Response to Cohen: Separating Sport From Sexuality in Women’s Roller Derby

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A few years ago, Cohen (2008) published the article titled, “Sporting-self or Selling Sex: All-Girl Roller Derby in the 21st Century.” She spent the winter and spring of 2006 practicing and participating as a member of the Boston Derby Dames (BDD). She performed covert participant observation, failing to inform the skaters in the league as to her intents and goals as an academic researcher. She also presented her experiences and personal feelings while making the transition from a “freshmeat” (new recruit) to an accepted member of the organization. She also analyzed particular aspects of the league, and derby in general, for the tension between athletics versus sexuality. She concluded that “sex sells and the sporting self is sacrificed” (33). In this critique, I challenge her choice of such a controversial research method. I also question the findings Cohen presents, pointing to temporal curiosities and methodological anomalies in the examples she provides. In the end, I agree with part of what is discussed throughout her original paper, that roller derby is a complex and oftentimes contradictory social world to study; however, I take issue with the findings that she does choose to emphasize.

First, a disclaimer. Like Dr. Cohen, I am involved in the sport of women’s flat-track roller derby. I started as a referee in late 2005/early 2006. Currently, I work as a referee, having taken the “derby name” of Professor Murder; since 2006, I have attended hundreds of practices, scrimmages and social events. I have also officiated over 100 public games, from pickup games attended by dozens of spectators to WFTDA Championship tournaments (from 2008 on). In that time, I have witnessed the sport grow from an amateur into a semi-professional organized sport, and witnessed significant cultural and social changes in nearly seven years’ time. Situations similar to those Cohen describes in her article rang true for myself, from deep discussions about the design of uniforms to initiation rituals involving “freshmeat” skaters. I believe that the experiences I have had over the years allow me to contextualize and understand the arguments that Cohen makes in a way that helps shed light on some of the shortcomings of her article.
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Terminology

Cohen’s article discusses some of the unique lexicon used by people involved in the roller derby world, but it also neglects to clarify some terminology that might be confusing to outsiders. “Leagues” are geographically-based organizations that practice and promote roller derby; league members can include skaters, coaches, referees, and other volunteers (statisticians, medical staff, etc.). “Teams” are specific groups of skaters (and coaches) who belong to a single league. In Cohen’s article, the Boston Derby Dames are the league, while the teams are the Nutcrackers, Cosmonaughties, and Wicked Pissahs. Lastly, Cohen uses the term “quad skates,” which became a term used to differentiate their traditional style (two pairs of wheels underneath the ball and heel of the foot, respectively) from the “inline,” or “rollerblade” skate style. Lastly, the term “freshmeat” is commonly, but not universally, a term reserved for those who are in the early stages of joining a league. They may be new recruits, people who have not passed tryouts or physical requirements (as in Cohen’s case), or those who are not members of any teams yet. Irrespective of local variation, what all “freshmeat” have in common is that they are outsiders seeking to become insiders within a specific roller derby league.

Readers will also benefit from a brief explanation of additional terminology not included in Cohen’s piece. Teams themselves can be differentiated into “Intraleague” and “interleague” teams. For the Boston Derby Dames, the Cosmonaughties, Wicked Pissahs and Nutcrackers are all intraleague teams: at public bouts when they compete, they largely play against each other, and rarely play teams from other leagues. That responsibility largely rests on the interleague team (aka “travel team”) known as the Boston Massacre. With few exceptions, interleague roller derby teams consist of an “All-Star” cast of the top skaters from each of the intraleague teams. They play primarily against other interleague teams from rival leagues in other cities.

The Use of “All-Girl”

Cohen uses the term “All-Girl” multiple times in the article: once in the title and second to describe the “All-Girls Flat Track Roller Derby world,” adding that it is the term by which the sport is “known in North America” (25). She neglects to support that claim in the article, and does not provide a citation where one might find this phrase used to describe the sport. Since the inception of the WFTDA in November 2005, if not earlier, the sport has widely been referred to as “women’s roller derby.”

It is also often simply called “roller derby;” the renaissance of roller derby leagues has been almost entirely grounded in women’s organizations. As a result, and defying gender normative expectations in sports, women’s leagues became the default category. Male leagues, by comparison, have to specify the gender of the participants. The website of the Harm City Homicide declares that they are “Baltimore’s first and only male flat-track roller derby team” (Harm City Homicide).

Since 2005, the Boston Derby Dames have been members of the Women’s Flat-Track Derby Association (WFTDA), the national governing body of flat-track roller derby leagues. The name and mission statement emphasize the use of language (“women”) that avoids labeling the participating athletes as juvenile or amateurish (“girls”; for information on the WFTDA’s mission statement, see http://wftda.com/mission). The name of the organization and its own mission statement emphasize that it is an organization of “women,” not an organization of “girls.”

Covert Participant Observation

Cohen decided to use covert participant observation as her method of studying and examining the Boston Derby Dames. Covert methods have a long history of controversy due to the use of deception, denial of informed consent, and potential risks posed to both researchers and their subjects. Cohen claimed that, “although sometimes considered controversial, largely due to the lack of notice given to the observed members of the group…[it] is nonetheless a valued method of inquiry…allowing access to groups that might otherwise not choose to be studied” (25). The controversy surrounding the use of covert methods is not sometimes a consideration. The history of covert participant observation elaborates the special conditions where covert methods are appropriate and the care that must be taken when using them.