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Finding the Goalposts: Masculinities through Sports Clubs in South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa is a sport-loving nation. This love has been mobilised towards nation-building discourse by many opportunistic politicians and entrepreneurs. Lived realities, however, remain fragmented, with crime, poverty and gender-based violence plaguing everyday life for the majority. This ethnography attempts to find out how sports clubs shape the conceptions, performances and embodiment of masculinities for young men in the town of Upington, South Africa. Existing anthropological research on masculinities and sports clubs often situates young men at the poles of victimhood or perpetration of violence. Drawing on the theoretical framework of incompleteness, this limiting construct is problematised through a historical and interpersonal analysis into the construction of masculinities in local sports clubs. This research was conducted through seven-weeks of fieldwork, participating and spectating training sessions and clubhouse interactions amongst two Upington sports clubs playing football and rugby, respectively. These interactions, animated by semi-structured interviews, allow the reader to access complex narratives of care, interdependence and agentic identity formation. Both clubs moralise players through appeals to ambition and responsibility. While ableism and heterosocial visibility is reinforced in the body through jest, players engage with questions of identity beyond the “disciplined” or “bad-boy” stereotypes often associated with sporting masculinities. Appropriate forms of public care are negotiated and demonstrated through an analysis of handshake rituals and responses to on-field tragedy. Ultimately, this paper argues that Upington’s sports clubs shape and are shaped by its young participants, creating a culture of toughness and varied levels of (in)vulnerability while promoting important social connections. It reveals the importance of community in regulating permissible behaviours, and the imperative for open communication and innovative regimes of care to destabilise harmful masculinities.

Keywords: masculinities; sports clubs; intersectionality; identity; interdependence; incompleteness; ethnography