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# Identity socialization and construction within the French national rugby union women's team

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this article is to present the output of a study on women who play rugby union at international level. This article aims to uncover the steps in their sport socialization – in rugby among others – and to understand how these women construct their identities. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 players from the French national rugby union women's team. First, the results show that the players have varied sport and rugby socializations. Sport socialization happened at an early age for most of the players, but two different subgroups seem to emerge vis-à-vis rugby socialization: members of the second underwent socialization through their family for many years, while members of the other were not as exposed to rugby. As far as the identity question is concerned, the players present different constructions vis-à-vis social norms. The results show that a majority of women say they do not feel the need to meet social norms said to be feminine, while others want to in order to free themselves from the masculine identity caused by the fact that they play rugby. Lastly, some of the players set limits on this double identity, which is sometimes identified as a constraint.

## **Keywords**

gender, high-level, identity, socialization, rugby union

## **Introduction**

Even though women's participation in a varied number of sports has increased considerably since the 1960s (Cox and Pringle, 2012), female rugby union players still constituted a minute fraction of the athletic population in 2010, abroad as well as in France, where they represent 0.07% of all sports federation members (Ministère des Sports, 2012). Yet, and contrary to what had been previously observed in France (Joncheray,

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2009) and abroad (Howe, 2001), their proportion seems to have risen recently among French rugby union federation members: from 3% in 2007 to 4.7% today (Ministère des Sports, 2010). Despite this slight increase, the French rugby union federation remains one of the federations with the fewest female members compared to men, as was the case over a decade ago (Louveau and DAVISSE, 1998). Moreover, despite the fact that their presence in the media is slowly developing, sociological studies of those female rugby players are scarce in France (Joncheray, 2009; Joncheray and Tlili, 2010; Vincent, 2005).

Hence our examination of the backgrounds of those few sportswomen who choose to play rugby union and who reach high-level competition. Precisely, we aimed at determining their sports background and understanding the way they interpret the fact that they are engaged in a sport that is atypical for a woman. We are primarily concerned with socialization and the gender issue for women committing themselves every day to a sport said to be masculine, these sportswomen who challenge woman's traditional image. This research aimed at grasping how they feel in a world in which their behaviour on the rugby field does not correspond to what is usually expected of a woman.

From a theoretical point of view, this article is based on the interactionist theory developed by the Chicago School and then by Goffman (1967, 1977a, 1977b, 1990), among others. This interactionist paradigm makes it possible to consider both the players' sports background and the context in which they play rugby. We have thus been able to look at the social and gendered constructions of their sports identities within the frame of an activity in which masculine domination prevails. As a matter of fact, sport projects the image of a masculine ideal: competition, strength, dexterity (Connell, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Whitson, 1994). Rugby is not to be outdone in that matter, especially since this sport is described as a specifically masculine space (Louveau, 1986; Mennesson, 2005), as a 'male preserve' (Sheard and Dunning, 1973), an example of 'masculinizing practice' (Connell et al., 1982) which 'symbolizes the values of manliness' (Mennesson and Clément, 2003) and a 'conservatory which lives on manly virtues' (Pociello, 1983). Sport sociology has very much dealt with the issues of socialization (Dubar, 2006; Le Mancq, 2007) and gender construction through and in sports, notably via studies about the experience of women who get involved in so-called masculine sports (Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Mennesson, 2000; Messner, 1990; Sabo, 1986; Theberge, 1995).

The social and sports construction of these seemingly unusual female players' identity (Becker, 1985; Goffman, 1967) is of prime interest to us.

## **Theoretical framework**

Our work focused on two processes: the sport socialization process and the identity construction process of high-level female rugby players in France. Our goal was to determine the sport socialization they have undergone on their way to becoming rugby players, and to uncover the identity strategies these women involved in a masculine sport implemented.

### *Socialization and gender socialization*

Socialization can be defined as the set of processes through which an individual is shaped by the global and local society in which he/she lives; processes during which

individuals acquire, 'internalize' and 'incorporate' ways of doing things, of thinking and of being that are socially situated. For Berger and Luckmann (1996), the socialization process phenomenon may be defined as 'the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it' (Berger and Luckmann, 1996: 150). This process occurs in relation with others, on the occasion of numerous social interactions (Mead, 1963). As underlined by Lahire (in Blöss, 2001), the question of gendered socialization is all the more complex since the distinction between feminine and masculine cannot be reduced to a simple, radical opposition. Moreover, a man asserted as such may very well have incorporated traits that are deemed feminine, while a woman may bear traits considered as masculine. Gendered socialization thus refers to the incorporation of sexed ways of behaving and thinking, which leads to the fact that someone thinks and feels like he or she is endowed with one given gender identity. Socialization operates through significant others (Mead, 1963), usually parents at first, which asserts the family's socializing force in gendered socialization as much as in sport socialization. Family acts like the melting pot of a differentiated socialization in which 'the internalization of sexed behavior models is the most "silent" and thus the one that has the most chances of prevailing with the obviousness of natural things and the natural of obvious things, meaning relieved of its arbitrary codes' (Blöss, 2001: 2). This is the case with gendered roles, from which it becomes very difficult to distance oneself.

In the sports sphere, socialization refers more precisely to the process through which sports activity allows one to assimilate ways of thinking, of doing things, of talking, etc., that are common to all members and ensure their integration. Sport acts directly on the body through practice, the material culture made up of equipment and specific clothing, the occupation of space, the images and imaginaries, as well as through the integration of the different types of social interactions. In this way it constitutes an efficient vector of reproduction of gender hierarchies, just as it allows one to question norms and thus makes them evolve. Learning these behaviours that form a specific subculture (Goffman, 1977a), through impregnation and incorporation, will create a sort of repertoire of actions and feelings for the players. This socialization to sports or through activities depends on many factors, such as the age at which one starts playing, one's family environment, sports background, etc. It is carried out 'in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants' (Goffman, 1967: 224). The goal is thus to obtain as much information as possible about the players' sports experience and to grasp the processes through which they made the decision to play rugby, as well as the meaning they attach to it.

We thus took an interest in the context in which the players discovered sports activities in general and rugby in particular, and more precisely in the sport socialization they have experienced.

### *The theories of gender*

Contrary to former conceptions of identity, which tended to present identity as a personal attribute, social scientists today agree that identity is a complex and dynamic process which combines several dimensions. Consequently, identity does not refer to a structure made up of features that are innate and unchangeable, but to a reality that takes shape and

changes during the course of an individual's life. Among identity's different dimensions, gendered identity appears to be central and as such, it is the outcome of a long social reflection. In view of this, gender's canonical definition put forward by Scott (1988) rejects the biological determinism implicit in the use of such terms as 'sexual difference' or 'sex' and emphasizes the relational aspects between masculinities and femininities since, above all, gender designates 'social relations between the sexes' based on perceived differences between men and women. This conception, which refuses to focus solely on the study of women as an isolated sphere, results however in power relations that tend to favour a male supremacy (Bourdieu, 1998; Delphy, 2001; Scott, 1988). Far from the essentialist theories based on the existence of supposed biological and psychological fundamental differences, gender, as it is examined here, refers to social constructions of roles and attributes specific to men and women (Mead, 1963) and implicitly displays the historical changes these social relations have undergone (Scott, 1988). There is no denying the biological differences between men and women but, as Goffman (1977a) emphasizes, they justify an 'arrangement' between the sexes. According to Goffman (1977a), there is a real confusion between the 'very slight' biological differences – which lead to 'presumed natures of the sexes' – and the social differences which perpetuate this unequal situation on a daily basis. The work of ethnologists, and then of sociologists, enables us to claim that one is not 'a woman' or 'a man' on the same terms. Far from representing something 'eternal', what the 'feminine' covers is therefore fluctuating.

And yet, sports activities are a special place where gender is built and on display, sometimes in the sense that conventions and gender hierarchies are perpetuated, sometimes in the sense of a negotiation: 'exercising comes to the same thing as building gender: one is always led to presenting oneself as a man or a woman, displaying one's masculinity or femininity in a more or less demonstrative manner' (Pfister, 2006: 67). Although Anglo-Saxon feminist perspectives expanded very rapidly in the 1980s (Terret, 2006), France remained quite impervious to them and the gender issue remained sport sociology's poor relation. Louveau (1986) established herself as the first specialist in this field by proposing a 'Bourdieuian' vision. Sport, historically a stronghold of masculine identity and an area of male domination, partially opened up and allowed greater participation of women. However, the 'sportswoman' still remains a myth that hides many inequalities: women are still under-represented, and they neither get involved in all sports nor do this on the same terms as men (McKay and Laberge, 2006). In the light of this important sexuation of sports, rugby would appear to be a masculine citadel whereas dancing, for example, would offer an ideal of feminine norms and archetypical values. For some, the sports sphere is even one of the social fields in which gender socialization acts most strongly (Messner et al., 2000), a sort of sanctuary for a very traditional masculinity and femininity.

But, considering that the institutional bans have been lifted, the weak representation of women in activities such as soccer or rugby is probably linked to the imbalance between traditional social categorizations. Accusations of virilization (Louveau, 1986), marginalization, suspicions of homosexuality and/or refusal to recognize their legitimacy are regularly imposed upon women who transgress traditional gender relations.

Goffman (1977b) sees gender as a 'sexual subculture', that is to say a space in which identities confront and observe each other, negotiate and get lost by merging into one another. Gender 'is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; "the interior" is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody' (Butler, 2006).

All in all, exercising has a major impact on the construction of one's self – one's gendered self, among others – with sport playing 'a crucial part in the construction and maintenance of people, in the development of gender as personality' (Connell, 1987, in Messner and Sabo: 175). According to Pike (2007), women are less likely to consider sport as a way to gain a valued social identity (Pike, 2007) than men are.

Gender identity and the constitution and modification of gender behaviours are of particular interest to us. The concern of this research extends beyond the problems arising from the process of labelling someone as a man or as a woman (Goffman, 1990), also questioning 'under what arrangement this occurs and what symbolic reading is given to the arrangement' (Goffman, 1977a: 307).

If Goffman's positioning on identity seems particularly heuristic to us, we should bear in mind that he focuses on microsociological aspects; the dependency between the phenomenon we study and parameters pertaining to the macrosocial dimension (Giddens, 1988) should not be neglected.

Gendered and sport identities can be at the centre of the socialization concept: 'Every individual integrates in a syncretic way the plurality of social affiliations: gender, age, social class, cultural group' (Cuiche, 1996: 91). And socialization itself is an identity process. The link between these two dynamic processes is therefore of prime interest in order to study these players who transgress (Becker, 1985; Goffman, 1967) prevailing representations of women, at the risk of being stigmatized.

The key questions examined in this paper are: how do these players go beyond the paradox of being a woman and conform to a so-called feminine attitude while attaining a sufficiently high level of skill to be acknowledged as high-performance athletes (Kolnes, 1995; Laberge, 1994; Theberge, 2000); and what are these women's strategies regarding identity in a world in which most individuals expect a rugby player to be a tall, muscular man (Becker, 1985: 55)? The questions are all the more significant in rugby since, at equivalent levels, the rules today are rigorously identical for men and women. There are no 'girls' rules' (Lenskyj, 1986).

## **Methodology**

The study of the players' socialization and identity construction is of particular interest to us. The women who enter this territory in small numbers, transgressing traditional social expectations relative to their gender's roles and attitudes, call into question the identity construction process in a so-called 'masculine' world. We wondered if they try to emulate the actor's social competence in the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), if they live in two cultures: 'the sport culture that is inherently masculine and the larger social culture where femininity is celebrated for women' (Krane et al., 2004: 315). That is why the research method used to obtain the data was based upon semi-directive interviews. The methodology was therefore the Chicago School's, taken up by Goffman – a

qualitative methodology carried out in interaction with the players. As a matter of fact, face-to-face interaction with the interviewer, also a woman in this case, seems to be a relevant means to reactivate the self-presentation processes implemented by female rugby players and thus to highlight them. A genuine social situation, this direct encounter is an occasion for players to put on a performance in which the stake is not to 'lose face'. Moreover, the interview makes it possible to access the actors' point of view by encouraging their participation in the elaboration of meaning. In this way, the interview is about focusing on the ways the interviewees interpret their world: the way they speak of and comment on their activity gives us information about their categories of perception and about the pivot points that are essential to make their actions intelligible. The interviewee thereby hands over the interpretative frameworks through which he perceives and reads his experience (Berger and Luckmann, 1996). Resorting to interviews allows the interviewees to formalize their experiences and, in this way, to explore what they have gone through, the thoughts they had, their attitudes and the representations which are linked to their activities.

The aim was to hear atypical subjects' beliefs which challenge (Goffman, 1990) the feminine gender's traditional status. Lahire (1998) claims that all individuals bear a plurality of ways to see, to act, to feel, stemming from a great variety of socializing experiences that are not necessarily coherent, and may even be completely incompatible. In the case of partially or totally incompatible socializing frameworks, tensions can thus exist between contradictory abilities.

The interviews took place in September 2011 at the French federation's Centre National de Rugby during a team gathering for medical and physical tests. Knowledge on the subject, linked to previous work and to the fact that the first author, who interviewed the players, played rugby at national level for 10 years, facilitated contact with the players and staff members. The sample was made up of 12 active players from different clubs among the 22 players selected to be part of the French national rugby union women's team. Aged between 20 and 28, with 3–40 caps, they had varied backgrounds that were not an *a priori* selection criterion for the sampling (see Table 1).

The objective of the interviews was to know better the sports background of players who managed to reach the international level and to define the influence of their background on their identity construction. The interviews comprised five major themes. The first subject was that of rugby practice (rugby training, family influence); then we covered their sports background (other sports practised, in what conditions) and sociability. When trust had been (gradually) established, more personal themes were addressed: comparisons between rugby played by men and rugby played by women; the relationship with the body through the notions of femininity and masculinity. The players were assured that their interviews would remain anonymous.

The interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour, were recorded with the players' consent and entirely transcribed *verbatim*. A first reading consisting of examination of the data allowed us to be imbued with it and to bring to light the 'actors' point of view' (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2012: 144). A second and third reading were needed to identify the topics brought up repeatedly, in order to thematize them (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). The themes were then subjected to a conceptualizing categorization. The chosen categories thereby correspond to the beginnings of the theorization by



**Table 1.** Interviewee characteristics.

Participants	Age when started playing rugby	Position	Sports background	Rugby family
1	9	Forward	Ballet dancing	Yes
2	6	Forward	Rugby	Yes
3	14	Forward	Handball	Yes
4	13	Forward	Dancing/Karate	No
5	18	Back	Gymnastics/ Climbing/Handball	No
6	17	Back	Football	No
7	16	Forward	Rugby	Yes
8	17	Back	Judo/Tennis/ Football/Handball	No
9	7	Back	Dancing	Yes
10	6	Forward	Gymnastics	Yes
11	18	Back	Cross-country skiing	No
12	18	Forward	Handball	No

implementing the reference paradigm – Goffman’s among others, in this case. However, this categorization focuses on the empirical data, without a pre-established conceptual grid: the interpretations are formulated by induction.

## Results and discussion

### *The players’ sport socialization*

We observe a variety of sports and rugby socializations. Nonetheless, in the face of the apparent diversity of their sports background, all the players seem to elaborate on the fact that rugby was either suggested by their parents or discovered ‘by chance’ through school or university.

For some of the players (5 out of 12 interviewed players), rugby union was a little-known activity up to the age of 17–18, when it was proposed, if not imposed, upon their entry into university. Although they engaged in the game relatively late (Chu et al., 2003; Joncheray and Tlili, 2013) their success was swift, which certainly contributed to the fact that they continued the activity and quickly accessed high-level competition. For some of the players, choosing to start playing rugby is the result of a combination of circumstances: ‘I fell into rugby in Sport Sciences, at university, I was 18 years old. The coach gave me a pair of shorts, a pair of shoes and I found myself playing with the girls’ (interview 12). That did not correspond to a personal choice: ‘so, no, I hadn’t chosen rugby at all and I had no choice actually because in the panel of activities that were available, mandatory actually there was (...) football, basketball, handball and rugby, we had no choice’ (interview 12). This was also the case for other players: it was ‘an activity imposed upon everybody at university’ (interview 5) and ‘through university, I started, actually, in



Sport Sciences' (interview 11). The late start of rugby practice is coupled with a relative unawareness of, and little interest in, the activity up to that point: 'I didn't know the sport but I watched for five minutes when I flicked through channels, but then I didn't understand, I didn't know anything about the rules so I stopped watching but it wasn't a sport I was really attracted by' (interview 12); 'I knew of rugby, I saw the Six Nations Championship matches but I wasn't really interested' (interview 11). Still, studying these players' sports backgrounds shows that their sport socialization had begun at a very early age, as had competition: in the practice of handball, in which the player describes herself as 'a competitor in everything she does' (interview 12), the practice of high-level cross-country skiing in a club from the age of six (interview 11), the practice of football in a club between the ages of 7 and 17 (interview 6). All of these players had practised one or several physical or sporting activity(ies) competitively before discovering rugby. As Mennesson (2000: 31) showed with regard to boxing, 'the entry of women into the world of boxing depends on (...) the inculcation of a competitive sporting ethos during the primary stage of socialization'. But, as we had already found in research on French women playing rugby in the first division (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013), our sample did not fully confirm Mennesson's second necessary but insufficient condition, i.e. 'involvement in traditionally masculine games and sports during childhood' (Mennesson, 2000: 31). Noted sports include tennis, climbing, gymnastics and cross-country skiing as well as other activities with a masculine connotation such as handball, football and judo, and two of the five players had played several sports: three sports for each case, practised in competition. Of the 12 players, two interviewed came from families where parental sports activity was almost nonexistent. Both discovered rugby through school. One was enrolled in a high school with a Sport-Etudes [sports study] programme. After trying judo, tennis, football and handball in clubs, she started playing rugby at the age of 14. The other player started playing rugby at age 13 in the rugby section offered by her middle school.

For these novice players, rugby was, from the beginning, synonymous with success. The first year is described as follows: 'It went really well, we won every match easily' (interview 12); 'We played a match against the Nancy team and actually the Nancy team recruited me' (interview 11); 'So, I had never touched a rugby ball, neither had my friends. And (...) we won without knowing the rules so the following year we set up a team' (interview 11). These interview excerpts show how important it is for athletes 'to present themselves to the rest of the world as a competent person' (Coakley and White, 1999: 84) by quick mastering of techniques said to be masculine on the field.

For five other players, family socialization into rugby is conversely much accentuated and the beginning of the practice was early – at the age of seven: 'In fact, I come from a rugby family', said interviewee 9.

My brother, yeah. Well he went to practice so on Wednesday afternoons I stood by the field. And one day somebody said: why don't you play? So I said yes, it was appropriate because I was playing around with the ball all the time... at six years old my brother played, I went to watch him and my parents (her father coached and her mother was the secretary of the club's rugby school) enrolled me in rugby. (interview 10)

Socialization through family (Wheeler, 2012) or the influence of parents (Brustad, 1993; Colley et al., 1992; Côté, 1999; Donnelly and Young, 1999) – and, more precisely,

of fathers (Bryson, 1987; Chu et al., 2003) – on their daughters' participation in rugby is a prevailing element: 'My father played rugby for 20 years, my grandfather too, none of my cousins did so somebody had to take over' (interview 3). Having a brother who already plays rugby can also make it easier for girls to engage in it.

I must have been six years old (...), I came to it through my father who was a community sports coach (...) then a player, he had enrolled my brother who's three years older in rugby and one day when I was old enough he said, well let's enrol the daughter too. (interview 2)

The influence of male family members is perceived as 'natural': 'I came naturally to rugby through my father, by going to watch him play, we went every Sunday' (interview 1). As Mennesson (2004: 72) showed, female rugby players who are regularly brought to matches learn by immersion: they 'learn the technical features of the activity and become familiar with its modes of sociability'. These female players may have benefited from early socialization through rugby and, thus, from the development of specific dispositions preparing them for the rugby lifestyle, 'favoring an adjustment of the representations of the activity among others' (Le Mancq, 2007: 141). Goffman (1967) speaks about the 'all-time-in' phenomenon when talking of individuals who are virtually constantly immersed in an environment. Conversely, players with a more diverse sports background seem more likely to have internalized different institutional sub-worlds. However, despite a strong family engagement in rugby, it was rarely the first sport these players took up. We observed that a vast majority of players (four out of five) had tried other sports. In the most frequent cases, they had tried sports seen as feminine (dancing, gymnastics), in which they participated for only one year – 'I did ballet for one year but I was kicked out pretty quickly (laughs). I fidgeted too much, I couldn't stand still' (interview 9) – and unsuccessfully – 'I was out of sync with the others, I bowed to the audience when nobody had yet (laughs), I did not follow the same pace' (interview 4). As with French first-division female players (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013), we come to conclusions that differ from those of Louveau and Davisse (1998: 119), who wrote that for women to succeed in a 'masculine' sports activity, they should learn beforehand how to simulate behaviours through activities like dancing.

In a general manner, early competitive sport socialization (Louveau, 1986; Mennesson, 2004) of the players interviewed, carried out by their fathers or brothers (Mennesson, 2004), can be observed. Only one player differed. Indeed, although from a family very much committed to rugby – her brother a professional player, her father playing too – she came to rugby quite late, at the age of 16, for she deliberately opposed the model passed on to her: 'I lived in a very rugby-influenced environment because I have a brother who's a pro but I heard about it so much (...) at home that I wasn't interested at all' (interview 7).

Our results show that some players have only known this sports universe, whereas others discovered it much later. No player expressed the feeling of having deliberately engaged in the process of committing herself to rugby union. The fact that these women play rugby is therefore not the result of a choice they had previously thought about or anticipated. In the light of these answers presenting players with various profiles, we wondered about their identity construction processes (Dubar, 2006).

## *The players' identity construction*

During the interviews, the players highlighted the difficulties they feel they face in their identity construction. The players notably mentioned different gender identity constructions through the intensive practice of a sport that does not match the models traditionally associated with the female gender.

The players are aware that they are engaged in an activity considered masculine, and of the questioning it may entail in relation to the construction of their identity, whether this questioning is personal or comes from people they mix with:

Then, it's difficult too because yeah, you play a man's sport so you're a man. Well, I'm not comfortable with that. And then, some girls, their boyfriends don't want them to play rugby because they come back with bruises. There's this one girl who had to stop because she kept coming back with bruises. Well, for me he'll have to accept my sport and me. Isn't that right? (interview 2)

The player interviewed seemed to accept her body and the marks on it; she did not want 'to hide (her) rugby (body) or deny (her) involvement in the sport' (Chase, 2006: 241). However, she mentioned the reactions of others, which is thus a determinant in the process of labelling her (their) acts as deviant (Becker, 1985: 35).

Moreover, the players' identity construction may be directly impacted by some kind of stigmatization.

We must go beyond clichés because it's a pain in the ass. Because it's especially false to think that if you go see a girls' match you'll see a bunch of men. These prejudices are annoying, it's got to stop. That girls who play rugby are all men and all homosexuals. (interview 3)

As Cox and Thompson argue, 'female athletes, who deviate from the "norms" of femininity [...] are challenged overtly and covertly about their sexuality' (2000: 8). The suspicion of homosexuality to which female athletes are subjected is a means to restore the fragile frontier between masculinity and femininity (Richard and Dugas, 2012). By designating as a homosexual an athlete found to be too masculine, the gender 'duality' is preserved.

The players feel they are carrying a plurality of abilities which are, depending on the context, going to be put on hold or set in action, inhibited or activated (Lahire, 2005), and are sometimes considered as deviant: 'They don't understand that you can be both – well, that you can play a boys' sport and be feminine outside. It's not because you play a boys' sport that you are a boy outside the sport' (interview 4).

For these players, the practice of rugby is 'feminine-appropriate' (Hargreaves, 1994), it does not seem contradictory to them to be a woman and to play rugby. In order to face this apparent double constraint, the players bring up the possibility of being different on and off the field, with 'dual identities, as woman and athlete, which develop alongside one another although they appear to be incompatible with each other' (Russell, 2004: 562): 'Well, it's always been important for me to have this feminine side, you see, in the clothes I wear, my behaviour, etc. Because I don't have it on the field... to counterbalance these two sides a bit' (interview 11).

For some players, showing their femininity is a desire and an achievement which does not challenge but, on the contrary, reinforces dominant discourses of sport and sporting bodies (Chase, 2006: 229):

For a long time, I was actually trapped by my image. In the sense that since I was the tomboy of the group (...) I had a hard time breaking away from that image, well I wasn't the one who had a hard time understanding but it was hard for me to accept the remarks from others when I exuded a little femininity. I didn't stand up to it when I actually liked it, I wanted to but I told myself I was going to get some remarks if I did this, if I put that on, you see I was even ashamed of crossing my legs. (interview 12)

For some time, this player performed masculinity under constraint, so as not to depart from the masculine identity that was assigned to her. Thus, these players dare not assert their femininity and set avoidance strategies, whereas others refuse to be stigmatized (Becker, 1963) and work as best they can to get closer to the norms of feminine appearance: 'I often wear skirts, I always wear heels because I work in commerce and when people ask me if I do sports, I say yeah, rugby, and then they look at me from head to toe. It makes me happy; I prefer that kind of reaction' (interview 3). By challenging the image of the rugby player, 'these players reinforce (...) notions of normative femininity' (Chase, 2006: 230) but, contrary to what Chase (2006: 241) showed, not all of them 'proudly display their identity as rugby players through and on their own bodies'.

Unlike the female football players studied by Mennesson and Clément (2003), we observe in these two players a desire to accept the work of feminine body appearance, even if they do not go as far as using their sport activity as a means to be more attractive to men (Pike, 2007). They seem to agree to offer a self-presentation in compliance with dominant gender norms, with an appropriation of feminine schemes that correspond to a specific manner of appearing, of acting and of feeling (Goffman, 1977a).

On the other hand, for some of the players femininity may not require ostentatious participation in 'theatrical performances' (Goffman, 1959) in order to exist:

We live in a society that cares only about what's on the outside and not on the inside of a person. Of course, when you see a girl show up in sweatpants and sneakers and a girl with skin-tight jeans and heels or ballerina shoes, of course you're going to say beforehand that the one with heels and ballerina shoes is more feminine than the other one, when sometimes you must beware of that, sometimes it's the total opposite, sometimes some of them are more of a girl when they wear sweatpants. (interview 2)

Thus incorporated, this way of being does not seem to need to be either claimed or displayed (Mead, 1963). Cox and Thompson noticed that 'wearing make-up, perfume, dresses or skirts, all formed part of what these players described as acting in a feminine way, even though none of them believed it was necessary to behave like this in order to be feminine' (2000: 14). Furthermore, we could say that these players claim the right not to display a femininity that might be irrelevant to them, that might be simulated to better match an ideal: 'I won't wear heels and a mini-skirt just to show I'm a girl, you see. I don't need that. In fact I'm not a girlish girl' (interview 7). The players try to resist images of ideal feminine bodies and, at the same time, work to develop new female

aesthetics, and 'in this process they create new discourses and bodies' (Chase, 2006: 235). This identity construction is justified by the rugby identity – 'Being in a boys' sport, we're not girls who, well, we're feminine and all but we're not on the extreme' (interview 6) – or, more generally, by the sports identity: 'We're sportswomen, we put on shorts, a T-shirt. We stay feminine in our movements, we don't want to look like men, we're not men, we're girls' (interview 8). If the players refer here to their sex class, they do not judge themselves completely according to ideals of femininity. It therefore seems difficult to speak of gender identity (Goffman, 1977a); the notion of 'female sex-class' (Goffman, 1977a) possessing certain traits, certain feminine attributes, seems more appropriate for now. In order to deal with this paradoxical situation, the players build their own arrangement (Goffman, 1977a) between their biological and social sexes.

There is very little interest here in the body's appearance (Bernard, 1971: 28). All the more so with the following player, who explains she is detached from her looks: 'I don't tell myself I'm no longer feminine. I never was, I guess, so no, not at all. I don't give it any importance' (interview 11). But maybe this is also an avoidance strategy and a way of ensuring compliance with what friends and relatives say: 'I've always been called a tomboy since I was a kid so it's a little fixed in me. If they understand, fine. If they don't, they don't. All my friends and relatives do' (interview 11).

This heterogeneity observed among the interviewees is clearly expressed by the players, but the identity they put forward the most corresponds to the one which allows them to limit the stigma (Goffman, 1990):

We have girls who stay very feminine, who put on make-up after the matches, it exists (...). Some wear stilettos before and after the game. (interview 2)

In rugby, you get girls who are very feminine. There's one, she's a real princess, you see, feminine, I mean elegant. It's not that we're not elegant, but she's refined, you see, the type of girl men look at. When you see her and then the hard tackles she makes on the pitch, you wonder where the hell she comes from. (interview 7)

The whole paradox is expressed well in this last instance, in which the fact that a player meets the norms of both femininity and masculinity surprises even her teammates. This player displays at the same time athletic qualities considered fundamental by men (Goffman, 1977b) and a feminine body and behaviour, 'which generally appear to be incompatible with each other' (Russell, 2004: 562).

## **Conclusion**

We have put forward a variety of sport and rugby socializations, with one thing in common for all the players: none expressed the feeling of having intentionally turned to rugby union. The families or schools' influences are the two points of entry in this activity considered as masculine.

On the whole, the results show that what matters above all for these players is not to be stigmatized (Goffman, 1990). Their identity constructions are diverse and all have been confronted at some point with questions about their gender identity. However, no

player seems to view her activity as an opportunity to claim an evolution in the great divide between the feminine and the masculine. Some claim to be athletes on the field and women off it, sometimes tending to reinforce their feminine identity by gradually adopting feminine norms. These players, in particular, tend to incorporate some rather traditional norms of femininity. Others mention, besides physical appearance, the possibility of being a woman ‘on the inside’ without their femininity being part of an act (Goffman, 1959).

We can wonder whether, like women pursuing a career in bodybuilding (Bunsell, 2013), rugby can be seen ‘as an emancipatory and empowering transgression from hegemonic standards of femininity’ (Bunsell, 2013: 7) for these players. Must the female rugby player be perceived as an icon of feminism capable of disturbing the social order or, conversely, as a ‘victim’ of a sexual classification which places great emphasis on masculine norms? The answer is not obvious.

In any case, these multiple identity constructions show female rugby players’ ability to explore a sports activity such as rugby and express their gender (Goffman, 1977a) while somewhat disrupting the social order of these contradictory identities, which are often ‘kept separate but at other times merge’ (Krane et al., 2004: 326).

In an environment that has not been designed to evocate gender behaviours (‘genderisms’) that are feminine (Goffman, 1977b), engagement in a so-called masculine sport highlights in these players the deep and changing nature of gender.

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