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The lived experience of sex-integrated sport and the construction of athlete identity within the Olympic and Paralympic equestrian disciplines

Donna de Haan, Popi Sotiriadou and Ian Henry

Abstract

Equestrian sport is not subjected to the dominant binary sex segregation of most sports and therefore provides a unique opportunity to review how athlete 'identity' is constructed and framed within a sex-integrated sporting experience. This research draws on an ethnographic evaluation of the Olympic and Paralympic experience of the British Equestrian Team. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with riders, performance managers and support staff with transcripts subjected to Ethnographic Content Analysis. Results show clear constructs of identity, such as 'them and us', 'horsey' and 'discipline specific', with a noted absence of gender in the way interviewees describe themselves and others within the sport. Furthermore, in their accounts of their lives, there is a lack of salience of gender with regard to their identity as sports persons. The paper considers the implications of this phenomenon for a claim that equestrian sport might be described from a participant's perspective as gender neutral.

Introduction

Sport is increasingly acknowledged as a powerful cultural institution, strongly linked to identity and ideology, which routinely and systematically creates and reinforces the ideology of male superiority and often resists the inclusion of women (Mean 2001). The intertextuality of sport and war reinforces this male–female division, positioning the sports field as the equivalent of a battle field (Dunning 1999) in which athletes are powerful and aggressive, with bodies characterized as weapons or tools (Jansen and Sabo 1994). Indeed, Messner (2002) describes sport, especially modern sport, in its ideal form as a cultural artefact and social institution, which celebrates the supremacy of a particular culture through the representation of the ideal human as manifested in the athletic competitor engaging in ritualized combat (Messner 2002). The ideal weapon of combat with which the 'warrior' vanquishes his opponent is the athlete's body. The greater the reliance on the athlete's body for victory and the more interactive the game activity, the higher the status of the sport and its competitors. Hence, traditional 'male' contact sports, such as rugby, football or field hockey, are considered 'real' sports in ways that car racing, sailing and equine sports such as polo are not (Merlini 2004). It is interesting to note however that the terminology used to support the definition of 'real'

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sport, such as 'warrior', 'combat' and 'male', is indeed synonymous with military roots of equestrian sports (De Haan 2015).

The inclusion and development of equestrian sport within the modern Olympics was at the time dominated by military influences and whilst this has dissipated over time, it remains the only Olympic sport today in which athletes can compete in military attire (De Haan 2015). The historical relationship between man and horse in warfare has undoubtedly emerged from a male-dominated landscape and this is reflected in the gendered nature of some equestrian sports. Up until the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, only male riders were permitted to compete in any Olympic equestrian discipline. In 1952, women were allowed to compete only in Dressage; in 1956, Showjumping was opened to female competitors; and in 1964, they were finally allowed to compete in the military-dominated Eventing competition (Hedenborg 2009). Men and women have however always competed against each other in Para-Equestrian Dressage, since its inclusion in the 1996 Atlanta Games.

Gender bias against the participation of women has been implicit in the history of the Olympic Movement. According to Borish (1996) the 'Olympic Games provide a rich and dense arena for understanding women's gains in autonomy and physical emancipation, as well as constraints of their quest for equality in athletic performance'. Indeed within the context of the Olympic Games today, there remains only one class of sailing and the three equestrian disciplines in which men and women can compete equally against each other. The contemporary justification for binary sex segregation of sport is based on a complex mix of factors including biological, economical and commercial arguments, combined with social norms which continue to frame sport in a male domain (Foddy and Savulescu 2011). Hargreaves (2002) explains that the historical justification for segregating sport was built around the ideas of sexual difference and the belief in the unsuitability of sport and physical activity for girls and women. Whilst mixed-gender participation can be viewed as a currency of equality, it can also be seen as a violation of social gender expectations concerning the normative gender behaviour of athletes. If masculine and athletic identities are a function of how a man 'measures up' in the eyes of other males (Messner 1995; Sabo and Runfola 1980), according to Merlini (2004), the equal 'playing field' with female athletes questions whether male athletes are 'real' men.

Bodies and physical differences are indeed at the very centre of sport since it is based on a system which systematically reveals differences and establishes a ranking based on the individual's performance (Pfister 2010). Discussions on sport and gender are often focused on the physicality or

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the performance aspect of sport which highlights the differences between the sexes based on the biological and socially constructed gender order in society. However, as Dashper (2012a) explains, in the context of equestrian sport, there are no sex-based biological advantages for either males or females, 'masculine sporting abilities such as speed and strength are less significant ... strength of a rider plays a role, but this is limited as within the equestrian partnership the horse will always be the stronger partner'. Indeed to truly compare the gendered physicality of equestrian sport against other sports, we must define the physicality we are referring to. For example, within the Olympic discipline of Dressage, the first of the disciplines to allow female competitors or the Paralympic discipline of Para-Equestrian Dressage, scoring and hence placing are based on the quality of the horse's individual required movements. Therefore, correct training is rewarded within the scoring system and the gender of the rider is negligible, as it is the physical performance of the horse, rather than the human athlete who is judged (De Haan 2015). Equestrian sport offers an opportunity to review the phenomenon of sex integration in sport, presents a sporting arena in which normative conceptions of sex difference might be challenged, and provides an interesting lens through which the formation of athlete identity can be viewed.

Gendered discourse in equestrian sport

In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioural propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions (Garfinkel 1967). West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that competent adult members of these societies see differences between the genders as fundamental and enduring 'differences seemingly supported by the division of labour into women's and men's work and an often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviours that are prominent features of social organisations'. The traditional gendered structure of sport reflects the wider gendered social order, divisions perceived to be rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioural and social consequences. As Pfister (2010) explains, discussions concerning gender and sport generally cover topics on the differences between the sexes and biological aspects. Other key areas discussed include the cultural aspect of being a woman/man, which is important because 'it opened people's eyes not only to the great diversity and multiplicity of gender but also to the socially constructed gender order in our society'. This approach highlights that gender is not something we have or we are but something we present, we do.

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As previously discussed the relevance of the rider's sex is unimportant in Olympic equestrian sport, as it is the physical performance of the horse, rather than the human athlete who is judged. However, this is not to say that within the context of Olympic experience the athlete's sex has not historically been seen as a differentiating factor. When Norma Matthews joined the USA Showjumping team in 1950, press coverage at the time appeared to describe a beauty pageant contestant rather than an international athlete, describing her as 'a pretty blue-eyed blonde, 5'6½", 125 pounds' (Burke 1997). Some 18 years later, Jane Bullen faced similar reference in the press when she rode for the USA Eventing team at the 1968 Olympics when she was often referred to as 'Nurse Jane Bullen'. Although she was at the time training to be a nurse, the inclusion of a typically constructed gender role emphasizes the social and dynamic aspect of role construction and enactment. As 'roles' are situated identities, assumed and relinquished as the situation demands (West and Zimmerman 1987), reference to Bullen's feminine career, one may argue, detracts from her identity as an athlete.

At the time, the riders themselves also used gendered discourse when discussing their sport. For example, Lis Hartel, twice individual Dressage silver medallist (1954, 1956), suffered from polio which affected the ligaments behind her knees, weakening and distorting the lower leg to the extent where she couldn't mount or dismount a horse without assistance. Hartel had ridden prior to the polio and was determined to continue in the sport:

I restarted my riding in dressage competitions winning the Nordic riding games in '51. My efforts were crowned with a silver medal in 1952. It was the first time a woman had competed equally with men in the equestrian games, and this really brought my name to the limelight worldwide, because not only was it a woman, but a handicapped woman! (Burke 1997, 67)

During the 1956 Equestrian Olympics in Stockholm, the second time Dressage had been open to female competitors, commentary was laden with masculine and feminine reference. Hedenborg (2009) explains that one Swedish newspaper at the time reported the following, 'Lis Hartel as well as Liselotte Linsenhoff showed such gentleness, grace and flexibility that they made several of their male competitors seem too strict'. Indeed the success of the female Dressage riders, who secured individual silver and bronze, with the German team, consisting of all female riders taking team silver, caused an outcry from experts and the press. The subjective scoring system present in Dressage was thought by some to favour the women because of their femininity. The Swedish gold medallist Henri St Cyr believed that the standard of women's Dressage was so high they should have their own

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Dressage competition (Hedenborg 2009). This statement highlights the concern at the time that mixed-gender sport was merely acceptable in the context of masculine supremacy.

Henri St Cyr comments regarding the call for women to compete separately, supports the notion of the separating principle. Indeed, Hirdman (1990) defines gender systems using either the hierarchal principle which places masculinity as the norm, or the separating principle which emphasizes that masculinity and femininity have to be kept apart. According to Hedenborg (2009), the media coverage of the 1956 Equestrian Olympics can also be explained by Hirdman's (1990) gender system's separating principle. Yet, despite this early call for separation, equestrian sport remained integrated.

Integrating men and women in physical activity settings such as competitive sports, stands against much of the traditional conception of masculinity and femininity underpinning hierarchal sex discourse (Anderson 2008). In their study reviewing gendered discourses in English flat racing, Roberts and MacLean (2012) discussed how women faced discrimination in the sport based on five main themes; a culture of sexism, including the sense that women are more nurturing; the provision and actualization of opportunities, including for women to become trainers; the impact of risk and danger; the impact of differences in body shape and strength; and finally, a sense of industry fashion and trends. Whilst in a recent analysis of gender construction in the Swedish media coverage of equestrian sport at the 2012 Olympics, Hellborg and Hedenborg (2015) concluded that many of the media narratives about male and female riders did not challenge the gender order.

As outlined so far in this paper, we have discussed how equestrian sport in the Olympic context began in a male military-dominated landscape and we have specifically looked at gendered discourse in relation to sex integration in equestrian competition. In the following section, we begin to unpack how sex integration in sport does not simply equate to participatory parity.

Sex integration and participatory parity in equestrian sport

Whilst in this study we are specifically addressing the lived experience of equestrian athletes at the elite level of Olympic and Paralympic competition, it is important to place this sporting experience within the wider gendered context of equestrian sport in general. Participatory parity in equestrian sport is essential to help understand sex integration. Fraser (2007) argued that parity necessitates 'the condition of being a peer, of being on a par with others, of interacting with them on an equal footing'. According to Dashper (2012a), equestrian sport offers the conditions for equality of participation for both men and women at all levels of the sport, including the elite level. However,

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she suggested that ‘subtle discrimination and hidden barriers combine to produce a glass ceiling effect at the top levels of the sport, denying many women participatory parity in relation to their male peers’. Sex integration does not necessarily equate to participatory parity. Therefore in this section, whilst we review gendered participation rates at an elite level, we also discuss broader changing patterns of participation at sub-elite level.

Table 1: Participation rates in Equestrian events over six Olympic Games

	Dressage			Showjumping			Eventing			Total		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
1952	20	4	24	51	0	51	59	0	59	130	4	134
1956	28	9	37	68	5	70	56	1	57	152	12	164
1960	12	5	17	68	3	71	73	0	73	153	8	161
Mean	20	6	26	62	2	64	63	0	63	145	8	153
2000	23	25	48	62	12	74	59	23	82	134	70	204
2004	24	28	52	66	11	77	52	23	75	142	62	204
2008	19	28	47	61	16	77	42	28	70	122	72	194
Mean	22	27	49	63	13	76	51	25	76	133	68	201

In Dumbell and de Haan’s (2012) comparison of athlete profiles over 50 years of Olympic equestrian events, the authors present analysis of participation at six Olympics (Table 1). Analysis of the gender patterns among Olympic competitors shows that on average only 5% of equestrian competitors were female in the early years compared to recent games where this figure has increased to 34% (Dumbell and de Haan 2012). At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, women made up 42% of the 11,196 athletes who competed in the games, this figure was closely mirrored in the 37% of female athletes competing in the Equestrian events. Dumbell and de Haan (2012) outline that across all three disciplines, women were most likely to be competing in Dressage both then and now, but they now form a much greater proportion with 55% of competitors at recent games being female. Hedenborg and White (2012) highlight that it was in 1972 that the participation rate of women competing in Dressage first became higher than that of men. Showjumping, however, is still heavily dominated by male competitors with only 17% of athletes at recent games being female, although this has grown since the meagre 3% in earlier games. Finally, Eventing has seen the largest growth from no female competitors to 33% of the competing athletes now being female (Dumbell and de Haan 2012).

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Hedenborg and White (2012) suggest that a likely explanation for the higher number of women in Dressage compared to the other Olympic disciplines is due to the fact that Dressage riding was more compatible with an accepted femininity. Dressage was the focus of Dashper's (2012a) ethnographic study of equestrian sport, in which she discusses notions of femininity and masculinity. Dashper (2012a) highlighted the increasing acceptance of openly gay men within the discipline of Dressage but concluded that:

Even within equestrian sport, where men and women compete against each other on equal terms and male competitors demonstrate more inclusive forms of masculinity, those masculinities are still constructed in opposition to a devalued femininity, and this will have consequences for the relative value and status of women within the sport.

Despite the fact that to date there are no longer any explicit, formal barriers to participation for females at any level of equestrian sport (within the context of culturally specific gendered sporting access), Travers (2008) notes that this does not simply translate to equality of opportunity. One of the hidden barriers Dashper (2012b) refers to include the combination of gender and class as the following quote from a female young rider suggests:

It's really hard to get seen, to get noticed, especially with the selectors, because they're very, well, money orientated, and also there's only a few boys and they seem to get all the attention as well. There's so many girls and everything, and the boys just really stand out, I suppose, and they're from very wealthy backgrounds, the boys are, and so they do tend to stand out more and get, you know, first choice of things. (Dashper 2012b, 217)

Dashper (2012b) also identifies and discusses the barrier of 'family'. In a sport where competing at the top doesn't necessarily have a clear retirement age, female riders face the prospect of having to take a career break to start and maintain a family. Dashper (2012b) explains that amongst the riders interviewed, on starting a family, many female riders would opt out of international competition, a requirement at the elite level of the sport, instead opting to focus on family life:

Many riders marry other riders, and in each case of the three couples I interviewed where this was the case it was the female partner who had scaled back her competition career to concentrate on the domestic side of the horse business (training and horse care), as well as taking the lead in childcare. (Dashper 2012b, 221)

Dashper's (2012b) study focuses on equestrian sport within the UK context and highlights some of the 'hidden' barriers to participation, emphasizing the fact that sex integration doesn't necessarily

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equate to participatory parity. As a result of reviewing various international studies relating to participation rates in equestrian sport, Adelman and Knijnik (2013) discuss how 'feminisation' of equestrian sport 'has been identified as a world-wide tendency, but with differing degrees of intensity, affect, and effect'. Statistical evidence depicting the phenomenon in equestrian is available for certain parts of the world such as France, where equestrian is top of the list of women's sport (Adelman and Knijnik 2013), Sweden, where 84% of all members of the Swedish Equestrian Federation are female (Hedenborg 2007), and the USA, where according to Rice (2003) over 80% of all those involved in field of equestrian are female, and from an international perspective, De Haan (2015) reports that 57% of the athletes represented by the Federation Equestrian International are female.

Whilst in the first part of the twentieth century, equine competition was a masculine domain associated with the military and nobility, Plymoth (2013) explains that within the Swedish context, the second half of the twentieth century saw the feminization of equestrian sport. Whilst the horse was once a status symbol related to men and masculinity, it became mainly considered as an object of female adoration. Feminization of equestrian sport in Sweden occurred around the same time as the emergence of the Swedish welfare state. Indeed, Hedenborg (2007) hypothesizes that the states involvement and hence subsequent development of public policies in relation to equestrian sport may have favoured feminization. Indeed, such is the swing from male to female participation rates in the Swedish context, that Plymoth (2013) discusses 'paths to remasculinisation' of equestrian sport.

Our narrative so far has highlighted that sex integration does not necessarily equate to participatory parity. Indeed, gender is very much present in regard to participation rates as highlighted in the studies by Dumbell and de Haan (2012) and Hedenborg and White (2012) and the associated lived experience of this as highlighted in the findings of Dashper (2012b). Plymoth (2013) describes the issue of feminization of equestrian sport as;

... undeniably interesting and also contradictory when viewed in relation to some of the physical aspects of the sport that would normally be associated with masculinity. There is no doubt that the sport is action filled. It is a matter of mastering a large animal, and there are numerous risks involved in dealing with horses ... it is somewhat paradoxical that men are reluctant to ride horses when masculine characteristics such as courage, strength, leadership abilities and competition are doubtless needed on every level.

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It appears therefore that the evolution of equestrian sport has provided moments in which normative conceptions of sex difference have been both reaffirmed and challenged. Even within the context of sex-integrated sport, the reference to 'masculinity' or 'feminisation' is a constant reference to a dominant gendered ideology. As Channon (2012) discusses, until we are able to conceive of male and female athletes simply as athletes, who no longer require differentiation based on their sex and who no longer hold differently gendered status, we continue to problematize the labelling of such sporting activity. The literature may suggest that sex-integrated sport remains shaped by conservative gender discourse, which highlights enduring differences between the genders but does the lived experience of participating in sex-integrated sport support this? An important part of experiencing sport is associated with the construct of athlete identity. In the following section, we move on to discuss notions and constructs of athlete identity before analysing the lived experience of this for equestrian athletes.

Notions and constructs of athlete identity

Athletic identity has been defined as 'the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role' (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder 1993), and has been researched as an extension of self-identity, which is defined as the compilation of self-referent cognitions, emotions and attitudes expressed within various aspects of life (Carver, Reynolds, and Scheier 1994).

Several 'identities' have been discussed in sport-related literature from the perspective of the individual to broader themes such as nationality, race, culture, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Whilst sport comprises a site which provides a rich source of data about enacted identities, these often arise from intertextual links with other discourses (Lyotard 1984). As previously mentioned, sport is historically and culturally constructed as a male domain and is therefore a highly potent site for the construction of masculine identity. The dominant production of the male identity within sport therefore requires that women be positioned as the 'other'. Mean (2001) explains that positioning the 'other' serves an important sociocognitive function in defining the standard based on a hegemonic need to discriminate between categories and their membership. Social categorization is theoretically linked to many social and cognitive processes including self-concept, social perception, stereotyping and intra- and intergroup behaviours (Hogg and Abrams 1988). The place or context in which these identities are constructed is therefore also a point of discussion, influenced by factors such as sex segregation and the physicality of the sport; however the focus of research relating to sporting identity is primarily associated with the athletes' career progression, for example, from student-athlete identity through to retirement. Within this field, there is a limited amount of

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literature which discusses the identity of an Olympian or Paralympian or studies which discuss the construct of athlete identity within sex-integrated sports.

Whilst there are several examples of papers which focus on an individual sportsman or sportswoman who have competed in the Olympics or Paralympics, the sport/athletic identity is never the sole focus of the narrative. For example, Knight et al. (2007) and White (2008) discuss Cathy Freeman's cultural identity during the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. Canadian national identity is discussed in reference to the controversy surrounding sprinter Ben Johnson in both Jackson (2004) and Stelzl, Janes, and Seligman (2008) papers. Whilst McNeil (2009) uses the boxer Lennox Lewis as the main protagonist in a narrative wrapped up in issues of Americocentricity, Black identity and masculinity and Amir Kahn's identity as a British Asian boxer and his subsequent identity as a role model is the subject of Burdsey's (2007) paper. In Philips and Osmond's (2009) engaging paper on Australian Swimmer Dawn Fraser, numerous identities are discussed including gender, sexuality and national identity.

Even though a strong identification with the athlete role can have a positive effect on the individual (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder 1993), research in athletic identity and gender has produced mixed results. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) found that athletic identity was higher in male than in female athletes and Meyer (1990) argued that female athletes were able to commit equally to both academic and athletic commitments throughout their college career, while males tended to disassociate with their academic commitments after the first year. In contrast, other researchers have found no significant gender interactions with athletic identity (Aries et al. 2004).

It is important to note however that throughout the identified literature there is a distinct lack of an athlete voice within the discourse of athlete identity. The following two examples which also discuss identity in the context of Paralympic experience are the exception. Howe (2008), himself a Paralympian and academic, uses ethnographic data to explore the notion of body culture and the classification system experienced by athletes with disabilities. Howe's (2008) diary extract from his own classification experience at the Seoul Olympics in 1988, is evocative and insightful. He explains how the classification process not only provides parameters associated with his athletic ability, it also places his 'body' in a 'pigeonhole' and is used for non-sport-related issues such as room allocation.

Peers (2009) herself a Paralympian, critically reviews discourses which focus on Paralympic history and Paralympic empowerment, specifically critiquing two publications, 'Paralympics: where heroes

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come' and 'Athlete first: a history of the Paralympic movement'. In the context of identity, Peers (2009) uses several common nouns to define herself:

I read the newspaper articles and press releases that others have written about me. I read my own grant applications, speeches and business cards. I read myself defined, in each of these, by one word: not cripp, queer, athlete, activist, student, woman or lesbian, but Paralympian. I read my life story transformed into that of The Paralympian.

With regard to athlete identity and experience within sex-integrated sport, McDonagh and Pappano (2008) present Aaron Boss' reaction to losing to the female competitor Micheala Hutchinson in the Alaska state wrestling title in the 103 pound division, 'I don't look at it as a loss to a girl. I look at it as a loss to a wrestler'. Here, it is interesting to note the supplemented differentiating gender label with the shared identity of 'wrestler'. Anderson (2008) refers to such a response as an indication of acceptance and respect towards the female athlete and one which neutralizes the negative connotations of this specific loss within the framework of gender hierarchy and masculine identity. 'Losing to a girl' has long been seen as a sign of men's emasculation within traditional Western gender discourse and as such poses a 'powerful challenge to (male) identity' (Miller 2010). However as Channon (2012) explains, being fairly beaten by a fellow athlete is no shameful thing and it therefore stands in male athletes' best interest to accept more equitable de-gendered definitions of female competitors.

Channon (2012) examined the gender-subversive potential of mixed-sex martial arts and concluded that whilst sex-integrated sports have the potential to lead participants towards embodying and propagating such subversive gender discourses, in the context of highly masculinized sports such as combat sports, the significance of this subversion is amplified. Channon (2012) also discussed that the 'normalised' presence of women within multiple levels of participation particularly at higher levels, including coaches and competitors resulted in a shared identity as martial artists regardless of gender difference.

In this section, we have discussed notions of athlete identity, specifically focusing on the constructed identity of those athletes who have competed at an Olympic and Paralympic level and the notion of athlete identity within sex-integrated sports. We have highlighted that research in this area is limited, but we argue that it provides an insightful contribution to understanding the lived experience of these athletes.

Methodology

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This study adopts a critical realist ontology and epistemology, and represents part of a wider research project which sought to identify structures in the world of Olympic and Paralympic equestrian sport, the place of this competition in the career histories of these athletes, and the process of social construction and identity formation within these structures. In this context and in regard to understanding the lived experience of these athletes, an ethnographic approach was taken with regard to data collection and analysis. As Krane and Baird explain, 'Ethnography is aimed toward understanding the culture of a particular group from the perspective of the group members. The group culture, then, will lend insight into behaviours, values, emotions, and mental states of group members' (2005, 87). This study specifically focuses on the subworld of elite competitive equestrian sport and as Crosset and Beal (1997) outline, the ethnographic approach to this type of study requires an exploration of the everyday practices, norms, interactions and relationships of those intimately involved in the social and sporting world of equestrianism. Ethnography requires access and time, the primary data collection for this study took place over a period of 18 months, from January 2008 until July 2009, during which time the primary researcher had access to numerous social and sporting situations including training camps, press conferences, quarantine holding camps and Olympic competition.

At this point, it is important to note that whilst the primary researcher has been a competitive horse rider and has worked in the horse industry, she has not competed at elite level nor has she directly worked at elite level within the context of equestrian sport, however, she is well versed in the language of equestrian competition. Whilst not therefore positioning herself as an insider, during the period of data collection the primary researcher became seen as a familiar face within the British Equestrian Team to the point where they were able to have informal conversations with members of the team and conduct participant observations. The participants were aware that the lead author was a researcher collecting data for research purposes. Further to this, the Performance Director had emailed all members of the team explaining the role of the researcher and that he and the British Equestrian Federation (BEF) supported the study and would appreciate their cooperation. This resulted in the study being positively perceived, and allowed the lead author to build rapport with the participants and engage them in interviews.

In relation to the Eliasian concept of researcher involvement-detachment as a balance, we believe the lead researcher had sufficient insider awareness/empathy to issues such as the open discourse of sexuality within the discipline of Dressage (and the absence of this within the other disciplines). However, this was combined with objectivity that allowed the lead researcher to avoid asking

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questions relating to sexual identity that could potentially be overt. According to Gold's (1958) typology of participant observation, we therefore place the lead researcher in the role of 'observer as participant', meaning they were mostly cast in the role of observing, but also participated in a minor social role. In the light of this cultural position, we are not claiming that this is a purely ethnographic approach to the study, but merely highlight the ethnographic nature of the data collection and analysis.

Due to the fact that the experiences of the individual athletes are not formed in isolation, the culture, community and power relations within the sport, the team and their environments, must also be considered. Therefore, interviews were conducted with members of the British Equestrian Team, including riders, performance managers and support staff, many of which work across all the disciplines (see Table 2). With regard to accessing interview participants, consent was granted by the BEF to allow the researcher access to various training and competition situations prior to, during and after the 2008 Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Games. A convenience sampling technique was applied resulting in 34 separate interviews conducted over the 18-month period, with 28 individuals, at a time and place that was convenient for the participants (see Table 2); the duration of the interview was also predominantly determined by the interviewee. Participants were asked about their career histories and their Olympic/Paralympic experience but were predominately allowed to lead the direction and pace of the interview. This facilitated a more spontaneous, free-flowing and interactive interview conducive to the ethnographic approach adopted.

All interviewees were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Altheide's approach to analysis was used post hoc to inform and develop the analysis. The development of the research protocol used in relation to the data coding and categorizing process did however follow Altheide's (1996) 'rules of thumb' and asked the questions 'does it generate categories that subsequently will be explored?' and 'does it allow the researcher to identify new categories?'. Primary analysis was then conducted using deductive coding, whilst simultaneously allowing space for inductive codes to emerge. A revised protocol was then developed to facilitate a systematic approach to analysis, whilst allowing the researcher to remain reflexive and move in a recursive way between concept development, coding and analysis. The constant comparison enabled the researcher to clarify themes, frames and discourse, thereby moving through stages nine and ten of Altheide's (1996) process of qualitative document analysis.

Our analysis revealed several sport-specific 'identities' for this group of participants. These range from the general equine-related identity of 'horsey', to discipline specific (both in and out of

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Olympic/Paralympic competition), for example, 'Dressage riders' and 'eventers', to identities specifically linked to the 'Olympics', 'Paralympics' and the wider 'Team GB'. Data analysis shows an absence of gender as an identity in the way interviewees and other participants see themselves and others. In the following section, we present the findings that specifically relate to the construct of sport-specific identities for this group of participants within a sex-integrated sport environment.

Table 2: Overview of interviewees and their Olympic experience at the point of interview

Code	Position at point of interview	Gender	Olympic Experience	Nature of Olympic Experience
1	Team GB support staff	M	Two Olympic Games	Work with the Olympic riders across all three disciplines
2	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	F	Four Paralympic Games	Rider
3	Groom	F	One Olympic Games	Groom
4	Performance Manager	M	Two Paralympic Games	Performance Manager
5	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	F	Three Paralympic Games	Rider
6	Groom	F	One Olympic Games	Rider selected but did not compete
7	Team GB support staff	M	Two Olympic and Paralympic Games	Team GB support staff – experience across all four disciplines
8	Groom	F	Two Olympic Games	Groom
9	Team GB support staff	F	Two Olympic and Paralympic Games	Provides support to all four disciplines
10	Team GB support staff	M	Two Olympic Games	Worked with the Olympic riders across all three disciplines but did not attend the Games
11	Coach	M	Three Olympic Games	Coach
12	Eventing Rider	F	One Olympic Games	Selected but did not compete
13	BOA	M	One Olympic Games	Operations
14	Groom and Coach	F	Two Paralympic Games	Groom and individual coach
15	Team GB support staff	M	Two Olympic Games	Outside of the Olympics works specifically for the discipline of Eventing but during Olympic competition, works with all three disciplines
16	Groom	F	One Paralympic Games	Groom
17	British Paralympic Association	F	Five Paralympic Games	Previous Senior national coach and Deputy Chef d'mission Paralympics GB

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Code	Position at point of interview	Gender	Olympic Experience	Nature of Olympic Experience
18	Team GB support staff	M	One Paralympic and one Olympic Games	Para-Equestrian Dressage All three disciplines
19	Performance Manager	M	Four Olympic Games	Dressage Rider and Team Captain Dressage
20	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	M	One Paralympic Games	Rider
21	Team GB support staff	F	Seven Olympic Games	Working with owners and supporters of Eventing
22	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	M	One Paralympic Games	Rider
23	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	F	Two Paralympic Games	Rider
24	Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider	F	One Paralympic Games	Rider selected but did not compete
25	Coach	F	Two Olympic Games	Coach
26	Performance Director	M	Two Olympic and Paralympic Games	All four disciplines
27	Team GB support staff	F	One Olympic Games	All three disciplines
28	Performance Manager	M	Five Olympic Games	International Rider Chef d'Equipe Performance Manager

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Experiencing sex-integrated sport and the construction of identity

Analysis of the data highlighted several equestrian sport-specific identities. At a sport level, participants often position themselves within a 'them and us' framework, 'them' being other sports and 'us' being equestrian sport. Even within the 'us' framework, we noted that the construct of identity was often associated with the individual disciplines, as participants would refer to the differences between, for example, Showjumpers and Eventers, or Dressage and Para-Dressage riders. Through Ethnographic Content Analysis, at a personal/individual level, we noted that equestrian athletes are consistently referred to as 'riders' by fellow competitors and wider team members such as coaches and support staff. The term 'rider' not only highlights the difference between equestrian sport and other sports but also enables participants to refer to one another without a differentiating gender label instead promoting an inclusive shared identity absent of any gender reference. In the following section, we present evidence of the construct of these sport-specific identities whilst discussing the absence of gender as an element of identity in the way participants describe themselves and others within the sport.

Identity often refers to distinctive characteristics attributed to individuals or those shared by distinct groups. One such characteristic may be the common use of a language or specific terminology. Reference to the colloquial term 'horsey', as shown in the following quotes, demonstrates a distinctive 'them and us' identity:

The sort of great saying of any publicity is good publicity is ironically quite true, but obviously we want it to be all for the good reasons, but it's just trying to sort of sell the stories and breakdown some of the barriers and the Olympics gives us the perfect opportunity, because we are on that global stage, when we have a World Equestrian Games we're on the global stage but still only to the horsey people. (Interviewee 27, Team GB support staff)

For me, as I said, it's been my dream since I was a 6 year old and I think one of the ... one of the real appeals of the Olympics is it's such a universal experience, or sporting, universal experience that, you know, if you're an Olympian, it's something that everyone can relate to, whereas, if you say 'Oh well, I've been to the World Equestrian Games', to someone who's not well versed in sort of horsey speak, there's 'Oh, that's nice'. (Interviewee 12, Eventing rider)

The use of the term 'horsey' by someone outside of the collective group could be seen as a derogatory term due to its childlike connotations and association with the 1938 children's song

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'Horsey Horsey' written by Paddy Roberts. However, as these quotes demonstrate, when used by an insider, the term refers to characteristics of a collective group 'horsey people' and characteristics of a language 'horsey speak'. The way that the above two interviewees refer to the identity of 'horsey' in the context of 'them and us' shows a collective understanding of what the experience is like from within, with what could almost be described as a 'desire' to be understood by those outside. Interviewee 12 specifically differentiates between the horsey-specific experience of the World Equestrian Games and the universal experience of the Olympic Games, the latter being an experience which would be recognized/understood and implied to be more deeply valued by a wider group of people.

As with the term rider, the term horsey is again a label used to identify a group of individuals that is inclusive from a sport-specific perspective at the same time as being exclusive of gender connotations. The familiarity in which this type of phraseology is used is an indication of acceptance and respect of both male and female athletes and as with the wrestling example presented earlier, these identity associated labels neutralize the concept of gender dominance within the framework of gender hierarchy and masculine identity. Indeed, with regard to the all the interview data collected and analysed for this study, the only direct reference to gender occurred when participants were referring to the 'uniqueness' of equestrian sport in comparison to other sports as demonstrated in the example below:

Well, when you see people that ask you about the sport compared to other sports, I mean firstly you've got males competing against females on an equal level, which is very unique. You've also got ... you could be an Olympic champion, world champion one minute, and the next week you're competing against people doing it on a part time basis and get beaten, because it's all about the horse. So it's a very levelling sport, there's no room for egos as well, because you can go on your backside very quickly and I think that's what makes it quite unique. (Interviewee 1, Team GB support staff)

It is interesting to note that instead of referring to gender as a differentiating factor, the reference to gender in this example is presented as a 'levelling' factor. Across the data, the athletes in this study are consistently referred to as riders, unless identified by a name there is no way of knowing the gender of the athlete being discussed. The absence of a gendered identity could be seen as evidence of participants placing a low importance of gender within a defined mixed-gender team. It could also mean that the generic identity of 'rider' or 'horsey' is not only void of gender or sporting 'eliteness' but it can also be used as an identity that is inclusive of both able-bodied and disabled athletes.

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The comparison between 'horsey' equestrian sport and 'other sports' is again highlighted in the following quote as a member of the GB support team explains that the dynamic of the human/horse partnership results in an 'unselfish' athlete attitude in equestrian sport compared to other sports, implying that this is a unique characteristic and again illustrating the distinct identity of an equestrian athlete:

Athletes can be very frustrating to work with, because of the intensity and their selfishness sometimes, but with this lot, because they're not the most important part, the horse is the most important part, they haven't got that selfishness about them really, so they're a lot better to work with, and I enjoy this sport more than other sport. (Interviewee 1, Team GB support staff)

The ethnographic approach utilized within this study specifically left space for people to discuss what identity meant to them. This was achieved because this approach gives access to the self-understandings of the group in a variety of contexts, and allows the researcher to experience the reflexivity of group identity as well as what the identity means in practical terms (Adams 2009). It would appear that within the Olympic and Paralympic context there is recognition, at least, of the overarching collective sport-specific 'equestrian' or 'horsey' identity, which is inclusive of all the disciplines but exclusive of all other sports. However, analysis also highlighted nuances of discipline-specific identities. Some characteristics associated with discipline-specific identities have rather practical implications. The actual requirements of the horse and rider within the disciplines are very different, 'The disciplines are quite different really, all we've got is a four legged animal underneath us but it's actually bred very different, they're very different sports' (Interviewee 11, Coach).

The social interactions and behaviours of the different teams are further examined in the following sequence of quotes which are all associated with the discipline of Dressage. Here, we really start to gain an insight into the views and actions of this group of athletes. The narrative presented here not only implies specific characteristics associated with Dressage, it also acknowledges the differences between this team and the other disciplines. The first quote comes from an interview recorded in Hong Kong during the Beijing Olympics. This particular interview was recorded just prior to the start of the Dressage competition and specifically on a day when a tornado warning had meant that everything had shut down and no training could take place:

There's two things that can happen at these Games it could be quite a normal temperature, and we've already experienced that in the week that we've been out here. So then nothing

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will change, it'll just be like a normal World Championship, European Championship. Or, we could be facing this kind of situation, here, and what this situation will require is huge flexibility and adaptability and that's something that Dressage riders are not good at. It doesn't come into the routine, regime, discipline of Dressage. It comes into Cross Country riding, where you ride over different terrains, different weathers, no precise time, you know, or Showjumping, you don't know whether you're going to be waiting 2 h to jump or 5 min, in Dressage we know the time we ride, we know everything, everything's constant. (Interviewee 19, Performance Manager)

Not only does the interviewee recognize Dressage-specific characteristics, he also acknowledges that these are different from the other two Olympic disciplines of Eventing and Showjumping. What is interesting is the association between the requirements of the sport and the characteristics of the different riders. The nature of the Dressage competition is the completion of a pre-determined test. The riders will have completed the same test at numerous competitions; consistency is an inferred element of this sport and for these riders change is disruptive but for Showjumpers every competition is different:

When you're jumping there's nothing constant, you turn up at the show, you don't know the course plan, you don't know anything, you don't know the ring, you don't know whether it's on a hill, you don't know whether it's like this in mud. So there's no, no level playing field like we know in Dressage. So you are used to turning up to the unknown, you walk, 'Christ that's difficult, what am I going to do there', strategies, tactics, 'Shit, should have done it in 6', you know, nothing's for definite, like it is in Dressage. (Interviewee 19, Performance Manager)

In the following example, the Performance Manager refers to Dressage riders as 'private people', not as social as Showjumpers. In an Olympic competition, Dressage riders are not only competing as a team but they are also living in a team-focused environment:

As Dressage riders we're very private people, we make ... we have our plan, we don't always announce it, or maybe the one we announce isn't the one we use but we have it and we do it on our own and we train on our own at home, and we don't compete like Showjumpers competing, mixing, living with each other week in, week out, we don't do that. (Interviewee 19, Performance Manager)

The discipline-specific identity of Dressage as outlined in the characteristics discussed above is not however consistent with that for Para-Equestrian Dressage. Despite the fact that the nature of the

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competition is the same, i.e. a pre-known Dressage test, consistently encountered at numerous competitions, Para-Equestrian Dressage riders do not come across as being private people:

Erm you know everyone wants to interact with everyone you know what I mean, we are, all the countries we've got mates with all the countries and its great for everyone to meet up again you know like we met last year at the Worlds. And yeah you do sort of get mates and you know what people are doing and you keep in touch by email to meet up so it's like a long distance friends. I mean when the actual competition day comes obviously you're very focussed with team GB and then at the same time the South African for example Philipa, I always have a laugh with her you know good luck that sort of thing you know what I mean even though she's another country she's still a mate so you want her to do well. Apparently I've been told that's quite different from the other sports, where they stay very much in their country but no, everyone just cracks on. (Interviewee 20, Para-Equestrian Dressage Rider)

Through the analysis of data presented, we have discussed how participants have described themselves and others within the sport and in comparison to other sports, therefore highlighting the sport- and discipline-specific identities of equestrian athletes. Within the context of a sex-integrated sport, the use of hierarchical gendered discourse is notably absent. The dominant male identity associated with sport, which requires the positioning of women as others, is not evident with participants choosing shared identities of 'horsey' and 'rider' over any reference to gendered labels. Even within the sub-division of discipline-specific identities, additional characteristics are used to differentiate groups but these still remain absent of any traditional discursive meanings of sex differences. We conclude that gender appears less salient in this context, given the sex integration and levelling aspects of the inclusion of the horse.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to review the construct of athlete identity from within a sex-integrated sport. Through ethnographic analysis, which 'is generally interpretive, seeking to explicate meanings rather than make verifiable predictions' (Adams 2009), we have been able to identify the 'them' and 'us' sport-specific identity and highlight the nuances of discipline-specific identities. Whilst the majority of discourse surrounding equestrian sport as reviewed in the first part of this paper was laden with gendered reference, analysis of the current data shows an absence of gender as an identity in the way participants see themselves and others.

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As we have discussed in earlier sections of this paper, sport is predominantly separated into same sex competition (unless physiological differences between men and women offer no competitive advantage or disadvantage – as is the case with equestrian sport), with male sports taking the dominant default position. However, our review of prior discourse associated with equestrian sport highlighted that sex integration does not necessarily equate to participatory parity or gender-neutral discourse. We have also noted that whilst there is a body of literature relating to discourse surrounding sex integration and sex-separated sport, there has been to date limited space given to the lived experience of athletes within the construct of sex-integrated sport. Following on from Dashper's (2012b) work on sex integration and gender equality in equestrian sport, this study sought to evaluate the lived experience of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, specifically focusing on the construct of identity for members of the British Equestrian team.

The results of this study highlight an interesting sport-specific construct of 'them and us'. 'Us' being inclusive of anyone involved in the world of horses and 'Them' being outsiders to this, which includes other sports and athletes. This in itself became most apparent when participants were referring to the multisport environment of the Olympics or Paralympics. For the participants in this study, the Olympics or Paralympics would be the only environment in which they could compete in a multisport environment. For some this presented an opportunity for them to be seen within a universally accepted sporting framework, whilst for others this simply highlighted a general lack of understanding in the wider community as to what their sport entailed.

However, within the general 'us' or 'horsey' identity, we noted discipline-specific nuances. Participants noted differences between, for example, Dressage riders and Showjumpers. A possible explanation for this is linked to the different requirements of these disciplines which may suit personal characteristics. However, regardless of the specific discipline, and the acknowledgement that different disciplines may experience diverse cultures and atmospheres which may be relevant, throughout the analysis of the data, equestrian athletes were consistently referred to as 'riders', a term devoid of gender hierarchy or Olympic or Paralympic reference and a term that differentiated them from the generic inclusive term of 'athlete'.

In contrast to previous studies in which gender is associated with identity and the lived experience of sport, there was a distinct lack of gendered discourse present within the empirical data produced and reviewed in this study. The use of gender-neutral terminology (rider) might suggest either that gender is unimportant, or that respondents were gender-blind. We argue that our analysis shows an absence of gender with regard to the formation of equestrian athletes' identities. We conclude

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therefore that gender activity and behaviour expectations are not perceived as affecting the underlying reality of the performance environment of this particular sports team. This phenomenon is clearly of significance for the wider discourse on the gendered experience in sport.

Finally, we present possible considerations regarding the implication that from a participant's perspective, equestrian sport may be considered gender neutral. With regard to this phenomenon, it is worth making reference here to the recently published Olympic Agenda 2020, in which the IOC presents 40 recommendations that were discussed at the 127th IOC session and which 'lay out the strategic roadmap for the future of the Olympic Movement' (IOC 2014). The findings of this study have a direct bearing on 'Recommendation 11: Foster gender equality; sub-point 2. The IOC to encourage the inclusion of mixed-gender team events' (IOC 2014).

We are aware however, that previous studies relating to equestrian sport have in fact highlighted differences within the gendered experience of participants (Dashper 2012b; Hellborg and Hedenborg 2015) which may relate to the level of competition/participation and cultural influences. We therefore encourage additional research in this area which specifically focuses on comparative gendered experiences within sport that would inform policy direction at both elite and grassroots participation levels (e.g. Sotiriadou, Quick, and Shilbury 2006). Whilst we propose that the specificity of our study and consequent findings provide valuable insight in relationship between athlete experience and construction of identity, we believe additional research in this area that advances a more athlete-focused approach is required for a stronger representation of athlete voices.

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