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Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend: An Autoethnographic Analysis Of Softball's Empowering Potential

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DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SOFTBALL'S EMPOWERING
POTENTIAL

by

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Abstract

Due to dominant gender ideology, the body has become a site for personal and political power struggles and many everyday practices maintain the current power dynamics and the dominant ideology regarding gender hierarchy. These occurrences help to sustain an ideology that positions men and women in opposition, with the male role representing superiority and strength, and the female role representing inferiority and weakness. It is of interest to discover whether participation in certain sports can influence a larger ideological shift by empowering girls to reclaim control over their own bodies and view them as shining examples of their own competence and capabilities. This paper utilizes the analytic autoethnography method in order to explore how the researcher's experiences playing softball illuminate hidden social intricacies that increase the sport's empowering potential. Despite the social and physical privilege associated with researcher's subjective perspective, the results contained themes relating to fear, frustration, power, control, and a supportive environment, all of which are variables impacting the likelihood of a positive and empowering experience. Empowering benefits were attributed to controlled and powerful use of the body, a strong support structure both on field and in the stands, and a safe atmosphere within which to practice gender fluidity and defy gender normative roles. So, while the results are not generalizable to all female athletic experiences, they can still be used to structure a safer, more empowering place within sport. This work shows that there is a process to personal empowerment and that some variables foster and maintain the feeling of empowerment, while others dissolve it. By understanding these intricacies, those seeking to utilize sport as a tool for social justice may increase the likelihood that participants will have a positive experience.

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Introduction:

My research collected autoethnographic narratives regarding my experiences participating in softball in order to analyze the relationship between dominant notions of gender in sport and society, and my own feelings of empowerment from playing softball. To accomplish this, the scope of my research was limited to recollections of my last seven years participating in multiple forms of softball as serious leisure. The following research is both based on, and influenced by my own experiences, and due to the variety of contexts, it is not generalizable to everyone. Many women have not had a similarly positive experience in the realm of sport; and due to the patriarchal foundation on which sport has been built, many future female athletes will likely continue to have negative experiences. I have used my personal experience to illuminate the ways softball might provide participants with empowering opportunities and a safe place to resist societal gender stereotypes.

My research intent was to demonstrate the importance of sport contextualized in the social justice realm, where it has typically been absent. While there is not one definition of social justice (Buettner-Schmidt, & Lobo, 2012; Parry, Johnson, & Stewart, 2013), my research focused on the “just ordering of society” (Buettner-Schmidt, & Lobo, 2012) through social construction and ideology. The socialization of ideology and gender constructs, which place women in a powerless position, “discourages women from viewing themselves as competent, autonomous, strong, and self-determining individuals” (Blinde, Han, & Taub, 1993, p. 47). To clarify, it would be an oversimplification of the problem to expect empowering women at the personal level succeeds in toppling a long-

standing gender ideology and hierarchy. Restoring power or empowering women at the personal level is just a foundation from which further empowerment at the group and then institutional levels can emerge (Blinde et al., 1993; Shaw, 2001). There has been an acknowledgement within the leisure studies discipline regarding the potential utility of leisure to enact social justice by way of social change for marginalized and oppressed groups (Parry et al., 2013). As it stands, most articles on sport emerge from disciplines such as history (McParland, 2012; Popovic, 2013), sociology (Allen-Collinson, 2012; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Hall, 1985; Lenskyj, 1990), psychology (Bohan, 1993; Chang, Ho, Lu, Song, Gill, & Ou, 2013; Malcom, 2003), and kinesiology (Roper, 2009; Sage, 1990). While many of these articles discuss the gender imbalances, inequalities, and power dynamics within sport, very few adopt a social justice lens in order to analyze how sport is not just part of the problem, but also a potential solution.

This is why the notion of empowerment as a “foundational base from which women can eventually challenge their disadvantaged position” (Blinde et al., 1993, p. 48) is the primary concept for this study. Empowerment is a process, whereby members of a “disadvantaged social group develop skills and abilities to gain control over their lives and to take action to improve their life situation” (p.47). Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt (2011) corroborate this by proposing that participation in intercollegiate sport “may contribute to the development of a more confident sense of self, especially related to one’s physical competence” (p. 411). This concept is important because the socialized gender hierarchy and set of roles or stereotypes discourage most women from acknowledging their competence, strength, autonomy and sense of self-confidence (Blinde, et al., 1993). These stereotypes are part of a societal ideology regarding gender

norms, which is dialectically related to our social world and its organizing gender hierarchy in which the female role is deemed inferior and subordinate to the male role (Wallach Scott, 1999; Theberge, 1987). Despite significant advances, the lack of positive opportunity for personal resistance of these socially constructed notions of gender binary differences is perpetuating this oppressive and suppressive ideology (Blinde et al., 1993; Wallach Scott, 1999) and gender stratification (Sage, 1990). Herein lies the problem my research addresses.

I propose that personal empowerment through participation in sport, particularly sports that allow women to break free from the feminine sport conventions, might help to break this cycle. This position is incredibly partial, and while there is literature I review below that supports it, I am speaking from a particular social position that is not generalizable to all female participants in sport. I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied and athletically talented woman of western society, and anyone outside of these categories may disagree or have had different experiences. Although my particular position limits the scope and generalizability of my conclusions, it does not negate the importance of analyzing my experiences (Vryan, 2006) in contrast to the broader society.

My placement experience furthered my understanding of empowerment as a tool for resisting traditional female athletic stereotypes. Throughout my time at the Wayne Gretzky Sport Centre in Brantford, Ont., I had the opportunity to observe a preschool gymnastics program called Tumble Fun. During my visits to the program, of the five kids registered there were only three girls participating, even though there were two boys listed. As I observed the Tumble Fun session, I saw how the minimal organizing structure of the program seemed to have helped to empower the few young female

participants and gave them control over their bodies and their performance (Blinde et al., 1993). Since empowerment is about control over one's body and life events (Blinde et al., 1993), the lack of structured requirements regarding which gymnastic skills or actions should be performed by the children gave the participants control over their own skill development and choice of activities. With the Tumble Fun program focusing directly on *what* these female participants are capable of doing with their bodies, the program appeared to instill a sense of bodily personal empowerment very early on in the girls' lives. Such a sense of empowerment contrasts with the objectification and sexualization of bodies common to women and girls which emphasizes their own self-objectification or focus on the body's appearance rather than competence (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). In the future, if these girls pursue athletics or recreation, sport as a social institution may be able to provide them with an opportunity "to resist and redefine what it means to both be female and an athlete" (Malcom, 2003, p. 1389).

I find that my experience as a softball pitcher has greatly contributed to my self-esteem and confidence, as well as my notions of gender and female athleticism. To clarify, my participation in softball has been limited to what Anderson (2006) describes as serious leisure, meaning an intense participation in a leisure activity. My experience in softball is limited to a high level of competition in amateur and regional teams. My analysis focuses on softball as a team sport, but at the competitive amateur level instead of professionally. My participation allowed me to feel competent and confident in my skills, which supported my efforts to develop both physical and mental power. Additionally, since the pitcher is the position with (arguably) the greatest control and influence in the overall softball game, I find this associated control contributed to my

empowerment. Though the responsibility can be intimidating and many tears have been shed on the field, I have never felt as much confidence in my body and overall competence than when I am on the pitching mound.

Due to dominant gender ideology, the body has become a site for personal and political power struggles (Cole, 1993). Everyday practices embodying this struggle for control over women's bodies impact power dynamics and the dominant ideology regarding gender hierarchy (Cole, 1993). These occurrences help to sustain an ideology that positions men and women in opposition, with the male role representing superiority and strength, and the female role representing inferiority and weakness (Blinde et al., 1993; Sage, 1990; Theberge, 1987; Wallach Scott, 1999; Lenskyj, 1990). These roles become common sense and widely accepted organizing rules for our societal structure, which perpetuate the marginalization of feminine attributes (Cole, 1993; Wallach Scott, 1999). It is of interest to discover whether participation in certain sports can influence a larger ideological shift by empowering girls to reclaim control over their own bodies and view them as shining examples of their own competence and capabilities.

The following sections explore the current literature regarding sport and society, sport and gender, softball, and the past methods used to analyze these topics. I go on to describe the methodology I used to collect my autoethnographic data, and the theories that inform my analytic perspective. From there I present some of the recorded experiences which best describe the deductive and inductive themes of control, empowerment, fear and frustration, and a softball support structure. I then connect my own experiences to the findings in the current literature to show how, despite some negative mental outcomes, softball contains qualities that can empower participants.

Finally, the conclusion section synthesizes my findings, explains the limitations to my research, and proposes future research endeavors to better understand the possible utility of sport to achieve social justice.

Literature Review:

The Playing Field: Sport and Society

To better understand the importance of sport in the context of social justice, we must first acknowledge sport as a construction site for gender (and other) ideologies. It is imperative to imagine sport as more than recreational play; it is so much more than a pastime or opportunity for socialization. Kidd (1990) suggests that due to the history of sport as a masculinizing practice, it “cannot be detached from the interests of men in the maintenance of male power” (p. 27). Sport is a cultural force, a political force, and a site where perspectives of how we see ourselves, and our relationship to others are carved out (Earp, 2010). It has even been identified as a microcosm of society (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Ryan & Martin, 2013). From this perspective, sport is an ideal investigative arena, where conclusions drawn can be generalized to the greater society as it not only provides a scaled down version of society, but at the same time it exists as a cog in the larger societal system. In this way, sport is additionally unique in that it is both a product and producer of social reality (Frey & Eitzen, 1991).

Through its embedded, direct interaction with the ideological system of society, sport reproduces and solidifies the core values within this interaction by setting an example of societal norms. According to Sage (1990), class, race, and gender are some of the norms that are stratified within sport. Since, by nature, sport is meritocratic, it acts

as a symbol to society that “legitimizes the social inequalities of class stratification in American society and promotes the notion of social mobility based on effort” (Sage, 1990, p. 41). Due to the high visibility of a select few “rags-to-riches” athletes, ideological themes concerning social mobility through dedication, ambition, and hard work regardless of social origin, are maintained (Sage, 1990). Additionally, racial norms are reproduced and maintained by sport. While the racial stratification in American sport has improved over time, there is still discrimination within college athletics, and regarding the field position of black athletes (Sage, 1990; Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Sage (1990) explains, “many professional and college sports still have very few black participants” (p. 59). Frey & Eitzen (1991) extend this point by finding that few black athletes are placed in field positions that require intelligence, coordinated decision-making, and frequent interaction with other players: positions like the quarter back, middle linebacker, pitcher, and catcher. This stratification is tied to biological beliefs attributed to race that have now been refuted, but the phenomena based in racial stereotype continues (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Finally, as I discuss in the next section, gender norms are commonly found, sustained, and transmitted into the broader society.

The Roster: Gender

I am primarily concerned with how sport influences social norms regarding gender. Bohan (1993) describes gender as constructed in social transactions where certain behaviours are deemed appropriate for a certain group or individual. In this way, gender is not fundamentally connected to an individual’s biological sex category, but gender is a verb instead of a noun (Bohan, 1993). This point is furthered by Dewar’s

(1987) suggestion that these sets of acceptable actions are not only used to categorize, but that genders are socially constructed and produce power relations. Within a power dynamic like gender, there is usually a struggle to attain and retain the most power, and this is where the concept of patriarchy becomes relevant.

Sage (1990) describes patriarchy as a “process of male hegemony that ranks and rewards males over females” (p. 42). Crittenden and Wright (2013) also describe patriarchy as a system of male dominance used to enforce and reinforce power inequality between males and females by creating social arrangements that overwhelmingly benefit males. They also note an existing gap in the research since “there is no uniform definition of patriarchy” (p. 1268) because researchers typically do not try to “measure or conceptualize patriarchy [...and] rather take it for granted” (p. 1283). However, Sage (1990) is able to emphasize the structural influence patriarchy has over society by defining patriarchy as “a web of structured social practices that systematically fosters the development of men while constraining the development of women” (p. 43). Since this is a very broad depiction, he goes on to say that this restriction is accomplished through general norms and values, which “reinforce the needs of the status quo relations and attitudes toward women” (p. 43-44) that sanction their subordinate position. Essentially, patriarchy is a systemic and structural influence on ideology, through which “males control the social relations from which they benefit” (p. 44). This understanding is enough to problematize the construction of gender norms in society and sport.

Hall (1985) posits that we are all living in a highly patriarchal society, so if sport is accepted as a microcosm of society, it is logical to assume it contains a patriarchal structure as well. Hall further distinguishes the patriarchal role of sport as “reinforcement

of common-sense ideologies which assert the superiority of men” (p. 111). However, in this reproductive site, sport is also a place “where patriarchal cultural hegemony is being challenged” (p. 110-111), granting sport great social importance. Kane (1995) suggests that “our beliefs and assumptions about gender difference in sport comply with ‘reality’ only because of what we are allowed to see (the binary) and are prevented from seeing (the continuum)” (p. 203) about gender norms. Thus, within sport, there are potential opportunities to challenge “hegemonic femininities and masculinities by revealing how gender categories are fluid and unstable” (Lenskyj, 2013). Kane (1995) builds on this by suggesting that by acknowledging the fluidity of gender norms, “traditional beliefs about sport-- and gender itself-- as an inherent, oppositional binary” (p. 193) can be resisted and transformed. Kane (1995) also noted that the solution to sexism is not simple and that “resistance to such powerful forces of oppression must come from a multiplicity of strategies in various locations inside and outside of mainstream sports” (p. 212).

Sport becomes a site where the struggle to maintain male power boils down to institutionalizing sex differences into structures, beliefs, and practices (Lenskyj, 1990; Bryson, 1990; Kidd, 1990). Sage (1990) echoes this point by suggesting that “organized sport is one of the most powerful cultural arenas for perpetuating the ideology and actuality of male superiority and dominance; it [...preserves] patriarchy and women’s subordinate position in society” (p. 44). Additionally, sport not only constructs “men’s power over women, [but] heterosexual men’s privilege over gay men” by treating any non-masculine behaviour as weakness and an indication of subordination (Kidd, 1990, p.18). Therefore, men who perform feminine behaviours or who are not apparently heterosexual are seen as “[letting] the side down’ by demonstrating different ways of

being male” and thus threatening the interconnected structures that maintain heteronormativity and the distribution of power (p. 29). Further, gender verification is an intrusion that humiliates and marginalizes individuals who are not thought to fit the norm and therefore warrant suspicion by high-level competition sporting institutions like the Olympics (Cole, 1993). Not only does this further misunderstand the relationship between gender and sex, it oppresses, alienates, and scares, particularly transgendered, participants (Cole, 1993). Gender verification in sport works to maintain the traditional ideology regarding femininity and acts to suppress anything that is considered deviant (Cole, 1993), which denies power to all individuals who identify with the female gender. Through the social practice of sport, male hegemony and heteronormativity persist as part of a commonsense world view, which legitimizes not only the inequalities within sport but also the broader patriarchal relations. This is not the fault of sport alone since the societal ideology that forms from the media's representation of athletes has a very strong impact. Many sources have highlighted the power and prevalence of media and a passive audience as factors contributing to the perpetual construction and transmission of gender ideology (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Frey & Eitsen, 1991; Lee, 1992).

Just one of the ways media influences the dominant notions of gender roles is through the sexualized images presented of female athletes (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). Tolman (2013) suggests that these sexualized portrayals impact adolescent boy viewers by normalizing “the sexualization of girls” (p. 86) and reinforce the objectified evaluations of a female athlete instead of evaluating her based upon her performance of athletic instrumental skills (p. 85). In addition to this, female athletes are portrayed as

sexual objects instead of strong athletes, which negatively impacts female viewers' body concepts (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). Due to the sexualization and objectification of women's bodies, "many girls and women self-objectify, focusing on how their bodies *appear* rather than what they can *do*" (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013, p. 63, emphasis in original).

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that there is a flip side to the objectification of female bodies: an assumed lack of athletic ability and potential (Willis, 1994). The very presence of women in sport is seen as bizarre in the popular societal consciousness (Willis, 1994). Willis (1994) dramatizes this point by suggesting that some see female athletic participation as "like a dog standing on its hind legs. It is not well done -- rather one is surprised to see it attempted at all" (p. 35). When it is attempted, Kane (1995) notes that though a female athlete is able to excel in a sport like gymnastics or figure skating, it is not because they have necessarily achieved a great physical feat. Instead, the rules of these typified feminine sports where many women succeed emphasize restrictive traditional stereotypes about sexual difference. Consider the different rules for male gymnasts and female gymnasts: males are judged for their grand displays of strength, and their explosive movement through space as with the pommel horse or rings, while female gymnasts are judged for their poise, grace and flexibility, usually found in floor or balance beam routines (Kane 1995). Even in tennis, where men and women appear to be more equally judged, there is a subtle reinforcement of stereotypic sexual difference (Kane, 1995). The reason male tennis players need to win three out of five sets in championship tournaments and females only need to win two out of three sets is that despite no biological justification, there exists a rationale that women lack the endurance (Kane, 1995). Softball and basketball are not exempt from

these regulations on space and time. The distances on the softball field are shorter to accommodate women's assumed lack of arm strength and accuracy, women's basketball has a divided court and the duration of play is shorter (Cahn, 1994, p. 221). Pole-vaulting and golf are also on the list of sports structured to restrict the space and time female athletes and their events are allowed to occupy (Cahn, 1994, p. 221).

While these structural differences may seem logical as most women are smaller and lack the strength of most men, Kane (1995) suggests that the notion of "biology-is-destiny" (p. 200) is the basis of the oppositional gender binary. Particularly in sport, it is nonsensical to believe that successful performance in sport is "simply or even primarily about physical difference in, for example, size and strength, [if it were] then smaller, weaker men would never (or rarely) outperform bigger, stronger men. This is obviously not the case" (Kane, 1995, p. 201). Some sports positions value, and even require, great physical strength and size; in these cases most men will have an advantage. Yet, many sports have field positions that require a smaller stature, allowing for a variety of physical attributes and abilities to be utilized. These structurally reinforced biologically binary notions of gender feed an ideology or common sense stereotypes about women's normal physical disposition in sport and the broader society, which then further entrenches the objectification of female bodies, and the vicious cycle begins again. Unfortunately, without directly battling this ideology, the few female sporting successes will not increase participation or change dominant notions of gender (Willis, 1994). Henderson & Gibson (2013) suggest leisure and sport is a social cultural nexus, or a site where processes of construction, legitimization, reproduction, and reworking of gender relations simultaneously occur.

Empowerment can act as a tool for women to use to challenge the ideology of male hegemony by finding power from within themselves, rather than waiting for power to be granted by others (Blinde et al., 1993). Daniels & Lavoie (2013) even argue that the mastery of physical skills in sport can empower females “in and through their bodies, [where] positive body image can develop, which can lead to increased self-esteem” (p. 76). Krane, Ross, Barak, Lucas-Carr, & Robinson (2014) conducted interviews to discover what it is like to be a girl athlete. The young girls they interviewed discussed the frustrations encountered in sport as well as the friends they made, their enjoyment of physical power, and their commitment to the team (Krane et al., 2014). The researchers also discovered that sport acted as a space for these girl athletes to safely explore the fluidity of gender roles and violate gender stereotypes without fear of repercussions (Krane et al., 2014). However, as Malcom (2003) notes, softball in particular is an interesting site for the potential resistance of ideological gender stereotypes.

The Name of the Game: Softball

Softball was created in late 1887 so men could play baseball during the winter (Canadian Olympic Committee, 2013; Ring, 2013), and through its history has transformed into a “girl’s alternative” to baseball (Ring, 2009; Ring, 2013; Travers, 2013). In the beginning, softball was known as indoor baseball, or mushball, melon ball, or panty waist (Ring, 2009). Since these pseudonyms for softball appeared unthreatening, the sport was quickly approved for girls to have a “safe, non-violent way to get exercise, and it removed the threat to baseball of contamination by female participants” (Ring, 2009, p. 60). Softball was seen as a kind of “substitute baseball for

girls [since it was] a less strenuous form of baseball [and therefore] more appropriate for girls” (p. 62). In fact, this belief carried so far that “girls were urged to play indoor baseball outdoors and forgo hardball” (p. 61). Ring (2009) also recounts that in the United States,

In 1939 [...] Girls were officially banned from youth baseball just as baseball on all levels was associated exclusively with manliness. Baseball was given the task of building male citizens at the same time that softball was allocated to girls. Defying gender stereotypes, however, softball developed into a serious sport with many skilled players and avid fans, and women never completely gave up playing baseball. (p. 62)

In this way, softball became a female-dominated sport.

Where most female athletes have had to break into most sports and prove their ability to play, softball has been a site maintained specifically for female athletes. Even the inventor of the game was surprised and pleased how quickly and deeply the game had become a women’s game, particularly noting “the expertness with which girls can play the game after short practice” (p. 62). Yet, this gender segregation is technically unfounded since neither baseball nor softball are “inherently *masculine* or *feminine*: they are simply different games” (Ring, 2013, p. 62, emphasis in original).

Through this rare combination of history and nature of the game, there exists a realm where female athleticism has been proven to excel without a need to be masculinized or compared to the male counterpart, and without a need to be hyper-feminine or sexualized. Other historically female dominated sports leagues like The All-American Girls Baseball League required make-up and dress both on and off the field,

and made attendance in charm school mandatory (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). Most recently, in 2008 “the WNBA included cosmetic lessons and fashion tips during rookie orientation” (p. 65). All this stems from the fear of women performing masculine behaviours, or being/becoming lesbian due to this performance; thus, any woman participating in “the ‘masculine’ activity of sport had to demonstrate their femininity and heterosexuality” (p. 65). The association between the alleged masculinizing effects of sport on women and lesbianism is not new, and has been traced back to society’s belief in Freudian theories, particularly regarding repression, of the 1930s (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). This illustrates how sport acts as an oppressive product of the broader ideology (that has no real biological basis), by reinforcing shame and avoidance of lesbian acts. However, softball does not have this history of maintaining hyper-femininity. In the study conducted by Malcom (2003), adolescent girls participating in an amateur softball league were observed to recognize and articulate the gender norm of “what constituted a typical girl” (p. 1319). Interestingly, the girls then gave a “resounding ‘no!’” (p. 1319) when asked if they believed they fit into that category. Most attributed their reluctance to fit this description to their participation in softball (Malcom, 2003). This illustrates how important sport participation is to the reconstruction of gender norms, and dissolution of restrictive stereotypes. Additionally, many exclusively lesbian women-only, softball leagues have been created in North America. In recent years, these leagues have started to invite trans-gendered athletes to play and have been working to transform themselves into more inclusive organizations so that more members of the LGBTQIA + community can feel safe participating in the sport (Travers & Deri, 2010).

The act of being part of a team is also important to promoting fluid performance of gendered actions. Adams (2006) explored the life of a female softball player named Pauline Perron from 1926-1951, and throughout discovered a strong sense of community and support. Similarly, Migliaccio and Berg (2007) found that female athletes participating in tackle football believed the teamwork and reliance on each other to perform bonded the team, fostered friendship, and a sense of community. Both Krane et al. (2014) and Migliaccio and Berg (2007) list a number of psychological advantages like a boost in self-esteem, and trust emerging from this reliance on each other. Krane et al., (2014) also determined that various sports including softball create a safe space for these girl athletes to explore the fluidity of gender roles and challenge gender stereotypes without fear of repercussions (Krane et al., 2014). By examining these levels of play, it is easier to see how “the sex/gender system as it is reproduced in sport is one site where patriarchal cultural hegemony is being challenged and that it is important to address its theoretical significance” (Hall, 1985, p. 110-111).

The Sport Analysis

The final piece I want to discuss is the typical research methods and uses of autoethnography in relation to the topic of sport and gender. The existing autoethnographic research in the field has been conducted within disciplines such as sport history (McParland, 2012; McParland, 2013; Popovic, 2013), sport education (Carless, 2012), and sociology (Allen-Collinson, 2012). If we venture outside of autoethnography, other disciplines such as kinesiology (Roper, 2009), psychology (Chang, et al., 2013; Malcom, 2003), gender and society/women’s studies (Buysse, & Embser-Herbert, 2004;

Dewar, 1987; Theberge, 1987), as well as sociology (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Lee, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990) all employ a variety of qualitative, mostly ethnographic research methods. In combination, the findings from Theberge (1987) on empowerment and Malcom (2003) on young female softball player's relationship to and understanding of gender roles are useful in making logical assumptions regarding the impact of and resistance to ideological stereotypes. However, none of these studies directly investigate this potential resistance overtly or with a social justice aim.

Additionally, autoethnographies like McParland (2013) are more of the typical evocative autoethnography, where the telling of the story is the most important piece and success is based upon the emotional connection cultivated between the audience and the researcher (Anderson, 2006). Anderson poses an alternative to this 'classic' autoethnography (Allen-Collinson, 2012), which only a few researchers have utilized.

Methodology:

Henderson & Gibson (2013) suggest leisure and sport is a social cultural nexus, or a site where processes of construction, legitimization, reproduction, and reworking of gender relations simultaneously occur. I believe my research makes an essential contribution to the literature by not only valuing my experiences from the softball sport culture, but also by directly assessing my experiences within the broader ideology and gender stereotypes both in sport and society. Since my research is limited to a heterosexual, cisgendered perspective, it proceeds from the assumption that there are predominantly two gender categories. While I find it important to realize a gender

continuum and fluidity in gender norms, much of the discussion in the literature surrounds only the binary masculine and feminine behaviours. My research attempts to connect my experiences to the current findings within the literature, to further the understanding of sport as a potential site of broader social change. Overall, using an autoethnographic methodology, my research contributes to the discussion of gender relations by examining how individual empowerment relates to sport, women's participation in sport, and gender oppression.

Theoretical/Conceptual Approach

My analysis is broadly underpinned by Cole's (1993) discussion of Foucault's body politics and the control over bodies, namely the way ideological power impacts us in every day practices. Through Foucault's theory, "sport can be understood as an institution whose central feature is one of bodily discipline and surveillance" (p. 86). However, since "Foucault never specifically examined women's subordination or the sources of female subjectification" (Amigot & Pujal, 2009), I needed to use additional theories that are better suited to addressing the specific gender issues found within sport.

My research is also informed by physical feminism, and focuses on the importance it gives to "forms of embodiment which enable [women] physically" while also pushing for recognition of the gender ideology that positions women as weak (Velija, Mierzwinski, & Fortune, 2012, p. 525). Velija et al. (2012) also acknowledge the significance of empowerment in order to better discover "if and how women in sport challenge the oppressive forms of gendered embodiment" (p. 526). The authors describe the origin of the physical feminist perspective as developing from the "dissatisfaction

with elements of feminist theory that ignored physical strength as a form of empowerment for women” (Velija et al., 2012, p. 525). While the scope of the research conducted by Velija et al. (2012) was restricted to the martial arts, the foundation of this theory is transferable to sports like softball. Although softball does not require an enormous amount of strength, it does require a moderate amount of physical power to be used in a controlled manner. The primary utility of this theory is the focus on challenging gender ideology that categorizes women as weak. This conceptual approach also allows me to engage with the existing empowerment research as a route for analysis.

In sum, my research utilizes a post-modern physical feminist approach. I find that together, these theoretical lenses allowed me to analyze my experiences with a focus on softball’s empowering properties and the way they may have helped me challenge prevailing gender hierarchies.

Data Collection and Analysis

For my study, I chose to conduct an autoethnography. An autoethnographic study aims to describe and analyze personal experiences in order to understand those experiences on a cultural scale (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography, developed from postmodern resistance to positivist notions of qualitative research, is a relatively new and challenging method to undertake (Ellis et al., 2011). My research uses autoethnography in a way that few researchers have before, by analyzing my cultural experience in a social justice context. However, the task of completing an autoethnography can be seen as an act of social justice because it “challenges who is permitted to engage in dominant discourses” (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010, p. 345). Instead of having the researcher take the

voice of the participant, and make it their own for their own gain, autoethnography allows the researcher to tell their own story and speak for themselves (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). The most common form of this method is evocative or emotional autoethnography in which the purpose is to share a narrative about an experience in order to cultivate an emotional connection from the audience (Anderson, 2006; Vryan, 2006). In order to better utilize my theoretical perspectives and to produce results that reflect an analysis of gender ideology, I conducted a personal narrative analytic autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; Anderson, 2006; Vryan, 2006).

While Anderson (2006)¹, notes five criteria of analytic autoethnography, I find Vryan (2006) provides a much more inclusive description of the method. Vryan (2006) based his description off of the key ideas presented by Anderson, but does not strictly require the inclusion of external informants. Table 1 summarizes Anderson’s (2006) key ideas.

Table 1: Anderson's (2006) Criteria for Analytic Autoethnography

Analytic Criteria:	Description:
Researcher as a complete member researcher (CMR).	Researcher is a complete member of the social world being studied. Can be opportunistic, meaning membership to the social group precedes the decision to conduct the research study. Or, the researcher can be a convert CMR, meaning they aim for complete immersion and group membership through the course of the research study.
Use of reflexivity.	“Self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others though examining one’s actions and perceptions” (p. 382).
Narrative visibility of the researcher’s self.	Feelings and experiences from the researcher are considered vital data for understanding the

¹ The key author distinguishing a difference between evocative autoethnography as outlined by Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, and analytic autoethnography (AA)

	social world under study. Open discussion of changes to beliefs over the course of the research “thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds (p. 384). Acknowledge and reflexively examine how the researcher’s participation can transform or reproduce social relations and understandings.
Dialogue with informants beyond the researcher.	In contrast to evocative autoethnography, which hold narrative commitment to only the subjective experiences of the researcher, analytic autoethnography calls for dialogue and data collection from others within the social world. It is grounded in the researcher’s self-experiences but extends beyond that as well.
Commitment to theoretical analysis.	Use of experiential data in order to achieve insight into a broader set of social phenomena outside of the immediate experiences themselves. Intention is not to produce “undebatable conclusions” (p. 388), but instead to elaborate, extend, refine or revise theoretical understandings of the topic at hand.

In my research, I achieve four out of these five criteria specified by Anderson, as I did not interview informants beyond myself. In fact, Vryan (2006) finds that the collection of data from other participants in an analytic autoethnography is a problematic distinction in Anderson’s definition. Within the scope of my research interviewing others was not vital since the data I collected and analyzed was based on my personal feelings and experiences. Vryan (2006) supports the exclusive collection of self-produced data, by suggesting that only if the nature of the research inquiry supports additional data from and about others should the researcher endeavor to collect it. Otherwise, Vryan (2006) asserts that a “project based exclusively on self-produced data [allows the researcher to]

carry out effective analysis and develop concepts and models of significant social processes in new ways, and call it analytic autoethnography” (p. 406).

With my personal narratives as the focus, my experiences are the subcultural dataset being investigated. As in other personal narrative studies, my research seeks to “understand a self or some aspect of life as it intersects with a cultural context” (Ellis et al., 2011). Vryan (2006) further supports my research approach by explaining that an “autoethnographer with the serendipitous advantage of having relevant analytical and methodological education and experience and a ‘naturally occurring’ life [...] may be able to examine features of human experience that would not normally be observable to researchers studying other people” (p. 407). My research is best categorized as a personal narrative analytic autoethnography because it seeks to analyze and understand my experiences in the physical culture of softball.

To accomplish this, I performed auto-interviews (Boufooy-Bastick, 2004) or self-inquiry (Vryan, 2006) in order to evoke epiphanies or memories of past experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Typically, autoethnography requires retrospective and selective writing on these epiphanies, which requires a degree of memory recall (Ellis et al., 2011). Some analytic autoethnographies utilize journaling or field notes when the researcher acts as a convert complete member (converted from outsider to insider) of the culture (Anderson, 2006).

I have been a member of the softball subculture for nearly half my life, which means I am what Anderson (2006) calls an opportunistic complete member and had to rely more heavily on recall since field notes or journals are not available. In this case, I chose to auto or self-interview as a form of recording my own oral history, guided by questions

relevant to the research topic. Some of the questions I asked myself to elicit memories of relevant events were:

1. When did I feel most in control when playing softball? When did I feel most out of control?
 - a. What about this instance made me feel that way?
 - b. My own ability? Teammates? Situation?
2. When did I feel empowered?
 - a. Have there been instances outside of softball where I have felt the same?
 - b. When did I feel least powerful?
3. Have I noticed a difference between how I feel about myself on the field and off?
 - a. In what ways?
4. What gives me the most pride?
 - a. Can I think of a time off the field where I felt a similar emotion?
5. When have I felt most discouraged or doubtful in myself/my abilities?
 - a. How did I deal with these feelings?

These questions allowed for rich and thorough descriptions of events relevant to my research topic. Additionally, these questions guided the experiences I provided in order to better facilitate the data analysis. While my narrated experiences may not yield data that is explicitly social justice or social change oriented, the data analysis I conducted which utilized the aforementioned theories is the primary tether to social justice research.

After recording approximately two hours and twelve minutes of audio and transcribing those recordings resulting in twenty-four single spaced pages, I then coded and analyzed for both deductive and inductive themes. Concepts from the literature

regarding community, empowerment, bodily competence, frailty, and resisting stereotypes became apparent during the process of recording, transcription, and through the first round of coding. Through an additional three to four reviews of the transcriptions, concepts like frustration, pride, comfort, overcoming distress, expectations, fear and worry, competition, and bravery appeared. Finally, after further examination of these codes and where they appeared, I distilled these codes into five sub-themes: body competence, violating preconceptions, support in subculture, control, and fear. After determining the various connections between these codes and themes, I created “mind maps” from each experience and found the most commonly connected themes. I organized my results section around these four themes: control, empowerment, fear and frustration, and the support structure.

Benefits and Limitations

One benefit of my research method is the easy access to data. I have full access to my own memories at any time and can commit myself fully to this research with few obstacles. One of the associated obstacles was the reliability of data, which in this case refers to my memory of experiences. In autoethnography, reliability refers to the author’s credibility and whether it is believable that the experiences described are factual (Ellis et al., 2011). Here is an overview of autoethnography’s equivalencies to standards of reliability, generalizability, and validity, as described by Ellis et al. (2011):

Table 2: Ellis et al.'s (2011) Autoethnography Measurement Standards

Term	Description
Reliability	Credibility of the narrator or researcher. Are the experiences being described believable given the available ‘factual

	evidence', or was literary license taken making the writing more fictional?
Validity	A coherent, lifelike and believable story has been told allowing the reader to connect to the researcher's life.
Generalizability	While not useful in the traditional, social scientific sense of the word, it is important as a tool to determine if the story speaks to the reader. Is the experience able to illuminate a cultural process that may be unfamiliar to the audience? This helps to highlight how and why each of our lives are different, and allows the reader to become informed about a life they may be unfamiliar with.

Since Ellis et al. (2011) defer much of the judgment related to reliability, validity, and generalizability to the reader, it is difficult for me to assess the degree to which my research complies with these measurement standards. In terms of reliability, I did not take literary license when writing the responses, and aside from minor edits for grammar and cohesion the italicized segments in my results are directly from my recorded transcriptions. So, I find my research fully meets autoethnography's reliability standard. I also find that I have met Ellis et al.'s (2011) standard of validity since the experiences I narrated are directly from my past and I tried to give as much detail as I could recall from the memory. Finally, as described by Ellis et al. (2011), the judgment of generalizability "is always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experiences or about the lives of others they know; it is determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes". In order to satisfy this standard, I have conducted my analysis in a way that is not typical in the sport literature. By analyzing my experiences in order to explore the utility of sport in achieving social justice, I hope that readers will be able to connect with my

experiences or will have learned something about the cultural processes involved in softball.

Since I am a complete member researcher (I have been a member of softball culture for 14 years in many different roles), I have a plethora of experiences and have the credentials and experiences to reinforce the reliability of my experiences. However, this in itself is a limitation as I only examined my feelings and my experiences, which are partial. Vryan (2006) helps to quell some of this limitation by agreeing with Anderson (2006) that “the analytical aspects of AA [Analytic Autoethnography] requires that its success be evaluated in terms of the usefulness of its conceptual developments or theoretical claims as applicable to at least some other people, experiences or contexts” (p. 406-407). This means that the success of my research is dependent on the usefulness of the following results and discussion section. I find that while my results are not generalizable to all female athletic experiences, they are still useful to those who seek to utilize sport as a tool for social justice. My findings can be used to challenge and change the structures of various sports to increase the likelihood that female participants will have positive empowering experiences like my own. Despite the partiality of my experience and the likelihood that my work reflects a specific bias, as long as I maintain reflexivity through the process of this research, and my analysis is applicable to some individuals, my work will be successful. Even though my analysis is not directly applicable or generalizable to every woman’s experience in softball or any other sport, if my subjective findings are at least relevant to a few I have produced a successful analytic autoethnography.

The act of performing an autoethnography can be an empowering process as it reveals the researcher's power of experience and allows them to tell their own story (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). Due to this personal narrative approach, a primary limitation to my work is the academic acceptance of the autoethnographic process as a valid method of research, which impacts my trust in my own execution of this method. This is the biggest critique of the autoethnographic method (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Vryan, 2006), and the largest limitation to my research, as I need to be confident in the work I produce. In the midst of this concern, I have remained keenly focused on the theoretical analysis, while also keeping in mind what Ellis et al. (2011) describe as the most important questions for autoethnographers: who is reading the work, how the reader is affected by it, and how can this help keep the conversation rolling. After conducting this research and reflecting on the process, I find that my confidence in my chosen method has grown. I have come to understand how flexible this method can be, and how the researcher determines the depth of the analysis, and the extent to which the work attempts to evoke an emotional response from the reader. Additionally, maintaining a high level of flexibility and awareness of the inherent limits of analyzing self-produced data helped to draw cautious, but reasonable conclusions. By recognizing the boundaries of my research, I became more comfortable and confident with the method and the product I was generating.

Ethical Considerations

Though I did not interview other participants in order to corroborate my experiences, I candidly spoke to others who were involved in the experiences in order to

achieve an accurate and rich description of the event. This then raises the question, were there any ethical considerations and was there a need for ethics board approval? Yes, there were ethical considerations, but no, these did not need to be submitted for board approval because I was not researching the experiences of others and the data are my own self-interviews. However, within most autoethnographies, there are relational ethics that must be considered since this research of experiences inherently implicates others (Ellis et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, I did not require external data from other informants since my own personal reflections on feelings are the subject of study. I only examined my own experiences in softball, not the experiences of a group of softball players. Anytime external subjects are described as part of my experiences, I made sure that any identifying characteristics were altered to secure others' anonymity.

Results:

The following section contains only a few of the recorded experiences. These examples were chosen because they best represented the identified themes. The process of coding this data was challenging since the responses contained my own recollected experiences. I found myself second-guessing the codes and themes I had found, as they all seemed too obvious. I had to realize that these themes seem redundant and obvious because they are the very same experiences that influenced my research interest. At the outset of this project I had already been inadvertently remembering how I felt and drawing on my partial perspective to form a research aim. Themes like control and empowerment were the themes I expected to see in my experiences and are all evident

and relevant to the current literature reviewed earlier in this paper. These themes were directly used in my interview questions in order to draw out relevant experiences.

I was pleased to find some unexpected themes. These themes illustrate my initial biased and favourable perspective. I did not expect to find themes like inability or body incompetence, fear and frustration. I also did not anticipate discovering them scattered throughout the experiences I recorded. Nor did I expect to find a theme identifying a web of actors comprising a support structure, which was interspersed in many of the recorded experiences. This theme reminded me that there is no 'I' in 'Team', and softball is not a game that can be won by one athlete alone.

Anticipated Themes:

Control

Being in control allows for the attainment of self-power, through which athletes become self-assured or confident (Blinde et al., 1993). This then empowers athletes as they realize their own internal locus of control and employ it in other life events (Blinde et al., 1993). I find that control permeates multiple levels of interaction within the game of softball. In softball control can be intrapersonal through having control over one's own mind and body by focusing, gathering and controlling your thoughts so that they don't interfere with the required performance. Control can also be interpersonal through the influence of teammates by moving to initiate a particular play. Control exists in pitching by having an influence over an opponent when throwing a deceptive pitch, or even by simply looking at the runner on first base and letting them know they have been seen to dissuade them from stealing second. Making a play that ends up altering the

direction of the whole game is another example of influence, power and the exertion of control.

In my experience, the pitching position has the most control in the game of softball. I have played every position on the softball field throughout my years of participation; primarily I have played pitcher, first base, second base, third base and outfield. I have learned that each player has different responsibilities, each is equally important, and every position has an integral part to play. Since softball is a team sport, the ball itself becomes a shared and transferred token of control. Throughout the game, the pitcher makes the most contact with that token of control. In my experience the pitcher has the most control because they are the beginning and end of every play, and sometimes there will not be a play at all because of the pitcher's performance.

There are definitely multiple times where I'll be on the pitching mound, the catcher would be there, they'd slap their hand in their glove, and put it up for me right where I need to aim. After three pitches, four pitches, the encouragement coming from the catcher saying, 'Erin you got it, you got it. Right here, put it right here', and you can focus in on that glove. You lean back, get into your movement and you feel all of your weight moving through your body. You can feel the transfer of your weight from your hips, up your torso and out your pitching arm as the arm comes up over your head from behind your body, and you finally bring it past your hip, flick your wrist and the ball flies over the plate, and into the catcher's glove. When it's right where you want it, it's the exact speed that you wanted, it's dead on. When it makes that beautiful slap into the leather, and you know that's exactly what you wanted your body to do, that's exactly what you wanted the ball to do. That's when I feel most in control, when everything goes right.

When it goes right, it is amazing. It is so right and that's when I feel the most in control in softball, ever. During that practice pitching warm up and you release that ball perfectly over and over, even the first time it feels wonderful you get the next three in there exactly the same and you know your body is remembering what it needs to do. It's remembering it without you having to focus. It's just amazing. It's an amazing confidence in your body to just know that it's going to do the right thing, that it's done the right thing. That's when I feel the most in control.

What emerges from this experience is the identification of a relationship between control and confidence in one's own ability. I see an unconscious effort to perform a complicated movement, and the achievement of "perfect" or repeatable results. It is important to note that the notion of perfection is not an expectation within softball; rather, I set the idea of perfect results as a personal high standard of expected performance. This is more linked to my own personality than the sport itself, since I declared earlier in this response that, "I'm very tough on myself, so it's hard for me to feel in control in most situations, not just softball."

The positive outcomes and performance attained by having control over my own body fostered a sense of confidence in my body's ability to perform. As exemplified in this experience, confidence in my body was formed from repeated positive outcomes through good plays and accurate throws. The development of muscle memory and an unconscious ability to perform well regularly built trust and a belief in my bodily competence.

Empowerment

Empowerment is the recognition of one's own ability and power, which then allows women to take control over their lives (Blinde et al., 1993). Empowerment is the act of discovering the power to have control. One of sport's empowering characteristics is the focus on "physicality and the body [which] could enhance women's understanding of their bodily potential" (Blinde et al., 1993).

For me, empowerment within softball is achieved through the use of the body in the attempt to successfully complete a play. Simply connecting the bat to a ball is an

empowering activity. I gain power from recognizing my bodily ability to follow through and achieve my goal. This empowerment can be made more potent by the increase in competition, or the perception of greater difficulty in attaining the desired outcome. The harder I have to try, the more difficult the task feels, but the more empowering the success becomes. This added difficulty can be tangible, like a hard hit ball I need to catch, or having pitched three balls and no strikes to a batter, or a throw that appears to be nearly out of reach. This difficulty level can also be intangible; the pressure of a negative stereotype adds weight and fear. The added pressure provides another avenue for empowerment. I not only overcame the tangible difficulty of the play itself, but I exceeded the low expectations commonly held of female athletes. The audience's shock and awe added positive reinforcement because I believe I changed their preconceived notion of what a female can do:

In this particular game I was on second base because I knew what I was doing and I had a good arm. One of the big hulking guys from this opposing team stepped up to the plate, he hit the ball almost straight down; it was basically a line drive but at a 45 degree angle to the ground which made it speed right to me. I was prepared, in my proper stance and I knew where the ball was going. I grabbed the ball with ease. It was one of those surreal moments where everything just works and feels good. The ball went straight into pocket of my glove. It didn't bobble around, it was just hit the bat, hit the ground, flew after one bounce into my glove, and I picked it out of my glove perfectly. The next step was to throw the ball to first base to get the batter out. So I really was quite close to the first baseman but I just fell into the pattern of motion that I had come to know and love while playing this sport. The kind of motion that I've been taught in practices that has been drilled into my mind over, and over, and over. Again, when it just works so perfectly I don't even have to think about what I'm doing, it just happens.

It was a hard, great throw to the first base player who was a male player of ours, and he had the biggest look of shock on his face. Even the batter was shocked at what I did. The opposing team, with their benches on the first base line side of the field were shocked. There were gasps and there were even cheers from them for me and what I was able to do. The batter sent me a dirty look just as he ran to the first base. He just jogged to the base, tagged it, turned to me and gave me a dirty look. I just gave him a look as if to say, "Sorry, bro". Obviously, I really wasn't sorry. I did apologize to the first baseman because I knew he wasn't prepared for how I threw the ball. He was not used

to receiving that hard of a throw from a player that close on the field so I probably startled him.

As the hitter was returning to his bench he was getting chirped and chewed out by his teammates. They were saying how hilarious it was that he got thrown out so brutally, and that it came from a girl. They made a comment that implied I totally degraded him in a way, because of how quickly, how effortlessly and how well I got him out. That was one of the times that it felt really, really empowered. The shock they all expressed toward what I was capable of doing that empowered me. I was so proud, I thought, "Yeah, I can do that. I can throw that well. I can throw better than whomever on the team. Yes, I can throw really well. And yeah, I'm a girl. I know it's unexpected but I can do it. So there!"

From my perspective, this experience connects empowerment with pride, confidence, ability, and potentially altering the surprised audience's concept of female athleticism. I knew what I was capable of, I was sure of my ability and myself to make the solid throw from second to first. I was confident in my ability to throw the ball with accuracy and strength. The catch was made with ease; I had placed myself in the correct field position and was prepared. Once again my results illustrated the significance of my unconscious ability to perform successfully. The repeated experience performing the required physical motion built both competence in this movement, and confidence in my ability to perform and succeed. The rhythm of the movement wasn't interrupted with uncertainty in my ability; I was confident in my bodily competence.

The interesting thing was that other actors in this experience were not so well informed of my abilities as a female. The other team appears to have had a low expectation of my ability since they were shocked when I performed something that was routine to me. This shock led to two different responses. The opposing team responded to the surprise with cheers and heckling of their own teammate. The other team made fun of the batter because it was amusing that I "degraded" him since my ability was shown to be better than his. This may explain the batter's aggressive response to my ability. My

feelings of empowerment did not emanate from the supposed degradation of the other male player. In my mind, my throw was not an act of degradation because I do not feel that I disrespected the other player or broke him down with my play. I assume we both tried our best, but within the circumstances of that play I was successful in completing my responsibilities (the throw) before he could complete his (reaching first base). Since domination is typical of competition and sports, at some level I feel empowered. This is only because I did what was expected and required in the realm of competition. The domination of this specific male player did not provide any empowerment. Neither did the feelings from the cheers and positive feedback from the surprised audience. While the general cheers provided positive reinforcement, the specifics of their comments and the mocking of another player were not empowering.

Some may find the audience's surprise and remarks patronizing, because it should not be alarming that a girl can perform well in a sport. In the same response but regarding a different experience of a similar kind, I explain, "To be somebody's initial introduction into the world of competitive softball is really enjoyable to me." The positive support given from the shocked audience and the supposed degradation of the other player because of my unexpected ability as a girl did not feel empowering. What I did find empowering was that I potentially altered someone's perception of what a girl is capable of. However, this illuminates a limit to my research, since I do not know whether or not this alteration occurred or if my performance was brushed off as a freak occurrence.

Unanticipated Themes:

The Fear and Frustration

Krane et al. (2014) found that fear, frustration and stress due to the the pressure to perform are commonly found throughout female athletic experiences in sport competition. Fear and frustration were two themes that appeared together frequently throughout nearly half of the responses I recorded. They appeared when I asked about instances where I had a lack of control, felt least powerful, and felt discouraged or doubted my abilities. Sometimes, my fear is a fear of failure. Interestingly, this fear of failure can be found in my life outside of softball.

In response to a question regarding the difference in how I feel about myself on the field and off, I discussed my anxiety and worry in my day-to-day life:

I'm just very afraid of unknowns in my day-to-day life off the field. I'm far less confident, I'm not a confident person I know I'm not [...] I'm a lot more worried about my actions off the field because there are so many little actions that can lead up to either a success or a failure. But if one of those actions goes wrong, the likelihood that something's going to fail or something's going to go poorly is higher.

Additionally, my confidence level falls outside of softball:

I'm just not confident outside of the field and that's probably why I miss it so much. When I don't have at least a little bit of a confidence boost then the times I am not confident definitely outweigh the times that I am. I can tolerate a large lack of confidence but there's still a limit to what I can handle. So when I don't have a confidence boost at all it gets very difficult to deal with.

For me, softball helps to boost my confidence, and refill the metaphorical tank of self-esteem. Without that, I become less confident in myself and more fearful of the perceived higher potential for failure.

When asked when I felt least in control, my response detailed an experience I had while pitching when “my wrist was seizing; I was too tense, I was too afraid.” I explained that I would move through the pitching motion and right at the release point I had “this sudden shock of fear and everything seized.” In this experience I was pitching for a long period of time, which is not typically expected of a pitcher. I became tired, and my pitches began to slip and lose accuracy. I started to fear a potential failure, and that I would continue to fail without a chance of recovery. This then became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as that fear was negatively impacting my body and mind. This led to my wrist failure and the subsequent failed pitch. Consequently, I began to feel frustrated at my inability.

When I asked about a time I felt least powerful in softball, I responded with experiences where I injured myself and was unable to play. The first experience was when I tore my right quadriceps muscle during a game. At the time I was playing in the aforementioned co-ed three-pitch league, in addition to playing in a more competitive all girls league:

When I returned to playing it wasn't so difficult in the three-pitch league, but in the competitive league I really had a hard time. I would hit the ball and I'd try my hardest to run as fast as I could to the first base, but I'd end up getting to first base and nearly start crying because my leg hurt so badly and I was so mad that it hurt. I was so angry with my body that it couldn't do this and that I had to have somebody else perform a task that I loved doing.

I went on to discuss how “frustrating” and “infuriating” the experience was.

In the same response, I recalled a different experience when I broke my right middle finger during a softball game, and the subsequent frustration and anger. The injury was my own fault because I had mistimed a catch, allowing the ball to hit me directly on the end of my finger. This injury negatively impacted my mental state

because at the time I was playing in two leagues of softball and one league of beach volleyball. Because of the injury I had to miss six weeks --half the season-- for all three of these leagues:

I felt so powerless, and so mad at myself for doing that, it wasn't that my body betrayed me, it's that I betrayed my body in a way and this time it didn't forgive me. Other times like I said, when I've fractured my finger, when I've hurt myself eventually my body forgives me, it forgives me enough that I can still play but these two times when I hurt my leg, when I tore the muscle and when I chipped the bone in my finger it didn't. I had to take the time, it wouldn't snap back, I had to take time off and I had to take time to heal and that was again so frustrating to realize that I am breakable that I'm not.... It's almost that I'm not as powerful as I thought, that I'm not as durable and had hoped and expect myself to be.

This experience illuminates an interesting connection between frustration and frailty as well as physical inability. Both frailty and inability are common stereotypes of female bodies, and within this experience I succumbed to both which lead to my frustration.

Finally, in connection to my frustration and fear of failure, a fear of disappointing others was found. In response to a question about when I felt most out of control, I recounted an experience from my all girls house league team. We were losing the game, and I was the only pitcher for our team. Half way through the game the exhaustion began to negatively impact my pitches as they began to slip. I became frustrated, and the fear started to take its toll.

You just become so detached from your body and it's frustrating. I just started to cry, but I started to try and pitch through the crying. There's so much emotion, so much disappointment and confusion because I know what I'm supposed to do, I know what it's supposed to feel like but I can't do it and I don't know why. I wanted to be able to stay on that mound and play. I wanted to just press pause and walk away for five minutes, that's all I needed was five minutes to calm myself, to settle again. Unfortunately in the game you don't have that. The fear of disappointment urges you on. You go through the motion faster and faster. You rush because you want to get the ball out; you want to get it in play because maybe if you throw it faster it'll be better. This time you won't have time to think about it, and if you just throw it quicker, if you just go through the motion quicker, if you just walk back to the mound faster after receiving the ball again, step in your stance and start the motion again it might be better. It's an internal conflict. Trying to

calm down but also utilize the frustration and anger. There's a little nagging voice in the back of your head saying, "Oh, is coach going to come and take you out now? Maybe you should take yourself out of the game. Maybe you should call it quits since you're doing so poorly now that you're letting the team down." But you try to press on, and do the best you can.

Yet again, the spark igniting this fear was a physical inability or a failure of my body in motion. My mind slowly surrendered to the fear of disappointing and letting down those who support me. Negative emotions like frustration and anger boiled to the surface condensing in the form of tears. This frustration and fear caused further physical failure and mistakes, which shook my confidence in my ability. It all became a vicious cycle. I worried that I will let down the others who rely on me, to whom I have a responsibility and expected standard of performance. I feared that I would disappoint all those who support me.

The Support Structure

Following the fear of disappointing others, the findings from Krane et al. (2014) confirmed that the feeling of accountability to the team caused the female athletes stress. However, the findings also uncovered that an encouraging environment existed within the various teams, which helped to combat stress and improved the athletes' mental state (Krane et al., 2014).

I had similar findings in my softball experiences. The other people involved in the sport comprise an important support structure that helped to extinguish my fear, and rebuild my confidence. This support structure appeared as a theme throughout questions regarding control, lack of control, and feelings of discouragement or doubt. These agents are all other people involved in softball, from coaches, spectators, teammates, to even

opponents. I found that the spectators and teammates were the primary supporters. As previously mentioned, the confidence in my body and my ability is not inborn, nor is it unwavering. To feel in control and successful requires confidence; equally, being in control builds confidence. However, sometimes confidence needs outside support. In response to the question about when I felt most in control, the experience I recorded briefly mentioned a simple supportive gesture from the catcher. The catcher's verbal expression of faith, "Erin you got it, you got it. Right here, put it right here", helped my mind to focus, thus allowing my mind to control my body. The catcher knew, and even felt the need to remind me that I could perform the action and pitch the ball to the glove. Even during the experience where I felt most out of control, there are glimpses of my teammates' encouragement despite our struggle:

I kept throwing the ball high, or outside of the strike zone. But the whole time the catcher and the rest of the outfield were trying to be so encouraging. I could hear the short stop saying, "It's ok Erin, you got this, you got this. Just throw it right there". The second baseman and the out fielders are cheering me on shouting, "It's all right Erin, shake it off. You can do it, you can do it. Focus you can do it". I was trying to take it all in and let those encouragements actually sit and grow in my mind

Despite my growing fear and discouraging feelings, the rest of the team continued to support me and tried to rebuild my confidence.

When I responded to the question of discouraging feelings, I explained that this support was not an anomalous occurrence; their encouragement is consistent. To the point that picking one experience is, "very difficult for me to try and to even think and remember [only] one time where my teammates or the fans have been encouraging or helped me with this because it happens every time." I relied on their support to help me through the tough times. Their support made me realize I was not alone and that other people believed in me:

I don't usually allow the frustration, the powerlessness and the lack of control [to] manifest into discouragement or doubt in my abilities. When it does start to get that way I usually rely on my teammates, I rely on the spectators, I rely on other people to encourage me and I end up having a very easy time taking their words to heart and actually repeating them in my mind, allowing their voices, their cheers, their encouragement to echo in my brain and I find that really helps to stop any discouraging feelings. It's really not me that deals with it, the only thing that I do is that I allow myself to believe them.

Unfortunately, outside of softball I don't have such a stable and large support structure to help me through discouraging feelings. Outside of softball,

I don't have that voice for myself. I don't do well outside of sports but inside of softball I don't feel discouraged, I am constantly encouraged and that doesn't leave any opportunity for discouraging feelings, but when I'm alone that's all I have, I don't have encouragement from myself and I don't have enough encouragement from other people.

Inside softball there were many different encouraging voices that helped me through the discouragement, frustration, fear, and the physical struggles. When fear and failure bred frustration that lead to doubt and discouragement, the support system that exists within softball culture helped to stop the cycle.

Discussion:

The following section seeks to analyze my research findings in relation to the existing literature in order to better understand how softball can contribute to a larger ideological shift toward gender equality, by empowering girls. Kane (1995) posits that “women who are defined as being incapable of equaling men in sport are, by logical extension, seen as less capable within wider social arrangements” (p. 193). By presenting these sets of values and norms, sport preserves patriarchy by legitimizing women's subordinate position in society (Sage, 1990; Kidd, 1990; Shaw, 2001). As a social

practice, sport and leisure can influence the economic and political forces that reproduce sex inequality in society (Shaw, 2001; Dewar, 1987). In line with arguments made by Kane (1995), Shaw (2001), Sage (1990), Kidd (1990), and Dewar (1987), empowering female athletes to resist and challenge gendered stereotypes in sport has the potential to further change the ideological belief in women's inferiority. By allowing girls to find strength and power within themselves and act as an example to others, the individual empowerment has the potential to lead to collective empowerment, further prompting institutional change (Shaw, 2001; Kane, 1995).

My research aims to show how softball can be a tool for social justice by allowing opportunities to challenge the oppressive and marginalizing patriarchal ideology, one athlete at a time. By offering participants the opportunity to use their own bodies to exert power that is normally not prescribed to them in their day-to-day lives because of a restrictive gender ideology, the commonly accepted reality can be disrupted. Cole (1993) relays Foucault's suggestion that the body is a "central ideological resource" (p. 85) and the use of the body in sport becomes a tool for negotiating gender norms. If more individuals can utilize the personally empowering opportunities provided within softball and alter what they perceive as reality to be more accepting of a gender continuum rather than a gender binary, slowly their own gender ideology is changed. Since ideology is what structures our interpersonal, economic and political realms, this change and challenge to individual beliefs has the potential to spark a larger collective movement that consciously works toward an equality, acceptance and institutional level change (Cole, 1993).

Yet, softball as an opportunity to work for social justice is limited in its scope and may only be effective in certain scenarios since there are a variety of other social practices and mechanisms that impact the potential for change. Further, the utility of softball as an empowering practice varies among individual preferences, abilities, and social statuses. My analysis is both based on, and influenced by my own experiences, and due to the variety of contexts, it is not generalizable to everyone. However, the following analysis can be used to better understand the minutia of empowerment as a process. Therefore, while my analysis is not generalizable to all athletic experiences, those seeking to utilize sport as a tool for social justice can better understand how to influence the softball structure to increase the likelihood that participants will have an empowering and positive experience.

I find that softball was an empowering experience for me by allowing me opportunities to gain control and exercise power. While this supportive atmosphere helped to encourage me in my on-field attempts, frustration and fear still emerged, which could dissuade others from further participation. In my experience, the use of physical power is traditionally a masculine endeavour, so by affording girls the opportunity to act in a way that is not typically categorized as feminine, the dominant gender stereotypes held by both the participants and the spectators can be challenged. It is important to remember that softball is a leisure activity, and in my experience my interaction was limited to two hours on the field, three times a week, only in the summer. There are a variety of other factors and influences including an individual's personal capacities and interests, and the role of parents, school, and the media that can negate the empowering experiences a girl has on the softball diamond. This was certainly my experience, off the

field where I found myself struggling with confidence in my academic and social abilities. I described my inability to support or encourage myself, and the fear that accompanied the multitude of unknowns in the rest of my life. I mentioned that not only can I not encourage myself, but also I do not find I have enough encouragement from others to help me through some of the dark times. This exposes the limits of the strength and impact empowerment through physical power can have, and shows that it is a process that needs to be maintained.

Achieving Control and Exercising Power

The use of the body's power to master physical skills has been shown to empower female athletes (Blinde et al., 1993; Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). For some, the discovery of an internal locus of control, and the subsequent use of that control by exercising the body's power and ability can be provided through sport (Blinde et al., 1993). Since the female body is a site of societal control (Theberge, 1991; Cole, 1993), the opportunity for girls to form a belief in their own physical power and control can be significant to their self-image (Blinde et al., 1993, Daniels & Lavoie, 2013).

As a softball player, I was able to feel competent and confident in my bodily ability to repeatedly perform complex movements like throwing accurate pitches. In the experience I narrated I described the unconscious ability for my body to move through the motions in order to complete a successful pitch. I described the trust I formed in my body and how that formed over repeated successes. This feeling of body competence, confidence, and control all lead to my feeling of empowerment, which still lives within me to this day. Similarly, Blinde et al. (1993) propose that personal empowerment can

enable female athletes to apply their own power and control outside of sport. However, I was also recorded saying that I have a difficult time encouraging myself and fostering a sense of trust in my abilities outside of softball. While I am assured of my physical capabilities, other abilities like academic or common social skills are not reinforced by my participation in softball and so I do not believe in myself the same way off the field.

Some suggest that competition and the use of power to dominate others is not a necessary or productive means to empowering females because it aligns with a more violent ‘male model’ of sport, which has been oppressive toward women. (Velija et al., 2013, p. 526). From here I find it important to discuss how my results challenge this argument by clarifying the relationship between domination and competition, and my sense of power in softball. In one experience I mentioned, I was able to use my ability to successfully dominate a male player, who was subsequently ridiculed because of his failure to outperform me. While the domination was a small piece of the experience I described, there were negative consequences to my use of physical power. The significance of this performance to potentially shift other people’s notion of gender is discussed later. In the results section I explain that my feelings of empowerment did not emanate from his humiliation. This is consistent with Blinde et al.’s (1993) finding that female athletes typically do not use power in the same way as men, and the focus of those feelings of power and control were usually toward themselves, rather than others. They further explain this use of power by suggesting that because of their disadvantaged position “women are not in the same position as men to use power” (p. 57). I did not originally notice how my power was used to dominate the male player in the competition; rather I focused on how that power impacted me. This shows that the competition was not

harmful or oppressive to me, and my empowerment was not attained at the expense of another individual. I discuss later how I find that my act of domination through competition was not malicious toward the male player; instead apparent humiliation and emasculation was the result of the audience's gender ideology.

Since the dominant gender hierarchy does not allow power, strength, and physical capability to fall within the scope of femininity (Blinde et al., 1993; Sage, 1990, Theberge, 1987; Wallach Scott, 1999; Lenskyj, 1990), many women miss an opportunity to fulfill their bodily potential (Blinde et al., 1993). Additionally, since the dominant gender ideology does not prescribe the use of bodily power as feminine, many women accept this restrictive norm to be their reality because they themselves act as a representation of the subordinate feminine norm (Cole, 1993). Some may also abide by these restrictive norms due to fear of judgment and ridicule from participating in the masculinizing process of categorically unfeminine sports. In their efforts to avoid teasing, many women overemphasize performances that align with traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality, in an effort to either hide or to erase any questions regarding their sexual orientation. This performance reinforces the heteronormative ideology, and therefore solidifies the 'otherness' of many LGBTQIA+ participants.

This was not my experience in softball; instead I had the opportunity to channel newly found physical power through the use of my body to achieve positive outcomes. Consistent with the findings of Daniels & Lavoie (2013), I was able to explore what my body is capable of, instead of only seeing it for what it looks like. However, by exploring my bodily capabilities, failure defined the edges of my physical ability and I became frustrated with where the limits fell. I was afraid that those who believed in me would be

equally disappointed with the limits of my ability. I feared failure and how it acted as a beacon illuminating the extent to which I could control my body and summon its power. Similar to the girls interviewed by Krane et al. (2014), I too felt the pressure to perform well for my team. In their research, Krane et al. (2014) found that the girls had a commitment to their teams which motivated them to focus, but this accountability also added pressure which led to frustration and sometimes tears. In line with the results from Krane et al. (2014), the accountability I had to my team was found to be a source for friendship, community, support and encouragement.

Positive Support Structure

Daniels & Lavoie (2013) suggest that, “an optimal sport context is characterized by simultaneously teaching sports skills along with life skills in a safe, fun, supportive, and challenging environment” (p. 75). The authors further specify, “in these contexts, positive outcomes for girls are more likely to accrue, but it should be noted that positive outcomes are not an automatic by-product of participation” (p. 75). My results and the results of Velija et al. (2013) and Migliaccio & Berg (2007) align with the cliché: “there's no ‘I’ in team”. Migliaccio & Berg (2007) found that female athletes participating in tackle football appreciated the variety of roles involved in the sport, and that each position was important to the success of the team. Migliaccio & Berg (2007) also confirmed that the teamwork and reliance on each other to perform, or at least put forth effort, bonded the team and fostered trust, friendship and a sense of community. In my results, there are multiple instances of encouragement, and trust emanating from my teammates, my friends, and fans. This encouragement and support was so significant that

I could not remember a time where discouragement or doubt was able to take seed, because the support from my teammates or fans would wash away the fear and doubt. I was able to focus on the task at hand, my athletic performance, instead of the nagging fear, which may have prevented me from continuing on. While I argue that the pitching position has the most control, my experiences show how that control is usually accompanied by fear. As previously mentioned, the control allows me to further use my power and explore the limits of my physical ability. However, this exploration sometimes end up in a physical failure, which can be fear inducing when you are playing a team sport and are accountable to others. Yet, the people I felt accountable to were also the ones who helped to quell my fear by reminding me that they trusted my ability and they had faith that I would eventually succeed. Without their support I do not believe my experiences would be as positive and empowering as they were.

Playing a team sport, like softball, means that the responsibility to succeed does not, and cannot rest on the shoulders of one player alone. It is then no surprise that the enjoyment of team play, and reliance upon team support, are recurrent themes in both the literature and my responses. Both Krane et al. (2014) and Migliaccio & Berg (2007) describe psychological advantages like a boost in self-esteem, trust, and a sense of family emerging from this reliance on each other. Yet, it is important to note that not all women's sports may have this same positive dynamic. As Migliaccio & Berg (2007) explain, in some women's hockey teams, "relationships among teammates were sometimes tense and competition for recognition caused dissension" (p. 278). My experiences in softball closely mirror the experiences of the women interviewed in the study conducted by Migliaccio & Berg (2007). Many of their participants described a

sense of family, and trust within their team, where each player had a specific job to do in order to ensure the team's success (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). The players trusted their teammates to fulfill their responsibility and get their job done (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). In my recollection of the experience where I had been struggling to pitch, I negated the fact that my team was not performing well. I believed that my team was trying their best, and so I had to remain strong and support them until they were able to catch their groove again. I trusted that the team would collect themselves, and that they would not let me down; I instead focused on how I could control my performance to ensure I did not let them down. While it's arguable that the pitching position experiences the most control of the game, a pitcher is only one cog in the team machine. This is important because the sense of camaraderie and mutual support helped me through the various physical and mental struggles while playing and testing my abilities. If I wasn't able to trust my team to do their part, I likely would have given up on the sport of softball altogether. It would have appeared to be too much pressure for little reward. Migliaccio & Berg (2007) found their participants had a similar reluctance to continue in the sport if it were more individualistic and had a less cooperative atmosphere. The trust in others became an important variable in my personal empowerment. Without it, there would have been fewer opportunities to explore my physical power because I would have simply given up or fallen prey to the fear and frustration.

Krane et al. (2014) found that the mental skills girl athletes learned from their own struggles with the pressure of performing in sport, actually served as skills that motivated them to encourage their teammates. They understood the pressure, frustration, and fear involved when playing a sport, and thus understood that the team supported

them through it all, so they should reciprocate. Additionally, Migliaccio & Berg, (2007) found that many of their participants received much of their validation and approval from their teammates. When I was playing softball I did not notice the extent to which the other players, the coaches, and the fans were in tune to my frustration. At the time of the experience, I focused on myself and how I could stop failing. Similar to the participants from Malcom's (2003) study, I was most concerned with my performance and my reputation as a capable athlete. Yet in my responses, I discovered the encouragement from the teammates was essential to my mental state and my sense of control.

The support I gained from my softball community protected me from the negative impacts of competition like frustration and fear. I found that within softball when I met the limit to which I could encourage myself, the support structure was there to reinstate my confidence and remind me that I am capable. The support structure helped me to persevere, and to keep playing, which then allowed for further development of physical ability and body competence. Furthermore, the support structure helped me to cope with the responsibility of control and the pressure of performing. Without the support structure, the aforementioned empowerment would have been limited by my own fear.

Challenging Gender Ideology by Resisting Its Stereotypes

The dominant gender ideology and the norms it establishes restrict and marginalize women (Cole, 1993; Wallach Scott, 1999). Since sport is a product and producer of social reality, the restrictive norms and stereotypes that exist in the broader society are also commonly found in sport (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Ryan & Martin, 2013; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Assumptions of female frailty, weakness, physical

inability, and lack of power are evident in the way sports are structured and in the way sport is translated to passive audiences by the media (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Frey & Eitsen, 1991; Lee, 1992). However, the world of leisure and sport at the amateur level may give women an opportunity to reshape these stereotypes and become personally empowered (Sabo, 1988; Theberge, 1994). It must be emphasized that this is only an opportunity; not all women who participate in sport will have this chance. The circumstances of participation, the sport of choice, and variables in life outside of sport can reduce the likelihood that an opportunity will arise or be taken (Kane, 1995; Cahn, 1994; Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). Still, sport can provide potential opportunities to challenge the “hegemonic femininities and masculinities by revealing how gender categories are fluid and unstable” (Lenskyj, 2013).

The opportunity I had to hone my skills, build an understanding of my own physical power, and learn how to control that power, was vital to my own personal empowerment and development of body competence. My participation in softball fostered a belief in my bodily ability, which helped me to question the stereotypes reinforcing female frailty and physical inability. In the broader society, daily practices are influenced by a gender ideology that limits the power, space, and ability a woman’s body is permitted to have (Dewar, 1987; Lenskyj, 1990; Bryson, 1990). My softball experiences made me more inclined to challenge these limits because I knew that I could defy or resist what was conventionally allowed. By giving women an opportunity to realize their bodies’ capabilities and competencies, the hierarchy and division of power in gender can be shifted (Theberge, 1987).

Malcom (2003) explains, “as a social institution, the world of sports provides girls and women with opportunities to resist and redefine what it means to be both female and an athlete” (p. 1389). As previously mentioned, Krane et al. (2014) also concluded that the atmosphere created by teammates allowed female athletes to explore the fluidity of gender roles and challenge gender stereotypes without fear of repercussions. These findings are consistent with my experiences in softball.

The comfort zone I found in softball afforded me a safe space, where I could use my body in ways that dominant gender roles would not have typically allowed. I found softball to be a refuge from gender stereotypes. In the more competitive leagues of softball, the gender stereotypes regarding physical inability never appeared as a theme or code in my experiences. It does not seem to have been an alarming event when a girl was able to throw a ball with power and accuracy. The higher level of play appeared to facilitate a different gender ideology than the broader society. However, I described an experience in the co-ed league, which is a lower level of competition, where the frail, weak, and physical inability stereotypes arose. In this experience, when I was able to throw a ball accurately and with enough speed to get the male runner out, the opposing team and fans were shocked and overly impressed with my performance. The difference between these two communities could be that the audience at the lower level of competition was unfamiliar with the skills and abilities required to play at a higher level. This is in line with Malcom (2003) and Krane et al.’s (2014) finding that some girl athletes face teasing in school because of their dual status as a girl and athlete is unfamiliar and their ambition to participate and dedicate time and effort to playing sport is perplexing. Since I was familiar with those skills, I enjoyed violating the audience’s

expectation by being an example of that higher competition level. Krane et al. (2014) also found that sports allowed girls to “defy gendered expectations” (p. 93) physically and mentally. However, Malcom (2003) discovered that young female softball participants were sometimes ridiculed for crossing these gender boundaries and most often were called tomboys or lesbians by boys at school. Instead of shying away from the sport, the participants embraced the term ‘tomboy’ accepting that they were not what was considered a typical girl, and focused on being a capable athlete since they believed that being bad at sport would warrant the most teasing (Malcom, 2003).

In my findings, it was not obvious to me at the time that I was defying gendered expectations until I was faced with individuals who appeared, to me, to hold such traditional and restrictive notions of gender. I found that softball offered me a space where I did not need to act in a traditionally feminine way by being frail or weak. Instead, similar to the girls from Malcom’s (2003) study, I focused on my athletic ability and worried that that would spawn ridicule. I was fortunate enough to avoid being chastised for acting out of my gender category by performing traditionally masculine traits like showing physical strength and prowess. I was able to throw a ball with power and accuracy; I was able to make large movements in my pitching motion without feeling I was taking up too much space. Luckily, I was encouraged and cheered for when I successfully made a play or pitched the ball instead of being teased for my non-conformance to a feminine norm. Due to this unrestricted performance, I was unknowingly able to safely defy traditionally held gendered expectations.

Still, Blinde et al. (1993) state that personal empowerment is not a fix-all solution, it is described as a foundation from which group empowerment, and further institutional

changes can be achieved. The impact from resisting gender stereotypes through physical performance in sport is not limited to the participants themselves. Kane (1995) explains that the commonsense gender stereotypes and assumptions in sport are preserved because the broader society is frequently exposed to a gender binary. Both Kane (1995) and Daniels & Lavoie (2013) support this argument by identifying a limit to which outsiders are permitted by the media to see female athletes participate in sports like softball, hockey, rugby, and exhibit physical power, and noting the greater coverage of either sexualized images or gender conforming athletes like gymnasts or figure skaters made available to the public eye. Daniels & Lavoie (2013) specify that the coverage “of girls’ and women’s sports constitutes about 6-8% of all sports media. The broader society is not frequently exposed to skilled and competitive female athletes who resist gender norms, and to the extent that media do follow women’s sports, they tend to downplay female athletes’ abilities and objectify their bodies (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013).

My experience shocking the audience and opposing team with my physical ability illustrates the degree to which individuals are unfamiliar with the reality of female athletic ability. Since I have participated in softball for a significant amount of time, the gender ideology and stereotypes were debunked for me long ago. It is not surprising to me that a girl can play the sport well, and as a result, dominate a male player. Then, it is also not surprising that individuals who have not yet had their notions of gender norms challenged would respond with shock, extreme praise, and humor. The audience had their preconceived expectations violated, and I acted as an example of the incongruence regarding what they have been lead to believe a female is capable of and the reality. My performance is what Kane (1995) terms a challenge to the gender binary, and an example

of a gender continuum. The result of this interaction is not easily predicted, though there are a few possible outcomes based on the current literature. Kane (1995) indicates fear as a possible outcome of my successful performance in competition, because it brings the male player's masculinity into question, potentially leading to unwillingness to play co-ed again. Conversely, Shaw (2001) suggests that other girls may feel more confident adopting resistant behaviour after watching my success against a male player. Shaw (2001) also proposes that my performance may also prompt observers to participate in further discourse about gendered behaviour and gender inequities. While their singular exposure to a strong, capable female athlete is likely to be thought of as an anomaly, it is still an experience they had that may be reinforced later by similar demonstrations.

These findings illustrate that empowerment is not easily achieved, and that much more is required to achieve it than simply signing up and participating in a game of softball. Empowering opportunities to use physical power are also coupled with fear inducing realizations of limits and frustration. I was fortunate to have a strong support structure to help me through those tough times; not all participants are so lucky. Control is much the same: where the existence of opportunity does not then lead to empowerment, there needs to be repeated success in the utilizing of that control. Even then, inability to perform can negatively impact the potential for empowerment. My findings illustrate how personal empowerment is a process not a destination, and it is not only about individual action--it is influenced by the actions of others.

Conclusion:

While sport may only be a pastime for many people, something to watch or a fun leisure activity to pass time, I have argued that sport contributes to the construction and reinforcement of current western gender ideologies. Traditionally, sport has been a site for the reinforcement and perpetuation of masculine superiority (Wallach Scott, 1999; Theberge, 1987; Sage, 1990), but the dominant western gender hierarchy can be challenged as women's participation increases and expands beyond the boundaries of 'feminine' sports like gymnastics or figure skating (Kane, 1995). With female athletic participation growing (Kidd, 1990), there are potentially more opportunities in sport for women to be empowered through the use of their bodies and come to realize that, contrary to society's patriarchal ideology, they can be powerful, strong, in control and a woman (Blinde et al., 1993; Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). However, the solution to sexist ideology and societal structure isn't easily attained, and resistance to these forces of oppression needs to arise from any array of methods from various sites within sport and in the broader society (Kane, 1995). It is from the space of these convictions that I launched my exploration of how my own experiences provide insight into the ways softball may offer these individually empowering opportunities. By allowing me to exemplify the fluidity of gender roles instead of requiring compliance to the oppositional gender binary of masculine and feminine stereotypes (Kane, 1995), softball endorsed my resistance of gender stereotypes.

My own experience acted as inspiration for this research, since I believed that my experiences in softball have helped to empower me and positively influence my notions

of gender. I then decided to analyze these experiences to explore specifically how I was empowered by softball. I found that the opportunity to be in control and use my own physical power to achieve desired goals fostered a sense of bodily competence and a feeling of empowerment. However, this opportunity also allowed for the discovery of limits, which proved to be frustrating and fear inducing. Luckily, in softball I had positive support from peers who appeared to notice my fear and frustration, which prompted them to encourage me to persevere. Further, this support structure created a place where I felt comfortable performing and exploring the fluidity of gender norms without the judgment presented by an audience unfamiliar with powerful female athletic ability. Unfortunately, this structure may not exist in the same way for all female athletic participation in other sports. Fortunately for me, these opportunities worked together to foster feelings of personal empowerment, and have influenced my current notion of gender, which does not always align with the traditional patriarchal ideology.

Additionally, my affirmative experiences participating in softball may have had a positive impact on gender ideology, beyond my own personal empowerment. By acting as an exhibit of what a capable female athlete can do, my actions could spark challenging comparisons and conversations about the reality of gender stereotypes. As Shaw (2001) suggests, my performance of physical ability to outperform a male athlete could act as a showcase from which other observers can compare their beliefs and stereotypes. Alternatively, the performance could simply be brushed off as a strange and anomalous example of female ability. While this conclusion is tentative and not fully confirmed by my results, there may be potential to positively impact to others' notions and preconceptions of gender and ability. Further research should work from this tentative

conclusion, and explore the extent to which audiences are influenced by viewing athleticism in the context of serious leisure.

It is also likely that this performance could warrant ridicule aimed at myself and other players who also defy a gender norm. While I did not find any teasing or negative repercussion from my noncompliant performance, many others face judgment and stereotyping because of their performance of more categorically masculine actions. Many female athletes are teased or stereotyped as a lesbian because their actions confuse the audience by breaking from the traditionally feminine category (Daniels & Lavoie, 2013). This can either dissuade athletes, who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community from participating in such an uninviting environment, or it can push heterosexual, cisgendered athletes to prove or differentiate themselves from the stereotype; both events would negate feelings of empowerment. Analyzing the impact participant membership in the LGBTQIA+ community has on empowerment in softball was not within the scope of my research. Further research is required in order to better understand this as a variable in the empowerment process, so that a more inviting and safe place can be created within softball and other sports.

In line with Anderson's (2006) requirements of analytic autoethnography, my research does not produce indisputable conclusions, instead it helps to elaborate, extend, refine or revise theoretical understandings of the topic at hand. While my research findings are focused on one set of experiences from a particular position of privilege, they are an important contribution to the body of knowledge regarding empowerment and sport. Much of the existing research does not take the notion of social change far enough and stops short of connecting sport to the broader oppressive structures that maintain the

western patriarchal society. The existing research either identifies the potential for positive experiences, or identifies the contribution of sport to the marginalization of various groups. As previously stated, my work is founded in understanding social justice as the “just ordering of society” (Buettner-Schmidt, & Lobo, 2012) through social construction and ideology. My work helps to illustrate how those positive experiences can potentially impact oppressive ideology and gender hierarchy by offering an opportunity to regain power not typically offered by traditional notions of femininity. Further, by exploring this very specific set of experiences, my research illuminates the intricacies of an empowering experience in a sport like softball. My results contained themes relating to fear, frustration, power, control, and a supportive environment, all of which are variables that impact the likelihood of a positive and empowering experience.

My work shows that there is a process to personal empowerment and that some variables foster and maintain the feeling of empowerment, while others dissolve it. By understanding these intricacies, those seeking to utilize sport as a tool for social justice may increase the likelihood that participants will have a positive experience. So, while my results are not generalizable to all female athletic experiences, they can still be used to structure a safer, more empowering place within sport. This can come in the form of safe spaces training for coaches, or increasing parent and coach awareness of the impact associated with sport participation in a girl’s life. These findings could be used in the vetting of coaches to assure that their approaches foster an empowering and safe atmosphere.

The primary limitation to my research comes from only collecting and analyzing my own past experiences in softball. This limitation does not negate the findings of my research, nor does it diminish the significance of my conclusions. However, it does restrict the generalizability of these findings since they only depict a very particular perspective: that of a white, middle-class, able-bodied and athletically talented woman of western society. While the findings may not be applicable to all women's experiences in softball or in other sports, I hope that at some level my experiences are received as intriguing and relatable.

It is important to remember the relative role sport plays in the broader gender ideology in our society. Sport is indeed a product and producer of society; it is a relatively small cog in the societal machine. In many people's lives, larger institutions exist in society and hold greater influence over ideology and social structure than sport, and may extinguish the positive, ideologically challenging outcomes of athletic participation. Sometimes the dominant ideology may be too entrenched in the social structure, essentially making it impervious to negotiation or change, in which case, personal empowerment may not be sufficient as a level of social change. The current economic and political structures still strongly align with a patriarchal ideology and stand to reinforce the associated gender hierarchy because it maintains masculine power (Cole 1993; Wallach Scott, 1999; Sage, 1990), and any change is likely to be painful or shocking and actively resisted (Kidd, 1990). Yet, I remain convinced that every avenue of change and opportunity for active resistance to dominant gender norms is important when the aim is a societal shift toward a less oppressive and stratifying gender ideology. Since sport is usually considered a frivolous, leisurely activity, I find that research into

this arena of change and its more covert methods of influence to be particularly interesting.

Thus, further research should be conducted on exploring the empowering potential of others' experiences in both softball, and other similar sports like ringette or field hockey. As previously noted, it is very likely that many other past and current athletes have not experienced similar positive opportunities, and their encounters with discrimination, fear, support, and stereotypes will vary from my own. Since my research was limited to my experience as a softball player, I believe further research into the experiences of other players, coaches, and fans would elaborate on the intricacies and various positive and negative perspectives that were beyond the scope of this research. Future research could help confirm or dismiss my tentative conclusion regarding the impact my performance of successful athletic ability had on others and myself. Additionally, research exploring the potential for empowerment within other sports could illuminate whether or not there exists a more collective level of empowerment from sport participation. My beneficial experiences may prove to be more anomalous than they are common, which would indicate that the current realm of sport may not be fertile enough to be a site of significant individual, or collective empowerment. Investigating experiences in other similarly sex-segregated sports like ringette or field hockey will broaden the understanding of how personal empowerment is achieved, denied, and/or diminished by these sports, and the various external influences.

My research is only a small piece of a growing body of literature that explores sport as a site of cultural struggle. However, there is solace in knowing that "the struggle is never complete; it is in a constant state of flux and negotiation between dominant and

subordinate groups” (Kane, 1995, p. 193). The gender hierarchy and current gender ideology is not set in stone, which means the scales of gender inequality can be shifted to a more balanced state, but it will take many consecutive efforts. The solution to gender inequality is multi-faceted, but careful investigation of the various components, like sport, provides a better understanding of the benefits and limits to each. Just as personal empowerment cannot directly induce large-scale changes to ideology, sport alone is not able to balance the dominant gender hierarchy.

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