

Preliminary Insights as an Outsider Researcher in Female Bodybuilding and Physique Athletes

Bevezető gondolatok a női bodybuilding és physique versenyzők vizsgálatáról egy kívülálló kutató szemével

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Abstract: Ethnographic methods provide meaningful treatment and interpretation of data, especially in doing Sociology of Sport Research. Experiences of different researchers imply a variety of challenges in gathering data, especially coming as an outsider. Different studies highlighted the access of “insiders” to their chosen discipline to provide better rapport with their participants, and that the “insider” access might provide perceived convenience in data gathering. Studying bodybuilding has also been dominated by this point of view. The paper aims to present the initial experiences and insights as a first step in doing research related to women’s bodybuilding and physique competition, as someone coming from outside the subculture. The article offers a review on contemporary studies related to the discipline, especially on the discussions on methods and being an insider or an outsider researcher.

Keywords: Women’s Bodybuilding, Ethnography, Participant observation, Insider-Outsider Researcher

Absztrakt: Az etnográfiai módszerek az adatkezelés-értelmezés terén hasznosnak tekinthetők, különösen a sportszociológiai kutatásokban. A különböző háttérű kutatók tapasztalatai másfajta kihívásokat hordoznak magukban az adatgyűjtéssel kapcsolatban, főként, ha valaki kívülállónak kezd el kutatni egy témát. A „bennfentesek” könnyebb hozzáféréséről számos tanulmány született, amelyek a résztvevőkkel meglévő kapcsolat jelentőségét hangsúlyozzák, és azt, hogy így mennyivel könnyebben lehet adatokhoz jutni. A bodybuilding sportág tanulmányozását is jellemzően ebből a nézőpontból végezték a korábbi kutatások. Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy betekintést nyújtson egy olyan kutatás kezdeti lépéseibe, ahol a kutató nem bennfentesként, hanem a szubkultúrából kívülről érkezésként kapcsolódik be a bodybuilding, illetve a physique sportággal foglalkozó nők helyzetének kutatásába. A tanulmányban a kérdés kapcsán összegzésre kerülnek azon közelmúltbeli írások, amelyek a belülről és a kívülről érkező kutatókra vonatkozó lehetőségekre és nehézségekre reflektálnak.

Kulcsszavak: női bodybuilding, etnográfia, résztvevő megfigyelés, belső-külső megfigyelő

Introduction

There has been an ongoing discussion on doing ethnographic methods, concerning the question, which approach will provide meaningful treatment of data, especially in doing sociology of sport research. Experiences of different researchers imply the challenges of gathering data especially coming

as an outsider. In sport, many studies highlighted the access of “insiders” to their chosen discipline to provide better rapport with their participants. The “insider” access might also provide perceived convenience in data gathering.

As most of the ethnographic methods in studying bodybuilding are dominated by auto-ethnographic and insider points of view, I would like

to see if the possibilities of doing research from an outsider's perspective will have relevance and positivity. As a coach for almost five years in athletics, the first author of the paper also became interested in physique-based disciplines such as women's bodybuilding, having met different local athletes in the said discipline that entails a lot of hard work not only in training but adhering to a unique kind of lifestyle in shaping their bodies.

This paper aims to present the initial experiences and insights as a first step in the events related to women's bodybuilding and physique competition. In order to set the context for the introduction of the research and the methodological considerations behind it, the article will also offer a review on contemporary studies related to the discipline, especially on the discussions on methods and being an insider or an outsider researcher.

Being an outsider or an insider

Numerous articles discussed the comparisons between the etic and the emic approach in doing ethnographic studies (Naeke et al. 2011). For various authors, being an insider provides easier access to the subjects and implies more empathy on both sides. Meanwhile being an "outsider" may mean difficulty in gaining access, yet it provides a more "balanced" treatment of data among its participants.

Trust is a common issue for participants especially for an "outsider" researcher. This was mentioned by Naeke et al. (2011) on doing ethnographic methods. It will take time for the participants and organisations to open up themselves, and engage in an honest conversation, especially with someone who is not coming from their community.

The importance of having some relationship especially surfaces in the reflexive process of doing ethnographic studies. Skillen and Osborne (2016) highlighted the importance on the dynamics of insider and outsider especially in doing oral histories in sport, and many social scientists have evaluated the impact of their status as either 'insider' or 'outsider' in relation to the subjects they seek to study.

Being an insider possesses advantage as it provides better access to respondents. Markula and Silk (2011) emphasized the importance of researchers having some connection in order to understand the culture they immerse into. The dynamics of being insider and outsider researcher is

also affirmed by the experiences of Greene (2014) and Crean (2018), who explained the dynamics of the outsider-insider process when doing ethnographic research in sports. It is implied that the social position of the researcher, which includes class, socio-economic status, etc., has an impact on their position as an insider or outsider researcher (Crean, 2018). Greene (2014) affirmed the relevance of the position of the researcher as insider or outsider and that it is affected by culture and values. The experience and the position of the researcher not only as insider or outsider but also their current social class may affect the course of the whole research process. Reflexivity and positioning of the researcher, as either insider or outsider, has more weight as they must be balanced and must not be a fixed or static position (Crean, 2018). This was implied by Greene (2014:12) as well that even as an "insider", researchers will benefit "being close to one's research, as there is much to be gained from keeping one's distance and having an outside perspective."

Most of the recent studies related to women bodybuilders using ethnographic methods relied on the skills and knowledge of the researcher being an insider and participatory insider. Probert (2009) stressed that connections inside the organisation are important to gain access and to build trust among participants. These issues of trust were also highlighted by Bunsell (2013), when she underlined the importance of friendships and how they are intimately tied and forged during the research process. This was also justified by Chananie-Hill, McGrath, & Stoll (2012) that trust between researcher and participant was essential to procuring the depth and authenticity of the data, because female bodybuilders, like members of other, relatively closed communities or subcultures are often hesitant to be subjects of research by outsiders.

Personal experience in a particular discipline provides first-hand information in order to paint a realistic situation among the athletes. Hunter (2013) stated that the author's position within the industry is particularly helpful because it allows them to ask questions that are relevant and insightful, and to interpret the experiences of informants in a more meaningful way. Rosdahl (2013), who used an autoethnographic approach in exploring the structures of power within a woman's body, stated that the importance of telling the stories of

those women who are marginalised, and making use of the researcher's experience to connect with the unique cultural context of body sculpting, provides ways and means to affirm, question, or criticize one's concepts and principles. This personal experience of being an athlete was also affirmed by Rousell and Griffet (2000) as female bodybuilders enter a new world and one becomes a bodybuilder by mixing with bodybuilders.

Even so, being an outsider at the onset does not necessarily render the limitation of perspectives when conducting research in sports. In this case, establishing credibility can be a way for outsider researchers to gain the trust of participants. Coombs and Osborne (2018) shared their experience of being outsider researchers, which utilized the interpretation of symbols and themes related to being a sport fan. Spending more time and effort with the participants affirms the researcher's position in data gathering and rapport. Suffolk, (2015) utilized the advantage of the internet to gather data even without being an insider in the sport.

The importance of gaining access (and ultimately, the insider status) is emphasized by Markula and Silk (2011), who wrote:

"It is important to develop clear strategies of how the researcher plans to gain an insider status. More is at stake here than being merely able physically to access the field: as the ethnographers need to be able to observe everyday life and talk to people, they need to gain a position of trust among the culture. To obtain an understanding of the culture, the ethnographer cannot remain merely as an objective, distant observer." (Markula and Silk p. 162)

Methodological challenges and considerations

Guided by those principles, we started our exploration in the realm of women bodybuilding, physique, and fitness competitions. The first author of the paper attended and observed two major bodybuilding competitions in October and November 2019 in Hungary and in Romania. Before that, he also attended different competitions in his home country, the Philippines, through personal contact with a competitor (December, 2018). Even with all attempts to make my fieldwork more formal and professional, all the organizers declined his request to do the interviews etc. at the tournaments

claiming they have specific people for the coverage and only allowing him to go to the events as plain audience. Even with these limitations, he decided to continue witnessing the events so that he can gain both professional and personal networks. Given that this paper reflects on the stage of the first interactions with the athletes, empirical data cannot be provided in this research, as the authors are still in the process of networking and creating better relationship with the potential respondents.

Given the strict training regimen of most athletes, we realized that being in competitions especially the day before the event can be sensitive for most competitors because they are in a state of total focus and at the same time their nutritional and training regimen is closely monitored. The degree of competitions is highlighted by the rewards and recognition especially being a champion or gaining the so called "pro card". Having a professional status in women's bodybuilding and physique provides a status symbol that an athlete is one of the best in the sport and they can enter more competitions without being combined with "amateurs". The first author has conversed casually with different athletes and coaches at the competitions, yet he had to realize the lack of time to engage with them as they are totally focused on the competition itself. Due to this, they can only share their social media accounts to "follow" where a more established communication can be done.

Competitions and expos come hand in hand. The two bodybuilding competitions the first author witnessed were not just standalone bodybuilding events. They were combined with different disciplines such as pole dancing (also called as pole sport), strength sports, and fitness competitions. After all the competitions were also entitled as a fitness festival and not just a bodybuilding championship. We tried to initiate communication with the organizers and promoters. But due to the time constraints of their tasks during the competitions, they could only suggest watching the event and further communication to follow in due time. Still, the bodybuilding events provided informal occasions of communication to other followers of the sport. Given that this paper is still an initial report, we have only interacted with 20 athletes and coaches from the various competitions.

Given the importance of constant interaction with the participants, we strive to make them more

engaged in communication especially at the expo during the two competitions. The expo, which the organizers provided is another opportunity to network. Thus, especially for an outsider in the sport, it is imperative to attend these expos to gain more contacts. In the course of interaction, a number of athletes whom we communicated stated that it is ideal for them to be studied if they are not in competition phase since they can provide more time not being transfixed in preparing to be “on-stage”

These limitations of our research can be related to Markula and Silk's (2011) concepts on “gatekeepers”, individuals who are in one way or another central to the cultural field and/or well known by the people in the field. The challenge of seeking the approval of the gatekeepers is one of the main challenges of doing research in closed subcultures, and in this particular context as well. Yet, as we spend more time in the competitions, having the networks of possible informants circumvents the need of “gatekeepers” and just like the existing studies mentioned, trust can be built through constant communication, interaction, and understanding.

Based on the first author's first-hand experience with the athletes, the time needed for engagement is important as it produces rapport with the respondents. Connection and continuous communication especially for a very individualistic discipline such as bodybuilding should be given enough time for relationships to be built and should not be a one-time engagement. Probert (2009) affirmed that a structured process both on the qualitative and quantitative approaches is very important, which involves enough time for respondents to answer questions or share their stories.

Rooted in the importance of personal connections in order to paint a better perspective in Women's Bodybuilding the impact of social media and internet contributed in providing networks aside from personal connections. Indeed, the development of the internet paved a different approach in communication as most of the athletes whom the first author personally encountered would only tell him in a rush “please follow me on Instagram”. The impact of internet provided different ways of discourses on women fitness and physique athletes, especially for those who want to study their practices etc. (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). From the approximately 20 athletes

whom he initially followed on different social media platforms, only less than 10 replied to his follow-up inquiries about the upcoming research project and expressed interest in the future course of our prospective study.

As in previous studies, the low number of participants proved to be one of the major limitations (Suffolk, 2015), in the future course of the research, we aim to reach more athletes with a focus on increasing the number of possible participants from different socio-political and socio-economic situations. This implies that we need to establish and maintain a global network of potential research participants.

Discussion

One common theme that we noticed in our communication with possible participants is that their time is very limited for this kind of endeavour, given the strict regimen and structured timetable of being a competitive athlete in a lifestyle sport. They are subjecting themselves to a very detailed and structured training and nutrition plan. One of the athletes contacted online said it was better to really do all the interviews during the “off-season” or about 1-2 months before their major competition as they can interact further given the intense pressure on the athlete, both in a psychological and physiological sense. In all the “insider”-based research works, it came to the surface, how much time the participant observers can spend with the athletes even if they have an insider access to the athlete or a level of personal connection with them (Probert, 2009).

The experience of interacting with the athlete was done through online and physical meetings. During the time of the pandemic, we resorted to sending messages to the athletes through their social media accounts. Although there is a common interest to be part of the study, the athletes contacted still prefer that we meet them personally at the competitions where they plan to participate.

Time is a major factor as well in establishing a better connection and rapport with the respondents. Bolin (2012) documented 22 years of her career as an athlete, coach, and official in bodybuilding. This implies further the advantage of being an insider in the sport given the access they have in connecting with participants. The communication and experience in the sport lies heavily on

the constant practice and immersion. Socialization and connection are among the primary motivations of athletes in participating in bodybuilding and fitness competitions (Ricker, 2006).

On my first-hand experience meeting athletes and attending competition, it was observed that the attitudes of women bodybuilders especially connecting with them during the event is based on networks and both in online and previous communications. The constraints of interacting with the athlete is based on time management and previous engagements with other athletes or members of the media. Rohrig et al. (2017) noted in their research on the psychophysiological situation of a women bodybuilder that the athlete's mood was unaffected through the competition preparation period until the final two months of testing. The energy and calmness decreased and the tiredness and tension increased, suggesting that despite the changes in BF%, calories, and training amount mood may not be affected until a certain threshold is reached. That is why it is important that researchers in this discipline must be mindful and have enough patience interacting with the athlete.

Different studies related to the relationship between an insider and outsider researcher shows that there should be a balance between the two. Rabe (2003) stated that: "it is the relationship of power, knowledge, and self-understanding of those being studied along with the researcher's analysis of them that are relevant."

In their experience as researchers, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) cited the advantage of an insider on the access to the subjects meanwhile being an outsider shows objectivity in treating the topics. Yet the two authors stressed that there should not be a dichotomy between the two perspectives. Treatment of balance and work on "the space" between the status of an outsider and insider researcher is important.

Meanwhile, there are also reflections that being an insider and an outsider is also dependent on the position and perspective of the researcher. Hayfield and Huxley (2015) reflected that their position as a researcher can be both insider and outsider at the same time but depends on the situations that might arise during the research process. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of a reflective phase during data gathering, as it allows for discussions on being an insider and outsider

researcher. Because it provides different perspectives as it affects the production of knowledge throughout the research process.

Conclusion

In the center of our initial take-off in the study about women bodybuilders and physique athletes is the delicate and careful treatment of the connection between us and our prospective respondents. Even with the use of social media, we see that trust is a major factor especially when one is still an outsider researcher in a kind of subculture like bodybuilding. The trust gained through constant communication, building networks not only with the athletes but also with the "gatekeepers" of the sport will make better ways to analyse the topic. Given that we are planning to explore the different identities of women bodybuilders, physique, and fitness athletes in different nationalities and locations, cultural and gender sensitivity are also a prerequisite since we do not have the same gender as our respondents. Given the diverse situations, experiences, and stories of the athletes, it is imperative to put a very detailed perspective not only on their personal lives, but also on their career, and how their organisations and groups provide better and meaningful experiences for them in living a life so much dedicated to bodybuilding and fitness.

It is also to be noted that the class struggle of women so characteristic of this discipline means that many of the relevant studies draw on the feminist and class theories (Probert, 2009), while it can be more ideal to hear first the story of the athletes and the community as a whole before sticking to one or another framework. This order seems more feasible from an outsider perspective. Even with the autoethnographic methods used by the majority of the studies presented, there is still an advantage of being a little distant to the sport and suggest participant observation as another perspective in doing qualitative studies (Coombs & Osborne, 2016).

In terms of the position of oneself as an insider or outsider researcher, Breen (2007) concluded that it should not be set as a dichotomy between the two, but instead, as a continuum, which means the time and effort that the researcher devotes to the respondents in interacting with them provides a more balanced treatment of the data.

Furthermore, in qualitative research, we can test the rigour through credibility, dependability, and transferability. By constant collaboration, communication, and exchange of points of view of other researchers the data and the insights can provide better perspectives and additional insights. Hence, reflection is very important in the early stages of research (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015).

The need for more research can be highlighted, especially doing ethnographic studies on women bodybuilders. Worthen and Baker (2016) called for closer interaction with the athletes and that scientific enquiry should not be limited to one socio-geographic and socio-economic domain. Thus, it is important to highlight the stories and engagement of women bodybuilders and physique athletes from different locations and nationalities. They also implied that ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews are appropriate methods to better understand women bodybuilders' experiences.

Indeed, the path in doing this study is still at its initial stage, and what is important now is to seek more and wider perspectives by looking for further networks, learning from participants, and engaging in the organisations, so that they all consider the study as a relevant tool in understanding the identities and narratives of female bodybuilding, physique, and fitness athletes on a wider scale. Through this, we aspire to have deeper engagement with the community. Given that we are male researchers, we would like to see how the prospective participants will interact with a researcher that is not of their same gender or affiliation. By constant and deeper engagement in this topic, we would like to see how being a male researcher will provide another perspective in writing about female bodybuilding athletes using the outsider-insider axis. We want to make sure as well that different sectors and nationalities will be further involved in sharing their stories to see what really made these women stay or not stay in this discipline and what lessons we can learn not only as aspiring sport sociologists but also as human beings that aspire for the better.

Conflicts of interest

We hereby declare that the research paper has no competing interest in any commercial associations or financial interests held by the authors.

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