individual. Furthermore, self-regulation, which forms an important part of on-field performance, also reflects the athlete’s ability to anticipate the reactions of others and on the basis thereof, choose appropriate behaviours (Schlenker 2012). This draws on the internal process required to cope with situational on-field demands. Additionally, these mental characteristics can affect on-field group dynamics or the goals of a particular group. Group dynamics are dependent on the unique skills, knowledge and abilities of each of its members and these directly affect goal attainment (Levi 2014).

Apart from the internal factors, external parties can also have a marked/significant effect on group performance, which Levi (2014) refers to as social facilitation. Additionally, group performance and organisation is regulated by internal and external norms such as gender (Levi 2014).

Women’s Sevens rugby and identity. As gender is one of the dimensions of identity and a reflection of longstanding social processes, it is crucial to consider the manner in which gender affects identity. As already established, the game of Sevens rugby requires a combination of physical and mental characteristics. These physical and mental characteristics manifest as externally-imposed expectations and are directly linked to the social environment which relates to identity formation or configuration. Erikson (1968) characterises identity as a way in which humans see themselves in relation to their environment, which means the

social-cultural milieu affects the manner in which identity is developed and configured (Osborne 2009; Sandhu et al. 2012). Individual identity is inclusive of ethnicity, gender and race (Alberts et al. 2003). Identity configuration is a process where the ego is continually synthesised and re-synthesised in relation to individual needs and ascribed ideologies like heteronormativity (Erikson 1968). As such, identity formation is interpreted as dependent on social interactions in relation to context, and can therefore be interpreted as being a dynamic rather than a static process, reflecting continual re-configuration of identity.

In order to successfully achieve identity configuration, individuals need to engage in continued reflection, observation and integration (Delamater et al. 2014; Erikson 1968). Bandura's Social Cognition Theory [SCT] is evident here as it characterises individuals as self-organising and self-motivating in the presence of environmental influences (Bandura 1989). Continual adaptation of identity expression is reflective of an individual's social identity where social and group membership is an expression of individual identity (Adams et al. 2012; Crisp and Turner 2010; Galbin 2014; Philippon 2009).

This perspective stipulates that a specific social setting (e.g. the sporting environment) can affect an individual's social identity, which is greatly dependent on racial heritage and contextual norms (Delamater et al. 2014). Among these contextual norms and learnt role behaviours are what has been described as gender roles, which is a normative system affecting desired qualities of each gender (Coakley, 2014; Prentice and Caranza, 2002). Such roles refer to the "shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex" (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001, p.783). Females have traditionally been ascribed the role of homemakers whereas males are awarded the roles of breadwinners (Mac An Ghaill and Haywood 2007). As such, family and the domestic sphere are generally regarded as realms associated most strongly with a woman's identity (Joncheray et al. 2016).

Conversely, men's identity creation is mostly associated with participation in sport such as rugby.

In South Africa this has markedly been the case, based on the strong nationalistic history and connotations of the sport (Allen 2014). This has certain implications for the organisation of sport within the South African context, as rugby traditionally - and currently still - remains mainly centred on men; while women remain the marginalised gender within this realm. The dichotomous nature of heteronormative ideals may lead to a so-called gender role conflict [GRC] in women who choose to participate in traditionally male dominated sports such as rugby, as it challenges so-called socially and culturally accepted "female" behaviours (Ming et al. 2016). The GRC is defined by O'Niel et al. (2016) as a psychological state where socially enforced gender roles may lead to negative internal and external consequences which may restrict human potential (O'Niel et al. 2016). As gender is a large component of identity, the GRC could affect definitions of the self as dictated by contextual meanings. GRC in female athletes is identified as a struggle with self-concept which is catalysed by discrepancies between masculine (athlete) and feminine (gender role) expectations (Allison 1991 as cited in Fallon and Jome 2007).

Women's Sevens rugby and athletic identity. Apart from gender, athletic identity is another component of identity for female Seven's rugby players and athletes in general. Athletic identity is the extent to which an individual identifies themselves as an athlete and the strength of this identification (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016). Athletic identity is another component of overall identity and may affect self-esteem and levels of value (Ahmadabadi et al. 2014). The stability of athletic identity also has the potential to foster stable on-field performance (Geukes et al. 2017). A strong athletic identity can therefore be seen as crucial for athletes who compete at elite level, such as the national level, because

being categorised at an advanced level of the sport requires consistently optimal performance levels (Ahmadabadi et al. 2014; Geukes et al. 2017).

Female athletes, including rugby players, therefore typically face problems that are not faced by their male counterparts. This may include media publications which tend to emphasise the expected gender roles of females in sport, rather than their performance and athleticism (Ellison 2002). This appears to further serve as reinforcement for outdated societal norms and could detrimentally affect the expression of identity, particularly among female athletes such as female rugby players. Through these publications, female athletes are continually sexualised and objectified which has a detrimental impact on their athletic identity (Zeilinger 2015). In the process, stereotypes related to the roles of females and of athletes in gender are reinforced, maintaining the sexualisation of female athletes. On the other hand, female athletes who have more muscular bodies are sometimes also perceived as unnatural (Engh and Potgieter 2016). These perceptions may be linked to schemas which are internal knowledge systems informed by norms and role expectations in society (Augostinos and Walker 1996). Therefore, schemas underlie judgement or inferences regarding behaviours of specific groups (Gilovich et al. 2013). As such schemas are applied to navigate social situations and interactions. Sandra Bem's social cognitive theory; the Gender Schema Theory stipulates that people are subjected to gendered thinking from an early age. (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016). Such schemas lead to the enforcement of culturally constructed categories of gender, namely, masculinity and femininity and these categories reject behaviour that doesn't align with biological sex (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2016).

Female athletes also experience physical constraints in their pursuit of meeting performance expectations, not experienced by male athletes. This includes, amongst others; eating disorders, increased vulnerability for bone-related injuries and challenges related to menstrual cycles (Halim et al. 2016). The aforementioned displays the complexities of

operating in a domain not considered “natural” by some for the female gender and reinforces the “paradox of dual identities” (Krane et al. 2004).

Despite these challenges, within a contemporary society sport has been classified as a platform serving as an enabler for women to exercise personal power. As such it has the ability to change certain rigid beliefs and stereotypes within society. Stereotypes being a form of dysfunctional norms used to control specific groups within society (Fiske 1993). In many cases, sport is considered to be a form of resistance against imposed gender-related constraints and constrictions (Liechty et al. 2016). Rugby proves to be particularly empowering to the female gender as it enables women to resist, amongst others, ideal notions of female bodies by choosing to pursue physical goals, instead of idealised body types typically portrayed in the media (Liechty et al. 2016). This further highlights the effect of exercise on the construction of the self and ultimately, identity (Joncheray et al. 2016).

Problem Statement

The above discussion reflects the inherent difficulties of being a female athlete within a traditionally male dominated sport, namely rugby (Ellison 2002; Halim et al. 2016; Zeilinger 2015). Previous research endeavours have mainly explored the following topics in relation to female athletes mainly within South Africa, Canada and France; gender, socialisation and social barriers in women’s rugby (Hardy 2014; Joncheray and Tili 2013; Joncheray et al. 2016; Krane 2001; Krane et al. 2004; Mennesson 2000), the overall position of women in sport (Cameron 2015; Coakley 2014; Ming et al. 2016), sport as a facet of culture (Bogopa 2001), body satisfaction and self-esteem in relation to gender roles (Fallon and Jome 2007; Russell 2004), performance related outcomes and physical demands in Sevens (Suarez-Aronnes et al. 2011; Van Rooyen and Lombaard 2008; Vescovi and Gooddale 2015), statistics of females in rugby (Birch 2015), stereotypes (Martiny et al. 2015), self-efficacy and exercise identity (Strachan et al. 2016) and athletic identity (Geukes

et al. 2017). The aforementioned research indicates the absence of studies exploring identity and perceived on-field performance, as mutually influential constructs. This reflects a gap in literature relating to individual factors that influence athletic and team performance (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016). However, there were limited studies that qualitatively explored identity among female rugby players, specifically within the South African context (Gratton and Jones 2015). This may be problematic based on the strained and marginalised position that female rugby players occupy within the South African context. This created a need to understand the manner in which the social position affects female rugby players on a psychological level and how performance is impacted. Furthermore, no studies to date were found that have focused on the South African national Women's Sevens Rugby team, also known as the Springbok Women's Sevens team.

This sample was identified based on their elite position characterised by exposure to extreme pressure during the game and possible gender-role stereotyping as they compete at the highest level in the world and frequently interact with the public and male rugby players. The players are continually compared to - and forced to compete with - the Male Springbok Seven's rugby team, which is currently ranked as the number one team in the world for Sevens rugby. Being compared to the top performing team may significantly impact on their performance. As they are such an elite team, which few researchers have the opportunity of accessing, interviews with the players enabled nuanced insights into the realities of female rugby within the South African context, at its highest level. Additionally, there is an identified gap relating to individual factors that influence athletic and team performance, particularly the psychological constructs of rugby players within the South African context (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016).

Contribution of the study

The main contribution of this study was an enhanced understanding of the personal realities and the external pressures that affect identity and ultimately on perceived on-field performance of the Springbok Women's Seven's team. This enabled nuanced information regarding the position of this elite sports group and shed light on the manifestation of gendered and outdated norms affecting the organisation of rugby in South Africa. Additionally, possible pathways for catalysing sustainable change of these outdated norms have been identified. As such, the findings can be applied as a tool for breaking down gendered stereotypes regarding female rugby, by starting at the core of this sport: the players themselves.

Practically, insights from this study were used to assist coaches in better understanding players in order to enhance team dynamics and ultimately performance. Additionally, sponsors and managing parties will be able to apply the findings in decision-making situations and used this information to make decisions that are in the best interest of these players.

Ethical Considerations

Based on the application of qualitative research methodology, the personal nature of identity and the limited sample size the researcher took great caution regarding the psychological and social harm that participants may experience. The study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University (NWU-000123-17-S1). Participants also provided written informed consent prior to the commencement of the interviews (example in Appendix 6). Participation was emphasised as voluntary and allowed participants to withdraw from the study at any time.

Methodology

The noted research problem is suited for the application of qualitative methodology as it enabled the collection of rich data regarding the experiences, feelings and emotions of the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby team (Gratton and Jones 2015). Additionally, the application of a qualitative research design enabled consideration of the context affecting behaviour and experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Evidently the study was largely guided by constructionist and interpretivist principles, as described by Grix (2002), and Guest et al. (2012) who position individual or so-called "social actors" at the centre of knowledge creation. Evidently, histories play a large part in the creation and re-creation of knowledge. The nationalistic histories and continued societal creation of knowledge in the realm of rugby, explain the relevance of viewing the sport from this angle.

Based on this, individuals are able to formulate unique interpretations grounded in societal norms, regarding the reality of the sport which points to interpretivism. As such Guest et al. (2012) and Grix (2002) recognise that knowledge is unique to every individual and that meanings are subjectively and distinctively formulated. Furthermore, an interpretive descriptive design was adhered to in order to explore identity as subjectively situated and narrated by the research participants (Thorne et al. 1997). Additionally, the design promotes greater understanding into social group interaction and the core of human experiences (Thorne 2008).

Sample

The research participants consisted of South African Women's Sevens players who compete and train on an international level as part of the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby team. They are all full-time professional athletes who earn a full-time living from playing Sevens rugby and engaging in training camps. They are therefore regarded as the best

participants to be able to answer the research question and provided valuable insights into the lives of female Sevens rugby players in South Africa.

Purposive sampling as described by Sarantakos (2013) was used to identify the research participants. The applicability of purposive sampling is enhanced as it is the most suitable to us with the interpretive descriptive research design, (Sandelowski 2000). From the 18 players present at a training camp, 11 players provided consent to participate in the study. The majority of the individuals have engaged in rugby for more than four years. One participant has engaged in rugby for eight years, marking the longest involvement in the sport. The majority of the sample were black, Xhosa speaking females. Other languages spoken by participants included English, Afrikaans and Zulu. In terms of positions seven out of the eleven players were recruited as forward players who use their physical strength to dominate within the field of play. Only four of the eleven players held backline positions.

Method of Data Collection

Individual interviews were used as the main method for collecting data. The interviews were presented in a semi-structured manner which is also applicable within the interpretive descriptive research design as described by Sandelowski (2000). As such the questions were pre-determined and were also open and adaptable (Nieuwenhuis 2016). This method also enabled close and on-going interaction between the participant and the researcher (Yeo et al. 2014). Questions were stated in a broad manner to enable space for diverse responses;

- *What is your experience of being a female Sevens rugby player?*
- *How did you get involved in the sport?*
- *How would you describe yourself as being a female Sevens rugby player?*
- *How does who you are, reflect in your on-field performance?*

- *What are the positive and negative aspects of yourself and others that you experience as a female Sevens rugby player?*
- *When performing on-field, are there any aspects of yourself that you consciously adapt?*

The interviews were conducted by the first author of this research article from June 26 – June 29, 2018 at the Stellenbosch Academy of Sport, in South Africa.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis guided by the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied to the transcribed interviews. The researcher manually performed the coding and the theme selection of the data. The researcher followed an inductive approach as purposed by Clarke and Braun (2013) allowing the data to determine the themes that developed. As such codes were developed on the basis of participants responses and these codes were then structured into a code-network which enabled the identification of core themes.

Findings and Discussion

Two main themes, seven subthemes and four sub-subthemes were identified with regards to the identity and on-field performance among female Springbok 7's athletes. These themes are evident in the diagram (Fig. 1) below:

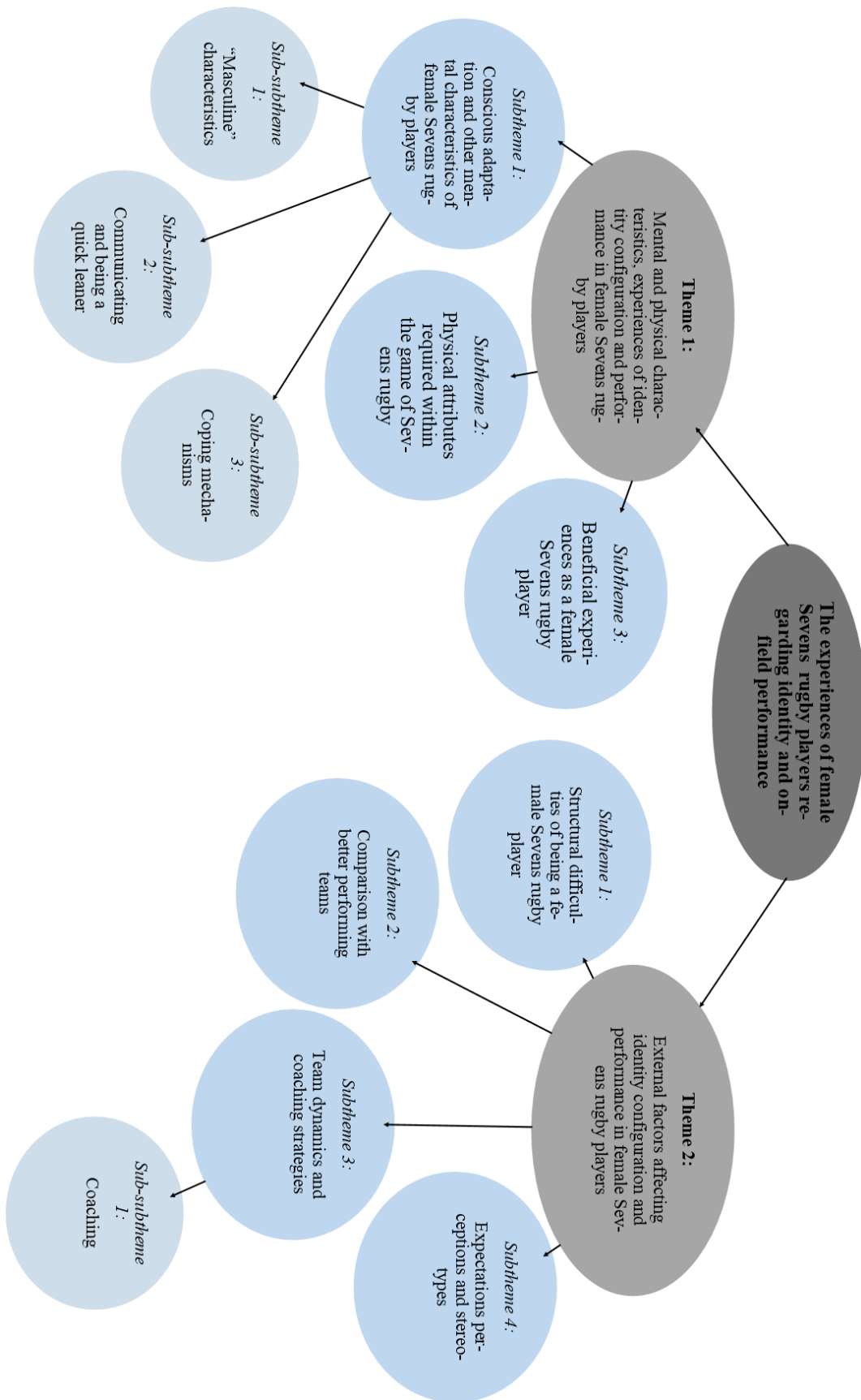


Figure 1. Diagram indicating main themes, subthemes and sub-subthemes

Theme 1: Mental and physical characteristics, experiences of identity

configuration and performance in female Sevens rugby players. The first theme sheds light on the integrated nature of the mental and physical characteristics affecting identity configuration among female Sevens rugby players. It emphasises Gerber and Terblanche's (2012) reference to the mental and physical skills needed to compete within rugby. The main theme is reflected and supported in the three identified subthemes. The first theme centres on conscious adaptation as the most salient mental feature in combination with other identified mental characteristics required within the high-performance environment. The sub-subthemes address the most prominent mental characteristics as identified by participants. Subsequently, the required physical attributes within the Sevens environment are discussed as subtheme two. Lastly the beneficial experiences mobilised by the Sevens environment are addressed.

The subthemes represent what Hewit (1997) refers to as the situated self, where internal self-evaluations and behaviour are dependent on the socially shared norms within a given context which in this instance is the high-performance environment. This also alludes to the dispositional characteristics such as coping strategies and mental toughness as described by Gardner and Moore (2006). The strong emphasis on conscious adaptations reflects the manner in which identity is continually being reconfigured through internal negotiations with the self (Galbin 2014). The process of reconfiguration within the Sevens environment was most prominently expressed by Participant 3 who claimed that: *“Playing Sevens is mentally fatiguing and also emotionally fatiguing you know.”*

As evidenced in the quote, the process of identity reconfiguration within the Sevens environment may be one that is taxing for the players on more levels than one as it requires constant mental engagement and conscious adaptation.

Conscious adaptation and other mental characteristics of female Sevens rugby athletes. There was general consensus from participants regarding the necessity of adapting

within the Sevens environment. Other mental characteristics appear as sub-subthemes and include displaying masculine characteristics, being a quick learner and adopting certain coping mechanisms. Adaptation was expressed as a requirement on an internal level as well as in game situations where opponents were involved. On an internal level, adaptation was expressed as a compromise of personal characteristics to succeed within the team environment. The expression of Participant 5 reveals complete adaptation of individual identity: *"I think one must be adaptable because you have to compromise literally everything personal to adapt."* Similarly, Participant 4 expressed that she needs to be a completely different person on-field as it allows her to release all the emotions she keeps inside. The process of completely adapting is indicative of a complete re-synthesis of the ego (Erikson 1968) and in this instance it is largely determined by the high-performance environment. This reiterates the dynamic process of identity configuration based on continued reflection, observation and integration in relation to environmental cues (Erikson 1968). On the other hand, Participant 7 emphasised that she tries to be herself on the field and she tries to stay true to who she really is as an individual.

Other participants applied adaptation to the gaming and performance environment: *"... on the field I may be a totally different person than I am off the field."* (P10). The necessity to adapt in gaming situations was also addressed by participants and it pertains specifically to adapting strategies of play in relation to what the defence is doing. This draws on the self-regulation component of performance, as identified by Gardner and Moore (2006) and Levi (2014) as it pertains to goal directed behaviours. Furthermore, this also positions female Sevens players as being able to anticipate the reactions of others which enables them to display appropriate behaviours and required social identity within this environment (Schlenker 2012). Adapting within a gaming situation was identified by Participant 3 and 5 as something which female rugby players struggle with in general and this is expressed in

relation to rugby being a predominantly male sport. Adaptation also refers to adopting typically masculine characteristics such as aggression.

“Masculine” characteristics. Aggression was expressed by participants as a requirement within the rugby environment and was identified as a mind state that manifests on the physical domain. Participant 1 has to give herself a pep talk before play *“okay, you are gonna play now, you murder them, you make them bleed, you bust them”*. The situational demands therefore force players to adopt qualities that may not be reflective of them as females or as individuals. This requires individuals to undergo a *“mental switch”* (P1), which is most salient in the following statement: *“... I’m not really aggressive but on the field of play obviously I need to be aggressive because it’s rugby”* (P11). Similarly, Participant 2 stated: *“... I had to learn how to be way more aggressive, so it’s not like you want to hurt someone but it’s rugby.”* The statements express the nature of rugby and the prominence of physicality, which may not correspond to the individual’s identity but may be an indication of the required social identity within the Sevens context (Chananie-Hill et al. 2012; Hardy 2014). Moreover, the participants may be experiencing the paradox of dual identities when they are forced to display characteristics not traditionally considered feminine as aggression is not expressed as a core element of individual identity (Krane et al. 2004).

Participant 4 alluded to the contrast between masculine and feminine characteristics, reconfirming the dichotomous and heteronormative manifestations of gender within the South African context (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001): *“...off the field, I am a very soft person but when I am on the field you don’t want to play against me because I am a _____ [curse word] and I make your life hell and I will talk you out of the game and I am very aggressive as well.”* This reinforces that the environment of rugby requires a display of specific characteristics which are considered necessary and constitutes an individual’s social identity within this environment (Crisp and Turner 2010). In contrast to the strong mental

engagement expressed by other participants, Participant 11 made the following statement:

“...when you are in the field and you are playing, you don’t think of being a female or a male because I am just being me”. As such her social and individual identity may have more commonalities and sport may have already been integrated as a fixed facet of her individual identity (Crisp and Turner 2010). Similarly, Participant 3 referred to sport in the following manner *“sport is part of my life, it’s part of my identity”*. As such a strong athletic identity was evident among some participants in spite of the dominant masculine norms (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016). An additional characteristic identified as essential within the environment of Sevens rugby is communication.

Communication and being a quick learner. Communication was identified as another area where participants felt the need to adapt their individual identity to be more suited to the Sevens environment (Crisp and Turner 2010). The majority of participants reiterated that they are not very talkative off-field but that the situational demands of the Sevens game time forced them to be more communicative. This is based on communication being one of the crucial elements related to performance. Participant 2 and 3 mentioned that increased confidence allowed them to become more talkative players on-field, as it enabled them to trust more in their own abilities and solidify their identity within this realm. However, for some of the participants, this wasn’t easy to achieve and it was really something they had to work at: *“Here I must push myself, okay I must talk because there is a time that you must talk on the field and not always be quiet.”* (P9). The lack of confidence in their own abilities may again be linked to the paradox of dual identities affecting the strength of identification in the rugby player role or identity, consequently affecting athletic identity (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016). Moreover, confidence is a characteristic mainly associated with the male gender which may affect the ability of female athletes to display this characteristic (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001).

Being able to think and learn quickly was another mental characteristic required within the Sevens environment, as game time is fast and reactions should be quick (Gerber and Terblanche 2012). The ability to learn quickly was not expressed as a once-off activity but as one that occurs continuously: “...*you have to learn very quick, so it’s not hard to get here, it’s hard to stay here almost*” (P2). This relates back to the “*mental switch*” (P1) especially when engaging in training or game time. However, Participant 4 mentioned that not everyone will get that mental shift right, reiterating the concerns of Participants 3 and 5 regarding women’s inability to adapt. This may be linked to female rugby players transgressing dominant representations of what is considered normative for women within the South African context (Chananie-Hill et al. 2012; Joncheray and Tili 2013). This also relates to expectations which are central within the high-performance environment: “*If you can’t pass then you have to learn very quickly because that is your job*” (P8). The statement suggests that expectations remain high; however the structures that equip women with the basic skills from an earlier age are not as advanced as those for males (Posthumus 2013; Grundlingh 2015). As a result, the female rugby player is subject to more pressure, which increases the need to learn quickly and if an individual is unable to keep up, this may lead to the experience of negative emotions.

Frustration was expressed as a prominent emotion when making mistakes in training or game situations and is largely contingent on external expectations: “...*you frustrate yourself and that talent is hidden inside because of maybe frustration that you can’t do something*” (P6). Mistakes usually occur when the player is not “*switched on*” (P8) which is indicative of the taxing nature of prolonged mental engagement in relation to the context of rugby (Suarez-Arrones et al. 2011; Van Rooyen and Lombard 2008). This reflects the realities of the participants regarding identity configuration (Erikson 1968). The external expectations may manifest as pressure experienced internally and this showcases the

standards of performance that the participants are subjected to at the elite level: “...*obviously when you are rendering a service, it has to be the best*” (P1). This requires quick adaptation of individual identity, portraying continued reconfiguration of the identity.

Coping mechanisms. As a result, the participants may draw on coping mechanisms to assist them in dealing with the situational demands and pressures (Gardner and Moore 2006). Participant 7 used the term “*sporting amnesia*” where a player should be able to quickly move on from mistakes. Other coping strategies include engagement in reflective thinking in order to positively improve on mistakes. Here the philosophical underpinnings of Bandura’s (1989) SCT are evident as the ability to apply coping mechanisms, positions individuals as self-organising and self-motivating when faced with situational demands. The ability to engage in reflective thinking also positions individuals as agentic beings and relates to participants being critical of their actions within the high-performance environment (Delamater et al. 2014). Participant 8 expressed that dealing with pressure resides purely on a mental level but the mental grit and capabilities of players are expressed in the following statement: “...*we wouldn’t have been here if we couldn’t handle the pressure*” (P10).

This depicts the type of players recruited within this team and when asked to describe themselves, the majority of participants highlighted their physical and mental strength. In spite of the situational demands, these players were able to elevate themselves above the physical strain of the environment by their strong internal beliefs in their own abilities: “*Being a rugby player is like my superpower, even though it’s tough, people might not see that within me but I believe I am strong and I can do whatever*” (P10). As such the continuous internal negotiations are evidenced as a crucial facet of identity (Erikson 1968; Galbin 2014). However, the physical strength and mental strength might not always be experienced on the same levels by all participants: “*I am strong on the outside, but sometimes a person can be strong from the outside but not on the inside*” (P6). Therefore, the societal

and contextual norms may affect the internal strength of these participants despite strong physical characteristics (Galbin 2014). In addition, the majority of participants strongly expressed being optimistic and positive individuals, which is also expressed in the gaming environment. Leadership and discipline were also commonly expressed characteristics among the participants and also required adaptation on social level.

Physical attributes required within the game of Sevens rugby. The physical attributes described by participants correspond with some of the mental characteristics that have already been discussed, the most prominent of these being grit. Grit draws on the instrumental competencies of these players particularly focusing on mental toughness (Gardner and Moore 2006). Participants mentioned actively giving it everything in all gaming situations: *“If you are gonna do things half-heartedly you are going to get injured...”* (P1). This relates to the high impact of rugby based on the largely physical nature of rugby (Suarez-Arrones et al. 2011; Van Rooyen and Lombard 2008). However, while the participants may possess the necessary physical characteristics, mentality was identified as crucial determinant of performance: *“...I wanted to see how tough it is because you have to make way more decisions”* (P4). The statement identifies the fast-paced and dynamic nature of Sevens rugby and the need to continuously engage on a mental level (Gerber and Terblanche 2013).

Furthermore, the physical side of rugby is something that the majority of participants didn't mind and some participants even went as far to say that they enjoy the physical side of rugby. This shows that rugby has created a platform for these individuals to synthesise typically masculine characteristics into their female identity (Erikson 1968). However, the smaller players did reiterate the need to compensate when playing against bigger players and that compensation occurs after situational information has been processed. The following statements reinforce the need to mentally engage before physically engaging (Gardner and

Moore 2006; Gerber and Terblanche 2013): “... *I am a smaller player, I mean, I am not the biggest girl out there so instead of playing harder I sort of have to play smarter*” (P3) and “...*being small and playing a contact sport definitely played a big role in my head*” (P8).

Furthermore, menstruation was emphasised as a barrier to engaging in physical activity which is something male counterparts don’t have to struggle with. This reiterates the difficulties identified by Halim et al. (2016). Regardless of how they are physically feeling, the vocational choices force them to push through these physiological challenges reiterating the characteristic of grit: “...*when I am on my periods I don’t really like to run or be around people... But now I have no choice*” (P11). In spite of the physically demanding nature of rugby Sevens, participants were able to identify beneficial experiences within this context.

Beneficial experiences as a female Sevens rugby player. While the beneficial experiences reside mainly on an internal level, the detrimental experiences were more prominently expressed in terms of the externally imposed factors and will be described in the subsequent section. Love of rugby and pride were expressed as prominent emotions characterising the experiences of female Sevens rugby players. These emotions can also be explained as factors that have already been synthesised and solidified within the individual’s identity. With regards to the love of the game, Participant 11 made the following statement: “...*sometimes I have to get out of my comfort zone and do what I love, which is rugby.*” This shows that while rugby might not be a socially acceptable part of women’s identity, they are still choosing to pursue and express that part of themselves through their chosen social group membership (Joncheray et al. 2016; Oyserman et al. 2012). This is also evident in Participant 2’s statement regarding pride: “*That’s the biggest thing for us, we want to wear that Springbok*”. The statement showcases the ability of females to configure their identities within the Springbok setup in spite of external influences imposed by society (Erikson 1968).

Two participants emphasised the absence of detrimental experiences in this context and that the environment is a very beneficial one as it facilitates a healthy lifestyle:

“Everything is just like positive, like you get to go to the gym, you get to eat healthy and you get to shape your body... like for me, I don’t want to get fat and I want to be faster...” (P11).

The statement draws the empowering nature of rugby whereby women pursue physical goals instead of conforming to ideal notions of the female body (Liechty et al. 2016). This portrays that these women are able to choose their own pathways instead of conforming to societal prescriptions (Bandura 1989). Additionally, the majority of participants indicated the “privileged” position to be able to work within the elite environment of Sevens rugby.

Reasons for this include learning about yourself and growing on a mental and physical level, which may not be the case in other working environments: *“I don’t think everyone gets to learn who they truly are and rugby has shaped and developed me as an individual”* (P7).

This statement reflects the ability of rugby to empower women on an individual level (Joncheray et al. 2016). The gendered nature of rugby and known stereotypes increase the intensity with which the empowerment is experienced: *“It’s such an empowering thing to play Sevens, I think it’s almost sort of more empowering because people have this perception of like girls shouldn’t be playing it”* (P3).

Participant 5 made the following statement regarding the Sevens system: *“This system taught me to be myself”*. Here it is evident that engaging in rugby can foster a solid sense of self and ultimately identity expression (Philippson 2009). As such rugby is a good environment for expressing selfhood in spite of the continued adaptation required. Other reasons for the position being viewed as beneficial includes that the system provides balance in life and the ability to make a living out of rugby. The system also allowed certain participants to address some of the negative elements of their personality by instilling discipline and professionalism in them. A specific example of this includes learning how to

control anger and emotions which may be interpreted as typically female characteristics (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). Participant 4 even refers to herself as being “*a real cracker*” when she just joined the squad. Being taught the right technique was also identified as a having a beneficial contribution on a personal level, as many of the participants didn’t have previous exposure to rugby as males might have had: “*...if you are taught from a young age how to tackle properly and whatever you are going to a lot less injury prone*” (P3). In spite of the beneficial experiences, females who engage in rugby may experience added external pressure to perform at this level.

Theme 2: External factors affecting identity configuration and performance in female Sevens rugby players. The external factors affecting identity configuration and performance in female Sevens rugby athletes, relates to the factors imposed by other individuals. The first subtheme pertains to the structural difficulties that are experienced due to a lack of resources. Secondly, the team dynamics and coaching strategies are addressed and given the strong external influence of coaching, it appears as a sub-subtheme. The second theme relates to subtheme three where participants are subject to comparison with better performing themes. In the last theme, more covert issues, particularly in relation to norms are addressed. It is also important to understand how these players first got involved in rugby, as the majority were influenced by external parties.

The majority of participants had previously been involved in other sports such as athletics, soccer, hockey, and netball. Some participants had been previously involved in rugby but more in fifteens or touch rugby and not so much “*proper rugby*” (P11). What could be identified from the responses was that there was quite a quick uptake into the sport based on overt physical characteristics even though there was minimal formal exposure to rugby. This assertion is elaborated on in subtheme one which centres on the structural difficulties faced by female rugby players. These overt physical characteristics may include among other

the notion of muscular body which may make the female athletes seem a bit more androgynous (Knight and Guiliano 2003; Krane et al. 2004; Wilde 2015). However, given the elite role the players occupy, their physical appearance can be interpreted as a part of their individual and social identities.

Furthermore, based on the minimal exposure to rugby, there was some experience of apprehension and doubt when participants first engaged in rugby: *“I remember my first rugby game I never pitched and then the following game, the coach actually came and fetched me.”* (P10). This may be linked to internalisations (thoughts and feelings) regarding the nature of the game and its unsuitability for the female gender, which may affect the synthesis and re-synthesis of the ego (Allen 2014; Delamater et al. 2014). Participant 3 also touched on another difficulty that may be related to motivation and possible social stereotypes surrounding the nature of rugby: *“It’s very difficult to convince girls to come and just give it a try even”* (P3).

The influence of external parties in the decision to engage in and continue with rugby was prominently expressed by the participants. Coaches and friends were identified as the two main parties influencing initial involvement in rugby. Some participants were approached and asked to fill in for someone who had been injured, while the majority of participants noted that these external parties recognised some quality in them, which might make them suitable for the rugby environment. These qualities were mainly on an external or physical level: *“...hey you look like someone who can play rugby”* (P1) and *“...you look very physical and you look very quick”* (P4). This reiterates the prominence of physicality in rugby and the fact that the sport has specific physical requirements (Suarez-Arrones et al. 2011; Van Rooyen and Lombard 2008).

Playing with brothers, cousins or male friends was the most common first encounter with rugby. This is indicative of certain socialisation processes determined by the dominant

heteronormative ideals within the South African context (Bogopa, 2001). This is based on the first initial encounters being linked with someone from the male gender: “...*I grew up on a farm and played rugby with boys. So, it was nothing new to me when I started playing as I already had that experience from a young age*” (P7). Informally engaging in rugby from a young age, proved advantageous given the quick uptake of female rugby. However, since rugby is still in many regards viewed as a predominantly masculine sport by the general public and by the players themselves, this may cause certain difficulties as expressed in subtheme one.

Structural difficulties of being a female Sevens rugby player. The structural difficulties experienced by the female Sevens rugby players relate particularly to marketing, the system for women’s rugby, funding and being based at the same facility in Stellenbosch. As alluded to in the sampling section, the majority of participants had not been engaged in playing rugby for very long. On top of the minimal experience a large majority of the sample also never knew that women’s rugby existed before playing themselves. This reveals that rugby wasn’t a sphere where females felt they could express their identity. This speaks to the limited marketing and opportunities for women to get exposure to play rugby (Zeilinger 2015). Participant 1 mentions that everyone knows the Springboks [the men], they are everywhere: this reinforces the gendered nature of rugby as a male dominated environment crucial for male identity (Allen 2014).

Participant 2 claimed that this is because there is no active system in place for female rugby: “... *there’s no system, people don’t actually know who you are.*” As the system is not nearly as advanced as the male system and there is no academy for female rugby players, this affects the individuals they are able to take in, hence the recruitment of girls in other sports. The pool of selection is therefore smaller for the female Springbok Sevens team and the skill levels of new players are not as advanced. As a result thereof, the training camps mainly

focus on teaching new players the basics which make it difficult to move on to more complex gaming strategies (Gardner and Moore 2006). Participant 1 stated the following, which strongly links to performance within this set up: “...*we are working with what we have and what we have might not necessarily be the best*” (P1).

Additionally, this forces the individuals to cram all the information in a short period of time which are not ideal situations for retaining the information. This is because girls don’t have the same opportunities as boys to play from a young age and build their experience within the game: “...*as a girl you don’t have the opportunity to play from a young age, so you cram everything in like 3 months or even less, whereas guys have all this time, they play in school and they start slow and then it gradually gets tougher*” (P4). Consequently, a stable athletic identity might be difficult to achieve (Geukes et al. 2017). Participant 1 made the following statement regarding performance: “*I think that if, if we could have a greater pool to select from, we select the best, we’d be the best team, we’d play against other nations, and possibly be the best or at least rank at the top*”.

Furthermore, funding has been recognised as a barrier that affects the implementation of a proper system and ultimately performance. This confirms Zeilinger’s (2015) assertion regarding the influence of external motivation and material rewards affecting performance. The lack of financial resources also means that women are concentrated in a particular space for longer periods of times. Female rugby players feel like they are stagnating within this system and that they are unable to produce what is expected of them: “... *I know it’s up to us on the field to get the results but if we just got a bit more support somewhere else that would help us*” (P2). Staying at a particular venue in Stellenbosch was seen as a negative thing for a majority of participants as it led to prolonged physical engagement with other players which affected dynamics between team members and not being able to “switch off” (P5 & P7) and this has been identified a predecessor for conflict. Participant 3 made the following comment

in that regard: *“I think it’s a mistake and this is just my personal opinion because the ladies live here...there’s no separation between going home after a hard day’s work, going home switching off”*

Participant 5 also said it made it difficult to stay out of each other’s hair and she also pointed out that the female Springboks are the only system in world that is set up like this. However, for Participant 11, the close physical proximity was interpreted as a positive because it contributes to her being a better player as their conversations centred mainly on rugby. Participant 7 saw the living arrangements as both a positive and negative thing. Positive because there are individuals that are close to you if something should happen but negative because of the conflict and not being able to move on. The prolonged physical proximity has been identified as detrimental to team dynamics.

Team dynamics and coaching strategies. Team dynamics as a predecessor for performance was identified as a crucial facet within the high-performance environment, as was coaching, which appears as a sub-subtheme within this discussion. This was predominantly related to the diverse group of individuals recruited for the Sevens team. The diversities are discussed in terms of the broader societal climate in South Africa: *“...we are the country with the most cultures”* (P7). This was interpreted as positively affecting understanding of fellow teammates confirming that each member within a team brings their own unique skills, abilities and knowledge (Levi 2014). The most common positive experience was the ability to learn how to deal with differences: *“...learning like the valuable things like patience and understanding for different cultures and individuals”* (P2). The diversity is also inclusive of the primary languages of fellow teammates. Apart from the overt characteristics, the diversities also reside on a personal and more internal level: *“we are a group of different personalities within the team”* (P1). Here the participant recognised individual identities within the shared social identity of a female Sevens rugby squad as

determined by the interactions with fellow group members (Galbin 2014). While this may be seen as a positive contributor in terms of personal growth, diversity was also interpreted as negative in some instances, particularly pertaining to off-field relationships.

Participants indicated that in spite of the high-performance environment, it was still very informally organised. As this is a professional environment, the informal norms within this context may make it difficult to successfully achieve desired goals (Levi 2014). With regards to the informal set up and relationships, Participant 7 made the following statement: “... a lot of the time it is difficult to distinguish between colleagues and friends...you don’t have to be friends with everyone at work”. Evidently there is a grey area which may affect social identity and strength of identification with fellow teammates. Participants identified family as a key characteristic of the team, however participants indicated that family was removed from their core team values as a result of them struggling to gel with one another. As such the cohesion component of group dynamics is compromised and this may ultimately affect goal attainment (Levi 2014). This may be related to the conflict resolution strategies, as unresolved conflict affects on-field performance. Participant 3 uses the example of not wanting to pass to another player when previous conflict has been experienced, which directly implicates a core role within the Sevens environment (Gerber and Terblanche 2012).

On the other hand, Participant 10 expressed the need to act like a family as it directly affects performance: “...we are a family because we are a team and if I don’t back my teammate it is going to go onto the field”. Participant 1 also shared the positive sentiments of Participant 10: “...you have that you know almost sisterhood type of a feeling.”

Notwithstanding, there was also an indication that new players find it difficult to fit in, in the beginning: “... it was almost as if the girls weren’t very welcoming in the beginning” (P8).

Some of the players that have been recruited for longer mention that it is necessary to be hard

on new players in order to establish standards suitable for the high-performance environment, which may also be reflected in coaching strategies.

Coaching. Coaching as an external factor was expressed as a key indicator of performance. Adapting coaching strategies was expressed as crucial for ensuring success as it can be interpreted as a facet of social facilitation affecting or even increasing performance (Levi 2014). This is expressed as dependent on the gender of athletes being coached: “...*we cannot deny that males and females are different, like completely different and the response that you get from a male when under pressure might not be the same, in fact it will never be the same. So, you must adapt your coaching style.*” (P1). The participant alludes to the gender philosophy and dichotomous nature of males and females (Ming et al. 2016; Prentice and Caranza 2002).

Participant 10 felt that good coaching should maintain a balance between freedom and guidance. Otherwise the participants may experience the environment as repressive and interpret the coaching strategy as inappropriate which may affect levels of confidence levels: “*I don’t know if he maybe just didn’t understand how to coach women...*” (P3). The statement reinforces the inherent differences between male and female rugby players (Ming et al. 2016; Prentice and Caranza 2002). Also, important to note is that consistency is crucial for performance as it affects the manner in which the players are able to organise themselves and synthesise their identity: “... *a lot of times the team gets promised things, specifically from management and then it never gets done*” (P5). In addition, comparison with better performing teams may influence individual and social identity.

Comparison with better performing teams. At the moment performance level of the women’s Sevens team are not as optimal as they should be which could be affected by a weaker sense of athletic identity due to the connotations related to women’s rugby (Geukes et al. 2017). The comparisons are mainly with male players and the top performing countries on

the global circuit (Australia and New Zealand). The participants reinforced debates surrounding the position of males in rugby by mentioning the following: *“male’s rugby is much faster...the impact is harder, everything is just more because of the physical advantage they have.”* (P1). Participant 4 expressed that spectators overtly express women’s inability to keep up with the physicality of males: *“...you missed a tackle because you are a girl”*. As such the female identity is being questioned within gaming environments. Participant 10 also referred to the inherent differences between males and females in the following statement *“We’ll never be fast like guys, we’ll never be physical like guys but what we are doing is actually the same but it’s not done in the same way”*. The statement reveals that the physical side of rugby is easier for males than for females, but this is also expressed in terms of mental characteristics.

In terms of reconfiguration of on-field identity, Participant 1 made the following statement: *“I don’t think you need to psych up a male as much as you need to psych up a female”* (P1). Sport in general is more strongly associated with masculine identity making it easier for them to express social identity. This may be because group membership in sport is a true reflection and extension of males’ individual identities but not necessarily a female’s identity (Galbin 2014). The aforementioned is expressed most prominently in the following statement: *“...sport becomes part of their identity as well so I think it’s a little bit easier for them to take their personality onto the field”* (P3). In addition to being more suited to thrive within the high-performance environment of Springbok rugby, the male Sevens rugby team also has better performance statistics and they are currently ranked first in the World Series (Log: Sevens 2018 para. 1). This includes, among others, being in the World Series and winning tournament matches, which the women have not yet been able to achieve, contributing to their strained position; *“... the women get neglected... the men are world famous and we aren’t”* (P5). In the long run this may affect athletic identity as being

compared to better performing teams and constantly losing, impacts self-esteem (Ahmadabadi et al. 2014): “...it’s very difficult to lose the whole time because it’s negative and people are talking about us in the process” (P8). Participant 2 described the losing phenomenon as something financial that requires investment, however she recognises the difficulties of attracting sponsors: “...why would you want to associate your brand with a team that doesn’t win?” As a result, Zeilinger’s (2015) references to lesser provision of resources for female rugby players is confirmed.

In opposition to the challenging position of female rugby athletes in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand were identified as top examples of how a system for women could be implemented to provide better performance. In terms of financial resources, participant 5 recognises that “... in New Zealand they get paid the same as the men”. This corresponds with Steger’s (2018) reference regarding salaries in Australia. In addition, the instrumental competencies of the Australian rugby team are applied to compare the levels of women’s Sevens rugby in South Africa (Gardner and Moore 2006). The participant referred specifically to catching and passing, which is used as selection criteria within South Africa: “...in Australia, if you can catch and pass that’s great everybody can catch and pass” (P3). Participant 5’s showcased how a strong athletic identity, mobilised by external rewards, can foster stable on-field performance by sport being an already-established part of individual identity (Geukes et al. 2017; Reifsteck et al. 2016): “... other countries like Australia, New Zealand and Canada, they are top 6 because for them it’s like second nature.”

Expectations, perceptions and stereotypes. The families and support systems of the participants initially questioned their involvement in rugby, as in many instances they still viewed it as a predominantly masculine sport. This reconfirms gendered thinking patterns regarding participation in rugby, especially within the South African context (Allen 2014). But these perceptions started changing the longer the participant was involved in rugby,

whereby their families became more supportive: “...when my mom saw that I wasn’t going to leave it then she got more supportive” (P5). This may become problematic as Participant 4 identifies support as having a huge impact on performance. As such, the notion of social facilitation is evident, where external support has a huge influence on performance (Levi 2014).

There is also an expressed retention of stereotypical thinking amongst the families of the participants (Grundlingh 2015). For example, Participant 7’s grandma asked, “Are you not going to get hurt?” Similarly, Participant 3’s mom was very apprehensive and didn’t want her to engage in rugby. She ascribes this to a stereotypical approach where “little girls need to be playing either hockey or netball because they are safer sports”. This relates to Allen’s (2014) reference that women need to display ideal womanhood which is embedded in early socialisation processes. These socialised cognitions and behaviours have a definite impact on identity. Additionally, Participant 10’s family “never really liked the idea of rugby because they think it’s dangerous”. The same stereotypical thinking was expressed in Participant 9’s statement: “... we are not strong enough to play rugby, rugby is for the men ‘mos’”.

In spite of the stereotypical thinking among the families of participants, the players themselves expressed a change in thought regarding the organisation of rugby “... nowadays you can’t distinguish between female sports of male sports” (P7). Here a shift in the gendered organisation of sport is evident (Allen 2014). Participant 7 also experienced a mind shift with regards to the perceptions of other because initially she was scared of what people would think and she was also scared that she would not receive support from those close to her. As such, establishing rugby as a part of individual identity proves to be quite challenging in relation to the contextual norms (Erikson 1968). Similarly, Participant 3 feels that this experience may be mutual as girls might be scared of judgement and they may be “...worried

what people are going to say if you tell them, I'm going to rugby practice." The necessity of a mind shift may be related to certain stereotypes associated with female rugby players.

Participants confirmed that there is a specific image that society associates with female rugby players: *"...like a big girl with very short hair and like very muscular and dresses in a certain way with maybe just like Polo shirts and pants tucked in"* (P3). This alludes to the homosexual allegations against female rugby players: *"... in women's rugby they talk about people being lesbians and what, what"* (P7). Typical classifications identified by Engh and Potgieter (2016) and Wilde (2015) are identified by participants. Regardless of a women's occupational choice whether it be physical or not, Participant 3 recognised that they remain females: *"...you might be playing a very intense and physically challenging sport that's sort of typically a boy's sport but like you're still a woman, you know?"*

As a result, the participants are prone to display certain characteristics which they feel are not suitable within the Sevens environment. Not being able to show "normal behaviour" was identified as something that participants consciously avoided displaying. *"I was actually feeling a bit down but obviously I am not gonna show that...Imagine if something can go wrong and you would start crying, are they gonna think you are crazy?"* (P1). The statement pertains to performance and being frustrated when expectations are unachievable. The gendered philosophy is again evident and the need to continually reconfigure the inherent female identity is expressed as a requirement of the environment (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). Participant 8 confirmed this by asserting that *"...in the professional system, you can't be too emotional because you have a job to do and you will make mistakes"*. This re-emphasises the dominance of performance and the social identity within this environment (Galbin 2014). Participant 1 mentioned that *"everything's performance-driven so you just perform"*. This statement may also be interpreted as adopting a particular identity based on the situational demands. This may increase the pressure that these players are experiencing

and lead to negative emotional experiences: “...*I get nervous when I have to start playing, I doubt myself*” (P8). As such this statement reflects how performance is affected by weak associations with an athletic identity.

Limitations

In spite of the rich data of the experiences of Springbok women’s Sevens rugby players, there are a few limitations that have been identified. Firstly, since the population is a very elite and unique group the sample size is limited which compromises the transferability of the results to other populations. Secondly, the emic exploration of identity and on-field performance doesn’t account for societal perceptions of the female athletes. Therefore, perceptions of spectators and the larger South African population remain unaccounted for.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above discussion, it is evident that identity is continually being re-synthesised within the Sevens environment. There is also a clear distinction between elements of the self that had been previously configured such as the love of sport and characteristics typically associated with the female gender. Notwithstanding the already configured components of identity, there are also facets of identity being re-configured within the Sevens environment, including a display of more ‘masculine’ characteristics as it is required for successful performance. While the participants are female, they are required to display and integrate typically masculine characteristics into their identity. As the environment of rugby is not typically associated with the female gender, this makes it difficult to attain a strong athletic identity as a rugby player. Evidently, performance is very reliant on internal mental processes. While identity configuration within the Sevens context is largely internal, external and situational demands are crucial.

Contributions of the study, reside on two levels. Firstly, on a theoretical level where it contributes to the body of knowledge of females in predominantly males’ sports, specifically

within the South African context. The main theoretical focus is identity configuration among Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players which is a unique exploration, based on it being the first of its kind and qualitative in nature. The contribution is based on the absence of previous studies among Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players and the majority of sport research being quantitative in nature, with a focus on mental toughness, sport injury and body satisfaction. The study equips us with knowledge regarding the realities of this elite group as influenced by gender norms and societal expectations.

Secondly on a practical level, the study contributes to enhanced self-understandings and group dynamics, improved coaching strategies and possible change in thought patterns. Enhanced self-understandings were mobilised by eliciting new avenues for self-reflection within the interview setting. This enabled participants to critically reflect on their individual identity and integrate it with their performance related reflections. Prior to the research endeavour, it seemed as though these reflections occurred in isolation. Enhanced group dynamics is another contribution, evident in the identified strategies that relate particularly to conflict resolution, communication strategies, adapting to diversity and coping with off-field relationships with teammates. Strategies have also been assembled for coaching staff and include adapting coaching strategies for the female gender, and having a good balance between discipline and freedom when coaching players. This is aimed at promoting more positive player-coaching interactions and enhancing overall team dynamics. The article will also be forwarded to relevant role players within the rugby domain including the South African Rugby Union and sponsors. The hope is that it will enable a deeper understanding into the realities of the athletes and prompt action, by identifying structural difficulties that are detrimental for performance.

Given the discussed findings and conclusions, the researchers recommend combining the emic perspective with more etic perspectives regarding the perceptions of female rugby

players, in order to holistically interpret their social position. Additionally, the framework can be used to conduct similar investigations into the experiences of female athletes in other traditionally male dominated sports like soccer and cricket. Lastly, quantitative measures relating to identity, can be administered to the selected population to get a more integrated view of their experiences in this environment.

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SECTION C: Critical Reflection

Introduction

This section that follows provides a critical reflection on the operationalisation of the research question as achieved through the research process. This section serves as a tool for determining the adequacy with which the research question was achieved and to identify possibilities for future research.

Summary of the Research

The study aimed to explore identity and perceived on-field performance among female Sevens rugby players, particularly focusing on the manner in which identity is configured within a domain that is dominated by masculine ideals. A social constructionist lens was applied when interpreting identity. Identity was seen as largely dependent on the social context in which it occurs. I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven members from the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby team, which allowed the athletes to reflect on their experiences in an open, yet structured manner as guided by the interview questions. As the research was guided primarily by the principles of the social constructionist theory, an interpretive descriptive research design was applied which enabled me to explore and describe the unique realities regarding identity and on-field performance among Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players. The chosen research design informed the selected method of data collection.

Applying semi-structured interviews individually, allowed participants to reflect on their experiences in an open, yet structured manner as guided by the interview questions (Appendix 2). The setting was also conversational in nature and enabled on-going interaction between the participants and the researcher. A voice recorder was used for recording each of the individual interviews where after the interviews were transcribed by the researcher (11 in total). In addition to the social setting, norms are also seen an essential facet affecting identity

configuration at an internal level and ultimately the expression of identity. Understanding the mutually influential nature of internal and external factors enabled interpretations of behaviours characterised as non-normative, such as those evident in females engaging in predominantly male sports. The interview questions were structured around the internal and external factors influencing identity configuration within the male-dominated context.

Evaluation of the Research Process

My interest in social psychology and sociology, combined with a need to understand realities of minorities within the South African context, initially prompted the identified research topic. This interest is substantiated by a keen interest in gender relations, stereotype manifestations and group dynamics. Combining the theme of identity with these interests proved quite challenging and I really had to immerse myself in pertinent literature (Erikson, 1986; Polster, 2005) to internalise and contextualise the constructs in relation to individual identity. Upon further reading and investigation, I began to notice a strong reciprocal relationship between identity configuration and social cues or social setting. The reciprocal nature of the interactions meant that social interactions are a key determinant of individual behaviour, which led me to implement the social constructionist theory as the basis of this research endeavour.

As identity is very dynamic and complex, the formulation of the interview questions proved quite challenging. Drawing on the principles of the interpretive descriptive research design proved helpful, as it enabled me to explore identity configuration and on-field performance in a phenomenological manner.

The research process began with the co-supervisor engaging with the players and with their coach to determine the plausibility of the study. Once the plausibility was established, I contacted the South African Rugby Union as well as the players' head coach to obtain permission to continue with the study. After goodwill permission was received from the

relevant parties, I arranged to conduct the interviews in Pretoria, as the players had arranged a week's training camp there, in mid-June. However, they had to cancel these arrangements at the last minute, and I had to arrange to conduct the interviews in Stellenbosch, which was a very rushed process as I only had a week to make the arrangements. This was probably the most stressful part of the entire research process. However, during this week, I contacted the players via email to explain the study and to provide them with the informed consent documentation. I also informed them of the information session that would take place on Monday the 25th of June and this session was scheduled into their training programme. All the players attended my session.

Upon completion of the information session, the players were given the opportunity to ask questions to clarify their understanding of the research process and procedures. I then left the room and those who were interested consulted with the independent person to arrange a suitable interview time and to sign the informed consent documentation (Appendix 6).

I had had exposure to qualitative research from my second year at university, when I conducted interviews for a project in Anthropology. I also had a large research project in a third year Sociology module which focused solely on the write up of a qualitative proposal. During my Honours in Sociology I conducted interviews for my mini-dissertation, which is where my knowledge of qualitative research grew on a practical level and I started to feel comfortable in an interview environment. Similarly, the mock proposal in Psychology Honours and the intense practical classes of my current Masters course enabled me to solidify my strengths within qualitative research and enabled me to comfortably engage with participants in this study. I closely engaged with research participants during the data collection phase of the research process. This was a positive experience for me as the participants were very open and welcoming to the participation and sharing of their experiences.

Data collection. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and Afrikaans, depending on the participants' preferences. Conducting the interviews at the Stellenbosch Academy of Sport allowed me to experience first-hand, the conditions and infrastructure in which these athletes train. The lack of previous studies exploring the realities of Springbok Women's Seven's players served as motivation for the athletes to engage in interviews.

The application of semi-structured interviews proved effective in addressing the identified problem and allowed participants a platform to openly voice their experiences and concerns with the hope that it would catalyse a process of change. This change pertains specifically to the structures and decisions within the sporting community and also the perceptions and awareness of the South African population at large.

Rapport with the research participants was easily achieved, allowing for comfortable and conversational interaction. However, participants interpreted the interview questions as very broad and they required guidance in some instances regarding their responses. Nevertheless, this allowed me to gain a holistic image of the inner realities of the various research participants. Participants generally experienced this research as interesting and were keen to gain access to the findings upon completion of the study.

Based on the broad manner in which the interview questions were presented, the responses were also very broad, with some overlapping similarities. This made the analysis quite challenging in terms of pinpointing concrete psychological constructs pertaining to identity and perceived on-field performance. However, I am confident that the findings reflected here are comprehensible and truly reflective of the essence of participants' experiences and realities.

Data analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised for analysing the narrative data within the transcriptions. I was primarily responsible for the analysis and a post-doctoral research

fellow assisted in co-coding the qualitative data. As such this step also enhanced trustworthiness of the research endeavour and eliminated any possible biases in the findings.

During the analysis phase, I generated codes and code groups and ultimately arrived at the main themes, which are substantiated by the verbatim statements of the research participants. The process of generating codes and themes occurred in an inductive manner. Pinpointing specific themes proved challenging in light of the rich data collected, as the shortest interview was 32 minutes in length. A mutual decision was made between the co-coder and myself, to keep the themes as simple as possible, bearing in mind the original research question and aims. As such, the chosen data analysis method proved effective in capturing the data that the researcher intended.

Research findings. The research question was formulated with the aim of exploring identity and perceived on-field performance among Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players. While many participants alluded to identity configuration processes, the broadly stated interview questions meant that there was a large quantity of interesting but irrelevant information being collected. I interpret the broad responses as a reaction to the minimal research that has been done among this elite group and their need to share their realities with someone independent from rugby, in the hope of improving their circumstances. Despite this situation, I was still able to identify themes that pertain specifically to identity configuration and on-field performance, as guided by the individual interview questions.

Question 1: What is your experience of being a female Sevens rugby player?

The initial idea with the question was to elicit information regarding the individual experiences within the Sevens environment, to get a broad idea of identity configuration amongst this population. While some of the participants alluded to the individual factors, the majority of the participants reflected on their difficult social position as female Sevens athletes within the South African context. I was pleased with the responses to this question as

it enabled greater insights regarding the complicated social position of female rugby players and enabled me to better contextualise identity configuration as determined by situational demands. As I have conducted studies on the influence of heteronormative gender roles, I had expected that the social position of these players would be a complicated one.

Question 2: How did you get involved in the sport?

The responses for this question came as quite a surprise to me, as I had not realised the extent to which the structures for women's rugby were lagging behind those for males. Most participants had never had the opportunity to engage in rugby from an early age: in fact many of them had only had their first encounter with rugby at a university. Getting involved in the sport was predominantly catalysed by external parties but then became an integrated part of the participant's identity.

Question 3: How would you describe yourself as being a female Sevens rugby player?

This question required some deeper thought by the participants, as well as prompts from me, during the interview session. I guided participants by suggesting that they identify physical or mental characteristics that would best describe them as individuals. The question was aimed at collecting responses that pertain to the individual factors that contribute to success within the high-performance environment. After giving the participants some prompts, they were able to identify specific individual characteristics that contribute to success and optimal performance within this environment. I felt that the individual characteristics were solidified personality traits which contributed to their success within team environments in general - and more specifically, the Sevens' environment.

Question 4: How does who you are, reflect in your on-field performance?

In retrospect I feel as though Question 4 and Question 3 are very similar in nature. However, this question was developed to focus specifically on the relationship between

individual characteristics and perceived on-field performance amongst participants. My experience is that individuals gave very similar responses to those in Question 3 and this showcased the consistency of their individual identity and their social identity. However, some participants contradicted themselves in mentioning that it is necessary to adapt - not identity characteristics per se, but rather their mental process and physical behaviours. This is evident in some participants expressing a need to become more aggressive and communicative, as this is what the Sevens' environment requires.

Question 5: What are the positive and negative aspects of yourself and others that you experience as a female Sevens rugby player?

This question was split and participants were asked to reflect on the positive experiences in isolation, and then the negative experiences. What really stood out for me in the reflection on positive aspects, was how resilient this group of players is and their ability to stay motivated in spite of facing adversity.

When participants elaborated on their negative experiences, I could really empathise with them and I felt increasingly motivated to do commendable research that would facilitate the possibility of an improvement to their current conditions. Here I was really able to distinguish the external and the internal factors that affect identity configuration. As discussed in the findings section, I noticed that the positive aspects were mainly internal, while the negative aspects were mainly externally imposed.

Question 6: When performing on-field, are there any aspects of yourself that you consciously adapt?

Initially this question was developed to elicit responses that would highlight aspects of the individual versus their social identity. Participants ended up repeating some of the aspects already discussed in Question 3 and 4, which prompted me to ask them to elaborate on any other aspects that they had not addressed in the hope of achieving more in-depth

insights into their experiences. Participants were happy to share their experiences and I observed a need for them to have their voices heard in the hope of improvements to their complex social position. I also witnessed the empowering nature of sport in breaking down fixed gender norms. However, I am not hopeful that the perceptions of gender roles and females in rugby will change any time soon, as heteronormative ideals remain quite fixed within the South African context.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that identity is continually being re-synthesised within the Sevens environment. There is also a clear distinction between elements of the self that had been previously configured and elements that are being re-configured within the Sevens environment. While the participants are female, they are required to display and integrate typically masculine characteristics into their identity. As the environment of rugby is not typically associated with the female gender, this makes it difficult to attain a strong athletic identity as a rugby player. Evidently, performance is very reliant on internal mental processes. While identity configuration within the Sevens context is largely internal, external and situational demands are crucial.

As far as I am aware the study is unique in its exploration of identity and on-field performance amongst Springbok Women's Sevens athletes. Additionally, I found that previous research endeavours within the realm of sport had mainly been quantitative in nature and this study sheds light onto identity configuration and perceived on-field performance of this very elite team: a team which few researchers have had the privilege of accessing.

By exploring identity and on-field performance amongst this sample, the internal realities - in some instances dictated by external stimuli - can be examined and addressed. I am hopeful that this will prompt future researchers to qualitatively explore the realities of athletes who face a similar social situation. These findings will hopefully enhance self-

understanding amongst participants and contribute to enhanced team performance overall. The uniqueness of the research endeavour allowed a feedback report wherein management, coaches and the players themselves were provided with specific strategies aimed at improving key performance indicators and overall group dynamics. Furthermore, the findings might assist coaching staff in adapting their coaching strategies and in the long run promote more positive player-coach interactions. Among others these strategies include being more sensitive to the manner in which female athletes relate to one another and balancing discipline and freedom. Lastly, this research is aimed at sharing this information on a broad platform so as to increase the general public's understanding of the realities these players face.

Contribution of the Study

Given the high-performance environment of Sevens rugby, it is necessary to reflect on the practical implications of the findings for all the parties involved in the female Sevens rugby team. The practical implications refer specifically to the added value as a result of the study: for the players, the team as a whole and the coaches, with the aim of possibly enhancing on-field performance. The practical implications relate specifically to the key performance indicators within the game of Sevens which are mainly physical outputs (passes, kicks, tackles, rucks, tries etc.) and tournament rankings.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the theoretical value of the findings.

Firstly, the literature search revealed minimal studies having been undertaken among female Sevens rugby teams, and none amongst the Springbok Women's Sevens rugby team. Previous studies amongst female athletes were predominantly focused on quantitative performance indicators, mental toughness, sport injury and body satisfaction. Information regarding identity among female athletes, especially those in rugby, were very limited and did not provide sufficient information regarding the realities of this elite group. Additionally, the majority of studies were quantitative in nature. As such this research contributes to the

body of knowledge by providing qualitative insights into identity configuration amongst female Sevens rugby players. This study educates us on the implications of females participating in predominantly male sports, as influenced by the societal expectations and gender norms of the South African context. Theoretically the study enables insights into the manner in which heteronormative women and professional rugby players experience, negotiate, adapt and re-negotiate their gender identity.

Secondly, the questions in the interview schedule elicited new avenues for self-reflection amongst participants as it enabled them to think critically about identity configuration when engaging on-field as well as off-field. As such it can be interpreted as increasing self-understanding of their individual identity. This is based on previous reflections (by participants) being solely focused on outputs and related to on-field performance during match situations. As a result, the researcher experienced a disconnection between individual factors affecting on-field performance and off-field expression of identity. The study therefore connected these seemingly isolated factors by enabling engagement in mutual internal and external self-reflection. For example, becoming more aggressive in a gaming situation wasn't something that players really thought of, it was something they engaged in unconsciously. However, after the interviews, the majority of participants showed greater awareness of the mental switch they undergo in practice and gaming situations

Thirdly, the study identified certain strategies that could contribute to enhancing group dynamics and on-field performance. These strategies include conflict resolution and communication strategies, learning to adapt and cope with diversity as already noted, and dealing with off-field relationships among teammates.

To address these problem areas within this team, I collaborated with my co-supervisor, who is a performance consultant for elite sports groups, who suggested that the team should have weekly climate meetings to work through conflict in a respectful manner to

avoid it affecting on-field performance. In these sessions, players can share what they have learnt about each other during the week or pose any pressing questions about fellow teammates in order to promote greater understanding of others' behaviours, as well as address diversities within the team. We also suggest that this session be moderated by a team captain, the coach or a performance consultant, when available. Furthermore, the players should decide the direction of the sessions, rather than having a structured session imposed on them. This would allow players the room for expressing themselves in their manner of choice

Similarly, strategies for coaches have also been compiled to enable an understanding of player needs and to promote more positive player-coach interaction. Players identified a need for a good balance between discipline and freedom, as well as coaching strategies tailored to the female gender, as opposed to having the same strategies applied to male rugby players, used for them.

We suggest that during training camp, the coach has one session per week with the players where he guides them on what the team needs to work on (e.g. defence that includes tackling technique) and then have them plan the session while he just observes. Furthermore, we suggest that he continues to allow players the freedom to do their own video sessions, and choose their own game strategies, as opposed to enforcing set plays on them. It is also suggested that he varies the starting line-up as opposed to having a fixed line-up, as this increases the self-worth of players and their ability to contribute in game situations. This is aimed at increasing team dynamics and ultimately on-field performance, based on the findings being distributed to all the parties involved (players and coaches). This will be done upon completion of the study by means of a collated feedback report.

Lastly, outputs of this research will hopefully be used in such a way as a tool for breaking down gender stereotyping around female South African rugby players, by starting at the core of this sport (the players themselves). This includes distributing the article of this

study to relevant parties such as the South African Rugby Union, key sponsors etc., in order to equip them with empirical evidence regarding the realities of female Sevens rugby players. A deeper understanding of these realities will hopefully prompt role players to address some of the structural problems which have been identified as barriers to optimal performance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

In spite of the rich data adding to the body of knowledge on the experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players, there are a few limitations which need to be considered.

- The population was a very elite group, which limited the sample size of the research study. As such, the transferability of the results to other populations is compromised.
- The information and sampling provided one side of the reality by adhering to an emic exploration of identity and performance amongst female Seven's rugby players. As such, the perceptions of bystanders and the South African population remain unaccounted for.

Based on the discussed findings and limitations, the following recommendations are made for future research, to further assist in broadening an understanding of the realities of Springbok Women's Sevens athletes and other female athletes who find themselves in a similar predicament. These include:

- Administering quantitative measurements to the sampled participants, specifically pertaining to identity and performance-related constructs in order to get a multi-methodological and integrated view of participant experiences and realities.
- Using the framework of this study, to explore identity and performance in females in other traditionally male-dominated sports like cricket and soccer.

- Extending the study to include social surveys to capture the perceptions of the general public regarding females in predominantly male sports and comparing the two in order to give realistic renditions from all relevant perspectives.

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SECTION D: Appendices

Appendix 1: Biographical Questionnaire

Participant number: _____

Biographical questionnaire

1. Age:

2. Marital status:

Married	
Single	
Divorced	
Other (please specify)	

3. Home language:

English	
Afrikaans	
Zulu	
Xhosa	
Tswana	
Sotho (Southern & Northern)	
Venda	
Tsonga	
Other (please specify)	

4. Race:

Black	
White	
Coloured	
Indian	
Asian	

5. Number of years playing rugby:

6. Number of years playing Springbok Sevens rugby:

7. Position played:

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

Participant number: _____

Interview Schedule

<i>1. What is your experience of being a female Sevens rugby player?</i>	
<i>2. How did you get involved in the sport?</i>	
<i>3. How would you describe yourself as being a female Sevens rugby player?</i>	
<i>4. How does who you are, reflect in your on-field performance?</i>	
<i>5. What are the positive and negative aspects of yourself and others that you experience as a female Sevens rugby player?</i>	
<i>6. When performing on-field, are there any aspects of yourself that you consciously adapt?</i>	

Appendix 3: Instructions for Authors

Manuscript Submission

Submission of a manuscript implies: that the work described has not been published before; that it is not under consideration for publication anywhere else; that its publication has been approved by all co-authors, if any, as well as by the responsible authorities – tacitly or explicitly – at the institute where the work has been carried out. The publisher will not be held legally responsible should there be any claims for compensation.

Permissions

Authors wishing to include figures, tables, or text passages that have already been published elsewhere are required to obtain permission from the copyright owner(s) for both the print and online format and to include evidence that such permission has been granted when submitting their papers. Any material received without such evidence will be assumed to originate from the authors.

Online Submission

Please follow the hyperlink “Submit online” on the right and upload all of your manuscript files following the instructions given on the screen.

Title Page

Title Page

The title page should include:

- The name(s) of the author(s)
- A concise and informative title
- The affiliation(s) and address(es) of the author(s)
- The e-mail address, and telephone number(s) of the corresponding author
- If available, the 16-digit ORCID of the author(s)

Abstract

Please provide an abstract of 150 to 250 words. The abstract should not contain any undefined abbreviations or unspecified references.

Keywords

Please provide 4 to 6 keywords which can be used for indexing purposes.

Acknowledgements

Any acknowledgments of people, grants, funds, etc. should be placed at the bottom of this page. The names of funding organizations should be written in full.

Text

Text Formatting

The 2010 (sixth) edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association should be used as the style guide for the preparation of manuscripts, particularly with respect to such matters as the use of non-sexist language, citation of references, and the use of abbreviations, numbers, and symbols.

Manuscripts should be checked for content and style (correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar; accuracy and consistency in the citation of figures, tables, and references); and stylistic uniformity of entries in the References section.

Type double-spaced using generous margins on all sides. The entire manuscript, including quotations, references, figure-caption list, and tables, should be double-spaced. The suggested running head should be less than 80 characters (including spaces) and should comprise the article title or an abbreviated version thereof. Number all pages consecutively with Arabic numerals, with the title page being page 1. In order to facilitate masked (previously termed “double-blind”) review, leave all identifying information off the manuscript, including the title page and the electronic file name. Appropriate identifying information is attached automatically to the electronic file. Upon initial submission, the title page should include only the title of the article.

- The length of a typical regular report is 25 to 40 manuscript pages, including references, tables, or figures, although page limits are not rigidly enforced (especially for qualitative and multi-study papers).
- Sex Roles does not use footnotes. All footnoted material must be integrated into the text.
- Use italics for emphasis.
- Use the automatic page numbering function to number the pages.
- Do not use field functions.
- Use tab stops or other commands for indents, not the space bar.
- Use the table function, not spreadsheets, to make tables.
- Include tables and figures in your manuscript after the References section, with tables first and in numeric sequence followed by figures in numeric sequence. Cite each table and figure in the text where appropriate (for example; see Table 1).
- Use the equation editor or MathType for equations.
- Save your file in docx format (Word 2007 or higher) or doc format (older Word versions).

Manuscripts should be submitted in Word.

Manuscripts with mathematical content can also be submitted in LaTeX.

References

Citation

Cite references in the text by name and year in parentheses. Some examples:

- Negotiation research spans many disciplines (Thompson 1990).
- This result was later contradicted by Becker and Seligman (1996).

- This effect has been widely studied (Abbott 1991; Barakat et al. 1995; Kelso and Smith 1998; Medvec et al. 1999).

Reference list

The style and punctuation of the references should conform to that used in the APA Publication Manual, illustrated by the following examples:

- Journal article with DOI

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 491-512. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491

- Advance online publication

Graff, K., Murnen, S. K., & Smolak, L. (2012). Too sexualized to be taken seriously? Perceptions of a girl in childlike vs. sexualizing clothing. *Sex Roles*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s11199-012-0145-3

- Book

Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control: The entrapment of women in personal life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Book chapter

Massaro, D. (1992). Broadening the domain of the fuzzy logical model of perception. In H. L. Pick Jr., P. van den Broek, & D. C. Knill (Eds.), *Cognition: Conceptual and methodological issues* (pp. 51-84). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Online document

American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Washington,

DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from

<http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

Journal names and book titles should be italicized.

For authors using EndNote, Springer provides an output style that supports the formatting of in-text citations and reference list.

- Endnote style (zip, 2 kB)

Tables

- All tables are to be numbered using Arabic numerals.
- Tables should always be cited in text in consecutive numerical order.
- For each table, please supply a table caption (title) explaining the components of the table.
- Identify any previously published material by giving the original source in the form of a reference at the end of the table caption.
- Footnotes to tables should be indicated by superscript lower-case letters (or asterisks for significance values and other statistical data) and included beneath the table body.

Artwork and Illustrations Guidelines

Electronic Figure Submission

- Supply all figures electronically.
- Indicate what graphics program was used to create the artwork.
- For vector graphics, the preferred format is EPS; for halftones, please use TIFF format. MSOffice files are also acceptable.
- Vector graphics containing fonts must have the fonts embedded in the files.
- Name your figure files with "Fig" and the figure number, e.g., Fig1.eps.

Ethical Responsibilities of Authors

This journal is committed to upholding the integrity of the scientific record. As a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) the journal will follow the COPE guidelines on how to deal with potential acts of misconduct.

Authors should refrain from misrepresenting research results which could damage the trust in the journal, the professionalism of scientific authorship, and ultimately the entire scientific endeavour. Maintaining integrity of the research and its presentation can be achieved by following the rules of good scientific practice, which include:

- The manuscript has not been submitted to more than one journal for simultaneous consideration.
- The manuscript has not been published previously (partly or in full), unless the new work concerns an expansion of previous work (please provide transparency on the re-use of material to avoid the hint of text-recycling (“self-plagiarism”).
- A single study is not split up into several parts to increase the quantity of submissions and submitted to various journals or to one journal over time (e.g. “salami-publishing”).
- No data have been fabricated or manipulated (including images) to support your conclusions
- No data, text, or theories by others are presented as if they were the author’s own (“plagiarism”). Proper acknowledgements to other works must be given (this includes material that is closely copied (near verbatim), summarized and/or paraphrased), quotation marks are used for verbatim copying of material, and permissions are secured for material that is copyrighted.

Important note: the journal may use software to screen for plagiarism.

- Consent to submit has been received explicitly from all co-authors, as well as from the responsible authorities - tacitly or explicitly - at the institute/organization where the work has been carried out, **before** the work is submitted.
- Authors whose names appear on the submission have contributed sufficiently to the scientific work and therefore share collective responsibility and accountability for the results.
- Authors are strongly advised to ensure the correct author group, corresponding author, and order of authors at submission. Changes of authorship or in the order of authors are **not** accepted **after** acceptance of a manuscript.
- Adding and/or deleting authors and/or changing the order of authors **at revision stage** may be justifiably warranted. A letter must accompany the revised manuscript to explain the reason for the change(s) and the contribution role(s) of the added and/or deleted author(s). Further documentation may be required to support your request.
- Requests for addition or removal of authors as a result of authorship disputes after acceptance are honored after formal notification by the institute or independent body and/or when there is agreement between all authors.
- Upon request authors should be prepared to send relevant documentation or data in order to verify the validity of the results. This could be in the form of raw data, samples, records, etc. Sensitive information in the form of confidential proprietary data is excluded.

If there is a suspicion of misconduct, the journal will carry out an investigation following the COPE guidelines. If, after investigation, the allegation seems to raise valid concerns, the accused author will be contacted and given an opportunity to address the issue. If misconduct

has been established beyond reasonable doubt, this may result in the Editor-in-Chief's implementation of the following measures, including, but not limited to:

- If the article is still under consideration, it may be rejected and returned to the author.
- If the article has already been published online, depending on the nature and severity of the infraction, either an erratum will be placed with the article or in severe cases complete retraction of the article will occur. The reason must be given in the published erratum or retraction note. Please note that retraction means that the paper is **maintained on the platform**, watermarked "retracted" and explanation for the retraction is provided in a note linked to the watermarked article.
- The author's institution may be informed.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

To ensure objectivity and transparency in research and to ensure that accepted principles of ethical and professional conduct have been followed, authors should include information regarding sources of funding, potential conflicts of interest (financial or non-financial), informed consent if the research involved human participants, and a statement on welfare of animals if the research involved animals.

Authors should include the following statements (if applicable) in a separate section entitled "Compliance with Ethical Standards" when submitting a paper:

- Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest
- Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals
- Informed consent

Please note that standards could vary slightly per journal dependent on their peer review policies (i.e. single or double blind peer review) as well as per journal subject discipline. Before submitting your article check the instructions following this section carefully.

The corresponding author should be prepared to collect documentation of compliance with ethical standards and send it if requested during peer review or after publication. The Editors reserve the right to reject manuscripts that do not comply with the above-mentioned guidelines. The author will be held responsible for false statements or failure to fulfill the above-mentioned guidelines.

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Upon acceptance of your article you will receive a link to the special Author Query Application at Springer's web page where you can sign the Copyright Transfer Statement online and indicate whether you wish to order OpenChoice, offprints, or printing of figures in color.

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Color illustrations

Online publication of color illustrations is free of charge. For color in the print version, authors will be expected to make a contribution towards the extra costs.

Proof reading

The purpose of the proof is to check for typesetting or conversion errors and the completeness and accuracy of the text, tables and figures. Substantial changes in content, e.g.,

new results, corrected values, title and authorship, are not allowed without the approval of the Editor.

After online publication, further changes can only be made in the form of an Erratum, which will be hyperlinked to the article.

Online First

The article will be published online after receipt of the corrected proofs. This is the official first publication citable with the DOI. After release of the printed version, the paper can also be cited by issue and page numbers.

Appendix 4: Example of Thematic Analysis

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

Semi-structured interview (1h01:06 min)

Stellenbosch, 26.06.2018

Participant 3

P3: This one isn't really applicable, I am here on a camp, I am one of the new recruits, I haven't really been playing with them yet.

R: Okay so this is sort of your first time?

P3: So ja well. So what should I?

R: You can just but zero.

P3: Do you want numbers or do you want positions?

R: Uhm if you can write it out that would be great. Okay so before we start are the any questions that you want to ask me?

P3: You might just need to clarify some of the questions because I remember reading the first one and thinking this is very like... quite broad.

R: Ja.

P3: Coz I'm not quite sure which direction.

R: Yes, I understand. I will definitely guide you. **What is your experience of being a female Sevens rugby player?**

P3: Hmm okay so here I need clarification, is this in terms of my experience like that I have gotten from other people, as in like my experience I have gotten from other people, as in how they interacted with me or is this more like what I have gained from it?

R: I think it would be valuable get both opinions so how people have approached you in terms of you are playing rugby as a female and then also your personal experience.

P3: So I think I'm sort of lucky that I have only sort of had a positive experience. Generally when people find out that I play 7's as a female, they are curious more than anything. I've had a lot of people, they really want to know more about it, they ask me questions, they want to know what I play and why I am playing it, uhm like if I'm worried if I will get hurt kind of thing. So it has been predominantly positive, where I have heard from other people where they have sort of a negative like experience and people sort of judge them a little bit. For the most I have just gotten really positive and people they are actually quite impressed more than anything that we are playing at sort of like a provincial and national level so it's predominantly positive.

R: That's good news.

P3: Ja it's quite like for instance even when I'm flying down here someone will start chatting and then ask me what am I going to do and then I tell them okay I'm a going to play 7's and they always end up asking us , are you playing a game can you come watch, that sort of thing.

R: Ah cool. It seems as though, is it marketed a lot because seems as though people are quite surprised and curious?

P3: Ja I think, I don't think anybody like I don't think a lot of people really know that there is even women's 7's rugby actually even exists because they are always surprised when I tell them that I play. And it I think they also have this idea of what they think a 7's or like what a rugby player should look like and then I'll tell them I play rugby and they are like ooh okay. They are quite taken back because I am quite small and I'm short and I don't look like what they think a rugby player should look like.

R: Okay which is..?

P3: Ja I don't know I think most people would probably think that you have this really like big girl who's got very short hair and is like very muscular and dresses in a certain way with maybe just like Polo shirts and pants tucked in and then they will see us and you know we look like just anybody else.

R: Yes.

P3: I think that surprises them a little bit.

R: Okay, I think that's good because its starts to, in a sense, break down certain stereotypes.

P3: Yes, ja definitely.

R: Okay and then your experience playing, engaging?

P3: Ja so, my own personal experience with it I haven't been playing for very long, I've only been playing for 4 years now but I feel like I've learn a lot about myself sort of physically and mentally. I come ^{from} a touch rugby background so I have played touch rugby until I was 13. That was a lot more, sort of acceptable for girls to be playing because there is no contact and that kind of thing. But when I started playing sevens I started learning a lot about myself in terms of like I am actually capable of doing it, I can actually be physically strong and not look manly. Do you know what I mean?

R: Yes.

P3: And it just gave me a lot more confidence to sort of tackle any situation because now I can handle getting onto a field and being tackled and that kind of thing so I can pretty much tackle anything. So ja I think it's done a lot for my confidence.

R: Okay that's very good to hear that.

P3: As a female athlete.

R: So 7's has enabled you to become aware of parts of yourself that you maybe weren't aware of before started playing?

P3: Ja definitely

R: Then, **How did you get involved in the sport?** Obviously you have now said that you've played rugby from an early age and you have played tag rugby?

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

Codes 26/9.

- * optimism
- * adaptability.
- * friendships within the team
- * age
- * parents scared of injury.
- * older generational thinking patterns.
- * friends (getting involved in the sport).
- * decision-making.
- * understanding / being familiar with abilities and personalities of teammates.
- * communication!
- * great opportunity.
- * motivating.
- * periods.
- * discipline.
- * leadership.
- * athletics.
- * didn't know about womens rugby
- * sponsorship
- * consistency and
- * fairness.
- * generational diffs.
- * comparison to other countries.
- * experience.
- * compromise.
- * challenged.
- * different personalities.
- * transfer of knowledge to diff arenas.
- ! * not being talkative.
- ! * staying @ SAS.
- * lack with words.
- * stereotypical thinking.
- * physicality.
- * marketing.
- * brothers.
- * 15's → 7's
- * improvement in the system.
- * doubt.

- * coach sees them playing
- * being a new player.
- * professional
- * perseverance
- * pride
- * respect
- * B. races
- * SES.
- * Universities affiliated.
- * time playing rugby
- * seeing mistakes.
- * Drills.
- * switched on
- * preparedness for games.
- * Australia & New Zealand.
- * physical size.
- * decision making.
- * doubt
- * not being friends w. everybody.
- * started w. 15's or touch.
- * make a living out of rugby
- * Frustration.
- * making mistakes
- * consistency
- * admitting.
- * emotionality.
- * mentality
- * being switched on.
- * control.
- * being positive
- * privileged position
 - ↳ extrinsic + intrinsically motivated.
- * global standing and comparison.
- * no change in the system - players.
- * mistakes
- * music
- * looking up to - being a role model
- * World Circuit.

- * loving what they do
- * financial stability
- * scared / afraid of contact
- * technique for rugby.
- * someone external elevating the strengths.
- * coaching styles
- * find out who you are
- * ~~guy~~ comparison with male players
- * talent
- * choosing rugby over something else
- * rustic / calm
- * animalistic characters
- * not being perfect
- * hard on themselves
- * selfishness
- * trust
- * language

good quotes.



Step 3: Searching for Themes

Possible

split of

themes

* The individual

* Others: teammates, family & friends, coaches.

* Management, spectators, fans.

"double meaning names for themes
↳ 'girls can't play rugby'

mental and physical.

* GRIT

* Adaptability

* Physical proximity (prolonged)

* Cohesion.

* Adaptation.

* conflict resolution

✓ Add this to p23 on thesis.
- initial categories.

	Theme Code groups -	Codes explaining theme pertaining to code group
1.	Initial involvement in rugby maybe use this within the introduction? ↳ SCT	.Other sports (e.g. soccer, cricket hockey, netball, athletics) .Mostly at university level .Friends .Approached by coaches .Brothers .Touch rugby
2.	* interplay between these two characteristics Mental and physical attributes / characteristics (individual) * pertains specifically to identity. - adaptation! - II.	.quick learner (little time) .Ambition .Grit (physical and mental) - perseverance .optimism / positivity (fun) .decision making .mental switch / switched on .giving 100% .Technique .discipline - food, exercise. .periods .doubt - .animalistic (male?) on-field persona expectations. hard on themselves. obody language
3.	(Structural) difficulties of being a female 7's athlete * performance related.	.Comparison to males .System not as advanced (implemented from a younger age) .Small pool of selection .Difficulties for new players .Rugby mainly male dominated in SA .Withheld sponsorship .Lack of marketing of female rugby (many players didn't even know female rugby existed) .Lower salaries and benefits .No set numbers like in 15's - know what to do .frustration .not knowing what to do .actual game time * injury. put no security
4.	Positives about being a female 7's rugby athlete * identity.	.Provides stability - viable career option .Role models .Travelling .Living their talent .Love .Finding your true self enabler. learning about your true self.
5.	Withholding certain personality characteristics or natural qualities (feminine characteristics) - conscious adaptation * identity.	.Emotionality .Inability to display true feelings .Pressure .High performance environment
6.	Societal reactions (mostly family) - external support * identity + perf.	.Injury related .Support .Stereotypical .Role models

7.	Team dynamics • performance.	.Communication (changing to become more talkative as that is what the environment requires) .Leadership .Conflict .Cultural / language diversity .Sisterhood .On-field mistakes .Understanding .Can't be friends with everyone .Prolonged physical proximity (staying at SAS) .Team identity versus individual identity .colleagues
8.	Coaching • performance.	.Coach elevating strengths .Freedom versus strict rules
9.	Global presence and ranking - performance outputs • perf.	.World series .Comparison with big rugby nations (Australia and New Zealand)
10.	Strong sense of responsibility • perf.	.Perform in order to pave the road for players to come
11.	Sprinbok rugby • identity	pride

② Dynamic relationship.
 ② external pressures affecting identity and on-field performance.
 . constant comparisons between better teams e.g. males +
 . other countries. 10

① individual realities relating to identity and on-field performance.

Step 5: Reviewing Themes and Defining and Naming Themes

Internal / internalised

*Indv → identity.

- mental + physical attributes

- rves

- adaptation

- societal reactions.

External factors:

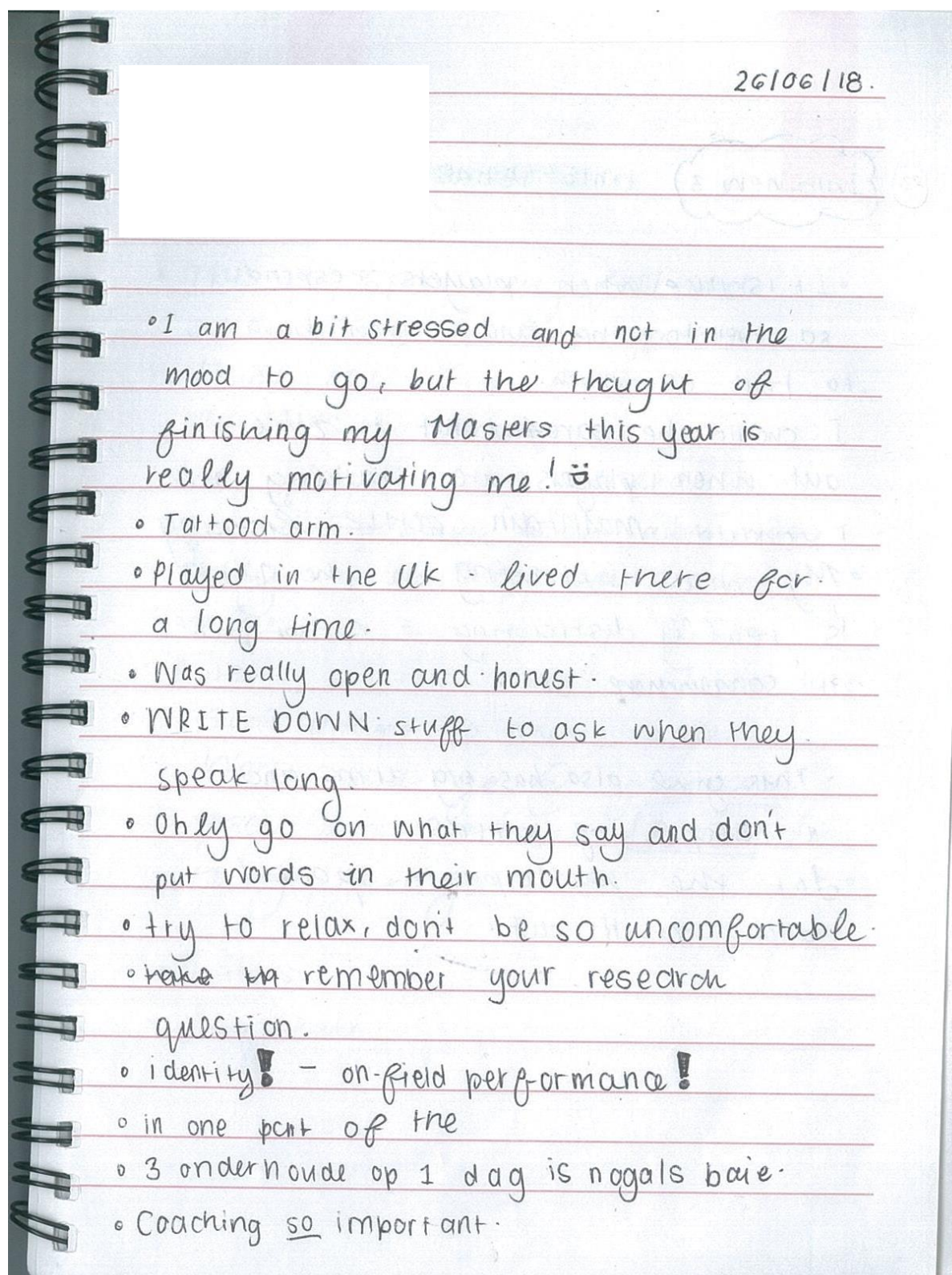
* Group related - performance.

- team dynamics.

- coaching.

- difficulties.

Appendix 5: Example Pages from Reflective Journal



• It is nice when players respond so well to probes and I don't have to talk as much.

I should be careful not to zone out when players are talking but I should maintain active listening.

• My phone vibrating on the table is really distracting - rather put it somewhere else.

• This girl also has big arms and a couple of tattoos.

• Let the participant speak! and drill out.

Appendix 6: Example of Informed Consent Document Completed by Participants



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INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR SPRINGBOK WOMEN'S SEVENS RUGBY PLAYERS

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance

ETHICS REFERENCE NUMBERS: NWU-00123-17-S1

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Miss Amori du Plessis (Master's student), Professor Herman Grobler (Supervisor) and Doctor Kobus du Plooy (Co-supervisor)

POST GRADUATE STUDENT: Miss Amori du Plessis

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You are being invited to take part in a **research study** that forms part of a Master's degree in Research Psychology. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain in-depth the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you, any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied and that you clearly

understand what the research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to say no to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the **Health Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University (NWU-00123-17-S1)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures (DoH, 2015) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or other relevant people to inspect the research records.

What is this research study all about?

- *This study will be conducted in order to understand your experiences as a female rugby players. This is because you participate in a sport not traditionally linked to the female gender in South Africa. The researcher wants to understand how you see and define yourself in order to see the nature of your identity as both a female and a sportswoman. The researcher also wants to understand the manner in which this affects how you perform on-field. This study will be conducted in a venue that is convenient to you and that will ensure that you are not recognised by one of your teammates, coaches or the public. The venue is in a private location on the Stellenbosch Academy of Sports' grounds, where your coaches and team mates will not easily recognise you. This will involve a semi-structured interview as well as a biographical questionnaire (45 to 90 minutes), which requires you to answer set questions and respond as honestly as possible to the probes provided by the researcher. These questions are open and flexible and are aimed at gaining the most information regarding your experiences as a female rugby sevens player. Miss Amori du Plessis will be responsible for conducting the interviews with you, her supervisors are both experienced health researchers trained in the field of psychology. She has been trained in the administration and of semi-structured interviews. This experience was gained during her undergraduate studies which includes a BA in Psychology and Sociology, an Honours in Sociology and an Honours in Psychology. A maximum of fifteen participants will be included in this study, should everyone agree to participate. We plan to explore the experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance.*

Why have you been invited to participate?

- *You have been invited to be part of this research because you are part of a specific elite group.*
- *You also fit the research because you are competing in a sport that is considered to be dominated by males in the South African context, as such you are challenging traditional gender roles. Furthermore you compete at an international level and you are contracted by SARU as a Springbok Women's Sevens rugby player.*

What will be expected of you?

- *You will be expected to commit to participating in a 45 to 90 minute interview relating to your experiences of being a female Springbok Sevens rugby player. The researcher will mainly focus on the manner in which you see yourself (your*

identity) and you perceived on-field performance. The researcher will ask a maximum of 6 questions during this time, with the usage of certain probes, should she need further explanation. In addition you will be asked to complete a short biographical questionnaire which will be integrated with the information from the abovementioned interview. This will occur in an area that is convenient and comfortable for you. A room in the administration building of the Stellenbosch Academy of Sport has been identified as the specific place where the interviews will occur. It has been chosen because of its ability to ensure your privacy and to allow a comfortable conversation between you and the researcher. This is expected only once and the researcher will communicate a particular time and venue with you.

➤ The interview questions are as follows:

1. What is your experience of being a female Sevens rugby player?
2. How did you get involved in the sport?
3. How would you describe yourself as being a female Sevens rugby player?
4. How does who you are, reflect in your on-field performance?
5. What are the positive and negative aspects of yourself and others that you experiences as a female Sevens rugby player?
6. When performing on-field, are there any aspects of yourself that you consciously adapt?

Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?

- The gains for you if you take part in this study will be providing you with tailored feedback which will possibly increase your own self-understanding which can contribute to better team dynamics. This will help you to better understand the realities faced by other teammates. This tailored feedback report will include strategies conclusions related to identity and on-field performance. Other benefits include the possible improvement of your teams overall performance which is based on enhanced self and team-understanding. The hope is that this study will promote more positive and relevant player-coach interactions that are specifically tailored to your needs as female athletes. Furthermore, the researchers want to increase the public's understanding of your realities in order to gain more public support for Springbok Women's Sevens rugby.

Are there risks involved in you taking part in this research and what will be done to prevent them?

- The risks to you in this study are possible psychological and social harm. The psychological harm is based on the study exploring identity and engaging in face-to-face interviews, which are both relatively personal in nature. This will be limited by the researcher carefully asking you to expand on certain questions and you will also have the opportunity to visit Dr Irene Strydom, should you need to. This session will give you the opportunity to discuss your experiences of the research study, with a registered clinical psychologist (Dr Irene Strydom) who is not actively involved in the study. If you require further psychological consultations, as a result

of the study you will be able to do so at the researcher's expense. In order to manage the possible social harm involved in this study, the researcher has certain strategies. Upon the publication of the final results the researcher will avoid including your names (you will be provided with a number) and certain direct quotes that may make you easy to identify. The venue where the interviews will occur will also be sufficiently secluded to protect your privacy. The final report will be inclusive of your exact team name (Springbok Women's Sevens rugby) because you are an elite group, only accessible to a few researchers. Therefore the researcher wants to maintain the highest standards possible, by including your name.

- *There are more gains for you in joining this study than there are risks.*

How will we protect your confidentiality and who will see your findings?

- *Anonymity of your findings will be protected by providing you with a participant number that only the researcher will be able to identify you by. Your privacy will be respected by not enquiring deeper than you allow into your personal thoughts relating to your identity and performance. Additionally, the interview will be conducted in a private room. Your results will be kept confidential by presenting data in such a manner that your coaches, SARU, MyPlayers and the general public will not be able to identify you. Only the researchers and the analysis assistant will have access to the data. Miss Andrea Daniels (co-coder) will undersign an NWU confidentiality agreement, which binds her to keep the information to herself. Findings will be kept safe by locking hard copies in locked cupboards in the researcher's office and for electronic data it will be password protected. As soon as data has been transcribed it will be deleted from the recording device. Data will be stored for 7 years, where after it will be completely destroyed.*

What will happen with the findings or samples?

- *The findings of this study will only be used for this study and is not to be used for future research. Data will be stored at the research archives of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus (COMPRES). The data will be sealed in an envelope where it will be stored in a lockable cabinet.*

How will you know about the results of this research?

- *We will give you the results of this research when the final publication has been produced and delivered for examination. This will be done via e-mail or via hard copy as per your request and this will hopefully reach you by December 2018 at the latest.*
- *You will be informed of any new relevant findings by e-mail or via hard copy if you request this.*

Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs for you?

This study is funded by the North-West University Master's bursary and by the student researcher herself.

You will not be paid for taking part in the study, however refreshments and light snacks will be available throughout the course of the interview.

You will receive a Woolworth voucher (R100) to thank you for your participation in the study. Refreshments will be served when the interview commences and these will keep in mind your strict dietary needs.

There will thus be no costs involved for you, if you do take part in this study.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact Miss Amori du Plessis at 0791948817 / amori.duplessis@live.co.uk if you have any further questions or have any problems.
- You can also contact the Health Research Ethics Committee via Mrs Carolien van Zyl at 018 299 1206 or carolien.vanzyl@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns that were not answered about the research or if you have complaints about the research.
- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.

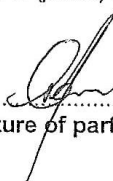
Declaration by participant

By signing below, I .. agree to take part in the research study titled: The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance.

I declare that:

- I have read this information/it was explained to me by a trusted person in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- The research was clearly explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person getting the consent from me, as well as the researcher and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be handled in a negative way if I do so.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in the best interest, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (place) Stellenbosch Academy / Sport on (date) June 25 2018


Signature of participant


Signature of witness

Declaration by person obtaining consent

I (name) Nadia von Nickert declare that:

- I clearly and in detail explained the information in this document to
- I did/did not use an interpreter.
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I gave him/her time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (place) Stellenbosch on (date) 25.06. 2018

Nickert
Signature of person obtaining consent

[Signature]
Signature of witness

Declaration by researcher

I (name) Amor du Plessis declare that:

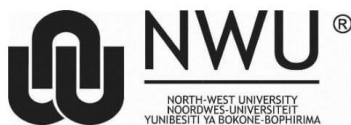
- I had it explained by Nadia (a Physiology Honours student) who I trained for this purpose. She has also received training in the matter of presenting informed consent documentation.
- I not use an interpreter
- I will available via email or WhatsApp, as well as during the interview should she want to ask any further questions.
- The informed consent was obtained by an independent person.
- I am satisfied that she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that she had time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (place) Stellenbosch on (date) 25.06 2018

.....
Signature of researcher

.....
Signature of witness

Appendix 7: HREC Approval Letter



Prof HB Grobler
Psychology-COMPRES

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

**Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research,
Training and Support**

Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC)
Tel: 018-285 2291
Email: Wayne.Towers@nwu.ac.za

20 June 2018

Dear Prof Grobler

APPROVAL OF YOUR AMENDMENT REQUEST BY THE HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) OF THE FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

Ethics number: NWU-00123-17-A1

Kindly use the ethics reference number provided above in all future correspondence or documents submitted to the administrative assistant of the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) secretariat.

Study title: The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance

Study leader/Researcher: Prof HB Grobler

Student: A du Plessis (22825622)

You are kindly informed that your amendment request (change in research site and independent person) to the aforementioned project has been approved. It, however, requires the following further condition specific to the progress of the study:

- a. Please provide the HREC with a copy of the signed confidentiality agreement with the independent person, when it becomes available.

As the study progresses the aforementioned condition should be submitted to Ethics-HRECProcess@nwu.ac.za with a cover letter with a specific subject title indicating "Outstanding documents for approval: NWU-XXXX-XX-XX." The letter should include the title of the approved study, the names of the researchers involved, that the documents are being submitted as part of the conditions of the approval set by the HREC, the nature of the document i.e. which condition is being fulfilled and any further explanation to clarify the submission.

The *e-mail*, to which you attach the documents that you send, should have a *specific subject line* indicating the nature of the submission e.g. "Outstanding documents for approval: NWU-XXXX-XX-XX". The e-mail should indicate the nature of the document being sent. This submission will be handled via the expedited process.

Any future amendments to the proposal or other associated documentation must be submitted to the HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, prior to implementing these changes. These requests should be electronically submitted to Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za, for review BEFORE approval can be provided, with a cover letter with a specific subject title indicating, "Amendment request: NWU-XXXX-XX-XX". The letter should include the title of the approved study, the names of the researchers involved, the nature of the amendment/s being made (indicating what changes have been made as well as where they have been made), which documents have been attached and any further explanation to clarify the amendment request being submitted. The amendments made should be indicated in **yellow highlight** in the amended documents.

The *e-mail*, to which you attach the documents that you send, should have a *specific subject line* indicating that it is an amendment request e.g. "Amendment request: NWU-XXXXX-XX-XX". This e-mail should indicate the nature of the amendment. This submission will be handled via the expedited process.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support at Ethics-HRECApPLY@nwu.ac.za.

Yours sincerely



Prof Wayne Towers
HREC Chairperson



Prof Minrie Greeff
Ethics Office Head

Current details: (23239522) G:\My Drive\9. Research and Postgraduate Education\9.1.5.3 Letters Templates\9.1.5.4.1_ApPROVAL_letter_Amend_Req_HREC.docm
30 April 2018

File reference: 9.1.5.4.1

Appendix 8: Permission Letters from Relevant Parties

SARU



26 April 2018

To: Amori du Plessis
Prof HB Grobler

Your research request was discussed by the SA Rugby Internal Research Review Committee.
Please note the following:

1. We support your research project request to work with the SA Women Sevens team. The project for reference is titled: The experiences of Springbok Women's Sevens rugby players regarding identity and perceived on-field performance.
2. SA Rugby requests that you ensure that all ethical and consent requirements are met. Please provide SA Rugby with proof thereof.
3. SA Rugby requests, for its records, a copy of the final research proposal.
4. SA Rugby requests that it is provided with a final draft of the research for internal review.

Please note that SA Rugby does not provide any financial assistance.

Thank you once again for your interest in the game of rugby.

Regards

Clint Readhead

THE SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY UNION
(an incorporated association of persons) | President: MA Alexander | Deputy President: F Davids | CEO: JW Roux
SARU House | Tygerberg Park | 163 Uys Krige Drive | Platteklouf | Cape Town 7500 | P.O. Box 15929 | Panorama 7506
W sarugby.co.za | T +27 (0)21 928 7000 | F [Springboks](https://www.facebook.com/Springboks) | G [@Springboks](https://www.instagram.com/Springboks) | @bokrugby

Head Coach



3 May 2018

To: Amori du Plessis
Prof HB Grobler

Good afternoon Amori

As Clint has mentioned SA Rugby are happy to support your research project and so am I.

I think it will benefit our system immensely. Please let me know where else I can help you going forward.

Thank you for your interest in the sevens system.

Regards

Paul Delpont

THE SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY UNION

(an incorporated association of persons) | President: MA Alexander | Deputy President: F Davids | Vice President: JY Stoffberg | CEO: JW Roux
SARU House | Tygerberg Park | 163 Uys Krige Drive | Platteklouf | Cape Town 7500 | P.O. Box 15929 | Panorama 7506
W sarugby.co.za | **T** +27 (0)21 928 7000 | **f** Springboks | **t** @Springboks | **@bokrugby**

Appendix 9: Turn It In Report



Digital Receipt

This receipt acknowledges that **Turnitin** received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission.

The first page of your submissions is displayed below.

Submission author:	Herman GROBLER
Assignment title:	Amori du Plessis
Submission title:	23376600: Vir_turnitin_Nov_2018 d
File name:	a6c1fb96-c1bd-4164-bac0-16facc ...
File size:	90.94 K
Page count:	51
Word count:	19,609
Character count:	110,539
Submission date:	03- Nov-2018 07:00PM (UTC +0200)
Submission ID:	1032196242

Introduction

The current study is an independent investigation into the experiences of Women's Sevens athletes and their definition of the self (identity), which is also affected by traits, characteristics, roles, social relations and social membership (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Additionally, researchers are interested in the manner in which identity is related to perceived on-field performance which is defined as the output of each individual player on-field and this is typically characterised by the number of tries and points scored for and scored against a team (Gerber & Terblanche, 2012). This relates to their displayed behaviour on-field and according to Cameron (2015) behaviour is evaluated and controlled by the powerful system of normativity. As such masculinity and femininity are positioned at opposite sides of the spectrum (Coakley, 2014). As sport is a display of culture and gender, its evaluations are more prominent and research a larger audience (Bogopa, 2011).

Additionally, relevant literature reveals the inherent difficulties of being a female athlete (Ellison, 2002; Halim, Linamra, & Sutton, 2016; Zeilinger, 2015). In Section A the researcher focuses on contextualising the research problem by referring to topic related literature in the literature review and the main theoretical framework and finally arrives at the problem statement. Subsequently the methodology, data collection, analysis and relevant ethics are discussed. Subsequently Section B contains the article format of the dissertation, which will be submitted to the *Sex Roles* journal for publication. Finally, Section C includes the critical reflection pertaining to the research and the research process and Section D, the appropriate addendums.

Before reviewing the literature it is important to understand some of the key constructs within the literature as evident in the section on prominent definitions.