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Regular Paper

Showing up “More as My True Self”: Gender and Mushing in the United States

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Abstract

Mushing exists in several forms: short and long-distance races, adventure tourism, recreation, and sport. While some scholars assert that gender does not influence a musher’s experience, this research, based on interviews with mushers, broadens understanding of how gender influences mushing and a musher’s sense of self. Nearly all research participants initially stated that gender is irrelevant in mushing; for example, in competitions, people of all genders compete directly against one another. As interviews unfolded, participants spoke about how gender norms and stereotypes complicated their experiences and how non-mushers perceive them. Despite depictions of mushing as masculine, participants stated that mushing embodies both masculine and feminine traits and is empowering for all genders. We suggest that scholars in outdoor recreation continue to broaden their research agendas to acknowledge the complexity of gender identities and the empowering nature of the outdoors, particularly for persons who reject the traditional gender binary.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, dogsledding, mushing, outdoor recreation, queerness*

Introduction

In the world of outdoor recreation and nature-based sport, mushing—the practice of tethering a dog to some form of a movable object, also known as dogsledding—presents an opportunity for scholars of gender and identity to explore the ways in which men, women, and nonbinary people experience their gender as mushers and as rivals during races (Braverman, 2017). Kemp, in a sociological analysis of mushing, argued that dominant notions of gender are not operative during races (1999). This paper engages with Kemp’s assertion in light of current racing culture as described by our participants, and examines aspects of mushing other than racing, such as caring for and selling dogs and interactions with sports media and spectators.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted with eight mushers residing in the United States, we contribute to the scholarship on gender and the outdoors in three ways: first, we focus on what it means to be a musher from a musher’s perspective; second, we explore how gender influences mushing and how mushers form networks; and third, by including the experience of non-binary and queer mushers, we avoid the gender and sexuality binary of male /female

or homosexual/heterosexual (Marinucci, 2017). While many participants did not initially interpret gender as relevant to the mushing experience, as they shared examples from their mushing worlds and the tensions that normative expectations of masculinity and femininity created, they revealed not only that gender did matter, but how and when it did.

Mushing in the United States

Mushing developed as a mode of transport for Northern Indigenous communities such as the Inuit of Alaska and the Canadian Arctic (Aporta, 2009; Guemple, 1986). The gold rush of the 1900s popularized sled dogs for mail delivery and to transport prospectors and trappers (Brown et al., 2014; Butcher, 1999). With the introduction of the snowmobile, dogsledding is no longer a primary form of transportation (Brown et al., 2014; Francis, 1969). The number of working sled dogs in Alaska declined between 1991 and 2008. Today, people mostly keep dogs for breeding, racing, and as pets (Brown et al., 2014).

Most racing sled dogs are Alaskan huskies (Granås, 2018), a lineage bred for performance that usually weigh between 45 and 55 pounds (Butcher, 1999). Competitive mushing developed in North America during the early 20th century (Herrman & Keith, 1997). In 1973, Dorothy Page and Joe Redington founded the Iditarod Trail Race that follows the 1,000-mile trail of the journey that relayed the diphtheria serum to Nome. It remains one of the most popular races in dogsledding today (Iditarod Race History, n.d.). Currently, over 8,000 people follow Mushing Magazine (@mushingmagazinellc, n.d.) on Facebook. We could not find aggregated data with respect to how many people currently mush or how many races take place annually in the United States. Races are run in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Alaska, and across the northeast. While Dorothy Page is recognized as “the mother of the Iditarod,” other prominent women include Libby Riddles (first woman Iditarod winner), Susan Butcher (who dominated the Iditarod in the late 1980s), and recent competitors, Aily Zirkle and Jessie Royer (Ho & Bragg, 2019).

Mushing as Outdoor Recreation and Sport

We situate our analysis within the literature of outdoor recreation and consider mushing both as a form of outdoor recreation and a nature-based sport (Humberstone, 2000). Mushing entails a range of equipment types, trail distances, and commitment levels. Depending on type and distance, mushers can run as few as one dog or as many as sixteen (Butcher, 1999). There are three major race categories: sprint (less than 30 miles), mid-distance (50-200 miles), and long distance (1,000 or more miles; *ibid*). While many mushers start with sprint races and then acquire more dogs to run distance races, others stay sprint or mid-distance mushers for their entire career. There are different commitment levels; a musher may be someone who has one or two dogs that they run on weekends using a bike or skis or someone who owns dozens of dogs and supports themselves financially through racing and for whom mushing is a lifestyle. Our participants mush either as their full-time job and/or they race competitively.

Mushing is similar to other outdoor sports such as kayaking, hiking, cycling, wilderness camping, mountaineering, or snow-shoeing. It requires physical strength, stamina, knowing one’s limits, technical knowledge to fix equipment and navigate outdoor terrain, exposure to extreme weather (heavy rain, snow, or hail), and potential isolation in the wilderness, which non-mushers might consider dangerous or risky. One aspect of mushing that these outdoor activities do not have is the relationship that mushers have with their dogs. In mushing, the dogs always come first. Mushers often tend to the needs of their dogs before their own (Braverman, 2017).

Finally, while some of our research participants run dogsled tours, tours did not figure prominently into how they understood themselves as mushers. Participants stated that races, conventions, and seeing other mushers on the trail validated their mushing identity and role as a member of the mushing community. Therefore, tours do not appear in our analysis.

Mushing, Gender, and the Outdoors

Given the above-mentioned reasons (e.g., stamina, being outside alone), scholars state that the outdoors is a “male and heterosexual space” (Humberstone, 2000; Jacobs, 2020, p. 5), with men considered leaders (McAnirlin & Maddox, 2020). Scholars also argue that expectations for women are lower than for men and in order to be taken seriously, women might feel the need to take risks that put themselves in danger (Evans et al., 2020; McAnirlin & Maddox, 2020).

This paper contributes to the study of gender in the outdoors in general, and an increasing focus on queerness in the outdoors (Asselin, 2019; Evans et al., 2020; Gray, 2016; Humberstone, 2000; Jacobs, 2020; McClintock, 1996; Meyer & Borrie, 2013; Sjögren et al., 2011; Warren, 1996, 2015). Gender is a social construction defined by “a combination of societally sanctioned traits for that sex” (Mitten et al., 2018, p. 319). A society’s dominant norms, values and institutions shape and generally privilege the masculine over the feminine. “Masculine” is the default state, particularly in public and active spaces, such as outdoor recreation (Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008; McAnirlin & Maddox, 2020; McNiel et al., 2012). For example, normative or expected behavior that constitutes a “real” man is that which is aggressive, assertive, and dominating, whereas normative feminine behavior is mothering, nurturing, submissive, community-oriented, and reliant upon others (Hentschel et al., 2019; Michaelson & Aaland, 1976). Through the process of socialization, children learn and internalize these norms, values, and behavioral expectations as if they are “natural” and “real.” Despite the fact the gender norms and expectations are neither fixed nor natural, they shape how persons ascribe traits and characteristics to others and to themselves (Hentschel et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2006). Many persons who live outside the gender binary challenge constructions of masculinity and femininity through queerness, “an umbrella [term]... used to describe sexual and gender fluidity” (Nwokocho, 2019, p. 72) whether or not it is tied to their gender presentation (Meyer & Borrie, 2013; Michaelson & Aaland, 1976). Three participants said that they were outside the binary. Their gender identity neither aligned with their assigned sex at birth nor with the traditional gender binary and its associated expectations of what it means to be a “man” (be masculine) or a “woman” (be feminine). Meyer and Borrie (2013) argue that women, non-binary, or queer persons often feel surveilled by others in the public domain. As one participant said, mushing allows them to show up as more of their “true self” (personal communication, July 17, 2020).

The Gendered Nature of Mushing

There is limited academic scholarship on mushing and its gender dynamics from the perspective of mushers themselves (Mosgaard et al., 2019). Research with Inuit communities focused on the continued importance of dogsledding to Inuit culture (Aporta, 2009), with brief mentions of the gendered division of labor for dog care (Guemple, 1986). Another strand of mushing scholarship focused on mushing tours and animal-based tourism (Bertella, 2014; Granås, 2018; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000) and did not include recreational and competitive mushing. In the competitive mushing scholarship, in addition to Kemp’s (1999) work, Dean et al. (1991) created personality profiles of Iditarod mushers by finish group. While their sample included both men and women racers, they did not state where women placed or if they dropped out. Dean et al. (1991) found that top Iditarod competitors were more aggressive than those who finished at the back of the pack or dropped out of the race and that top finishers were more enthusiastic and collaborative. Hentschel et al.’s (2019) research on gender stereotypes found that these former traits (i.e., aggression) are considered masculine whereas cooperation is considered a feminine trait. Our participants stated that success in mushing requires embracing both traditionally-understood masculine and feminine qualities and that mushing blurs gender boundaries. Given this context we sought to answer two questions, “what does it mean to be a musher?” and “how does gender influence the mushing experience?”

Methods

As gender is a social construct (Marinucci, 2017), we designed a qualitative research project that used an interpretivist framework (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Our approach focused on how each participant spoke about what it means to be a musher and how they made sense of their experiences when racing, being out on the trail, and interacting with other mushers and the media. After receiving IRB approval, we recruited participants through social media (Twitter and Facebook), mushing kennel websites, and from the rosters of large races, such as the Iditarod. We reached out to 31 mushers indicating that the research would focus on gender and how gender influences the mushing experience. Our final sample of eight mushers included four cis-women, one cis-man, one trans-man, and two nonbinary persons (one identified as a non-binary woman; see Jacob, 2020 for definitions). We had trouble recruiting cis-men; only 8% of those men approached participated, compared to 33% of women, 50% of trans men, and 100% of nonbinary people. Difficulty recruiting men to participate in research that asks them to discuss a personal experience or a sensitive topic is not unique (Butera, 2006; Siegel & Sawyer, 2020). Butera (2006) states that men's refusal to participate is one way that they perform masculinity and that men are more likely to participate when they feel certain that the research will allow them to perform their masculinity well (p. 1274). Perhaps the men we approached worried that they would be asked to examine male privilege and did not want to discuss that.

Five participants were distance mushers, two were sprint mushers, and one worked as a dog handler while competing in distance races. All our participants raced, recognized the stereotype of mushing as a masculine, and had been involved with some aspect of mushing for five to twenty years. None of the participants approached mushing as a hobby or a weekend pursuit. All participants were white, ranging in age from late 20s to mid-50s. Half of the participants lived in the continental United States (the lower 48), while the other half lived in Alaska.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted online interviews in Summer 2020, using a semi-structured interview protocol. Questions, such as “Could you describe how you became involved in mushing?” “How would you characterize your relationship with other mushers?” “How would you describe your gender?” and, “How would you say that your gender influences how you experience mushing?” were not asked in any particular order to support a natural flow of conversation. We probed to help participants create robust descriptions and reflect upon their experiences by asking them to walk us through, for example, the last time they experienced a particular validating or uncomfortable moment associated with mushing.

We recorded all interviews. With the exception of one 15-minute interview with a cis-man, all other interviews lasted more than 30 minutes. We transcribed each audio-recording to create a verbatim transcript resulting in 64 single-spaced pages and 38,293 total words for analysis. We manually analyzed each transcript using line-by-line, comparison-driven coding. Coding and re-coding took place until we reached the point of saturation and codes coalesced around a number of themes and shared meanings (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). To ensure study credibility, we reminded ourselves of our insider/outsider status vis-à-vis our participants across the research cycle (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As one researcher identifies as a cis-woman and the other as queer woman, during data analysis for example, we often saw different meanings in our participants' words, which we discussed and worked through as a form of analyst triangulation. To confirm that our analysis accurately presented our participants' experiences and upheld confidentiality (Kornbluh, 2015), we also conducted member checks. Four, or 50%, of the participants responded to our member check request and there were no major changes to our initial data interpretation and analysis.

Results and Discussion

Below we present the thematic analysis of interview data according to the paper's aims: 1) to discuss what it means to be a musher from our research participants' perspectives, 2) to

explore how gender influences mushing and how mushers form relationships and networks of community, and 3) to contribute to the scholarship on gender and the outdoors by including the experience of non-binary and queer mushers. Given the complexities of our participants' experiences, some themes are not mutually exclusive.

What it Means to be a Musher

During interviews, participants explained what being a musher means to them, including but not limited to, being there for other mushers on the trail and investing time, money, and emotion into their dog team. They commented that popular representations about mushing are misleading.

“The Select Few Who Have Gone to the Moon”- Camaraderie among Mushers

There is great diversity within mushing: racing (sprint versus distance) and recreational mushing on the weekends. For recreational mushers, belonging and camaraderie may involve passing other mushers on the trail and waving as they go by (personal communication, July 28, 2020). For competitive mushers, races allow them to meet and share stories, either at the race start, finish, or checkpoints along the way. Participants mentioned the importance of helping others to stay safe on the trail, expressing how they felt respect and safety amongst one another, often stressing that those outside of their circles could never understand the challenges mushing entails. They stated that mushing is extraordinary because of the beauty of being alone in the wilderness with only one's dogs. One participant said that being a musher was like being one of “the select few who have gone to the moon” (personal communication July 7, 2020).

“It's Always a Dude”- Frustrations with Popular Representations of Mushing

Participants expressed frustration with the general public's view of mushing as a masculine pursuit. This perception is understandable given normative understandings of the outdoors and the portrayal of mushers in film. A Disney+ subscription includes films such as *Togo*, *Iron Will*, and *Eight Below* (2019). Disney advertises all three movies with images of white men surrounded by dogs, ignoring the diversity of the mushing community found even within the sample of this study, reinforcing the idea that the expected or default musher is a man.

A participant who lives in the continental United States criticized mushing films as they depict a woman's sole purpose on a mushing team as providing “spiritual advice and supporting the man as he works with his dogs” (personal communication, July 17, 2020). The notion that a woman's purpose is to provide emotional support and act in a care-oriented, supportive role is the traditional gender stereotype (Hentschel et al., 2019). Participants noted that they wished that the media exposed the public to mushing content that does not conform to traditional, gender stereotypes. While traditional masculine traits of toughness and competitiveness are valued in mushing, so are traditionally-feminine traits of selflessness and care. Our participants, regardless of gender, strive to embody all these traits for successful runs and the health of their teams.

“One of the Best Feelings in the World”- Dog Care

Though some aspects of mushing align with masculine traits such as comfort and ease using hand tools, independence, and hardiness to withstand the outdoors, many participants, regardless of gender, explained that the joy of mushing has more to do with its caregiving and nurturing elements. In caring for their team and learning empathy, they come to understand their dogs as individuals and as team members (Kuhl, 2011). One participant explained that successful mushing is “knowing the personality of each and every one of your dogs, knowing who they like and who they don't like, knowing how far they can be pushed...” (personal communication, July 28, 2020). Another participant compared being a musher with “being a parent” (personal communication, September 9, 2020). Mushing is a 24-7 commitment; bonding and helping each dog reach its full potential (Kuhl, 2011). The cisgender male musher with whom we spoke stressed the importance of understanding animal psychology, as each dog has its own

personality (personal communication, September 9, 2020). Empathy leads to better mushing and is a reward in itself. Another musher said,

I just wish that people outside of the experience could feel, I wish they could feel what I feel when they see those dogs do something that those dogs never thought they could do before. Because it's, it's, I don't know, . . . it's one of the best feelings in the world that I've ever experienced (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

A musher cannot succeed without practicing empathy for their dogs. Likewise, the more time and care that a musher invests in understanding the needs and limits of their dogs, the more successful they might be. The surest way to gain acceptance by other mushers is to provide excellent dog care (Kemp, 1999). One participant simply said, “The thing that binds everyone together is the dogs” (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

Two female sprint mushers talked about negative experiences related to dog care, which subsequently made them both feel wary around men. The first woman stated that after her experience, “I did not trust men for a long time and that really colored my experience” (personal communication, August 10, 2020). According to these participants, such men were “bad eggs” who excessively pushed their dogs in order to win (personal communication, August 4, 2020). One sled dog handler, for example, wrote publicly about her experience in this regard. In her blog, she noted that she was worried about raising allegations of dog mistreatment against a well-respected musher and kennel owner until other women mushers supported her (Mendelson, 2020). Participants agreed that there is nothing wrong with wanting to win a race. All the mushers with whom we spoke highlighted the competitive nature of mushing, however, two of the women suggested that men might prioritize victory in a way that women mushers did not and that they witnessed more men than women committing acts of poor care.

Experiencing Gender as a Musher

Current scholarship suggests that as women enter traditionally masculine leisure activities, particularly those in the outdoors, gender dramatically impacts their experience (Evans et al., 2020). At first, nearly all participants stated that gender was not important to understanding mushing. This might be because women have long participated in distance mushing. As interviews progressed and participants were asked to provide concrete examples of their mushing lives, several participants stated that they enjoyed mushing because it allowed them to exist in a way that was not rigidly gendered. They explained how gender influenced their experience on the trail, treatment by other mushers, and the media. They revealed how gender (in combination with other factors such as geography or racing type) created networks and community, but also opportunity for negative gender-based encounters that those gendered networks helped them to reconcile.

“You Got to be a Little Bit Crazy to Get Involved in This”- Gateways to Entry

Participants noted some barriers to entry due to racing requirements and pertaining to traditional gender roles. The gear (such as a racing sled, cart, or dog truck) needed to participate as well as caring for and feeding even a few dogs is expensive. Tending to a team of dogs is time consuming. Demands on time and expense increase with the size of the sled dog team. Our participants noted that many women mushers juggled these tasks with other unpaid labor such as domestic chores and child or elder care. None of our participants were parents.

Whereas the obligations of marriage and family life sometimes prevent women from engaging in outdoor activities (Sjögren & Stjernberg, 2011), for some women mushers, romantic partners facilitated their involvement. One participant began mushing with a tour company and then learned how to mush from the man who is now her husband. Another started mushing as a joint activity with her significant other. These women spoke of knowing other mushers who began mushing as result of meeting their husbands. However, one of these women felt that some-

times the mushing community saw her as “musher number two” (personal communication, September 9, 2020). Considering the way in which gender socialization and social structures [lack of time, family obligations; Sjögren & Stjernberg, 2011] limit or delay women’s entrance into the outdoors (Warren, 1996, 2015), wives may have less experience racing than their male partners, which spectators and the press might interpret as less competence to compete.

“I Want the Medals”- Races, All-Gender Competition, and the Competitive Spirit

Participants valued races as an opportunity to build community and to interact and celebrate the sport with other mushers, dog handlers, and spectators. Many mushers enter races with the goal to finish, not to win. Participants noted that races offer an opportunity to test new gear for a future race or see which of their dogs is best suited for certain kinds of running (ex: does a dog like the slow pace of distance running or would it prefer to go faster?). While mushers can and do run their dogs without the structure of a race, one of the benefits of the race is that there are race officials and other mushers around to limit the chances of someone (human or dog) sustaining an injury. Additionally, in distance races, there are checkpoints, designated areas where mushers must check in and can rest their dogs and access veterinary care. These features allow mushers to see what their dog teams can do safely.

Races entail competition. For many of our participants, being recognized among their peers as a serious competitor is important to their self-image as a musher and resonates with prior scholarship suggesting that women often struggle with not being seen as “serious” in comparison to their male counterparts (Evans et al., 2020). We found this sentiment is true for sprint and distance mushers and for mushers of many genders. Placing highly, or even just finishing, signaled to the musher and spectators that they were serious and accomplished mushers who deserved recognition from their peers and spectators. Two women participants said that they used their platform as successful mushers to be role models for young girls and other women. Two other participants speculated that sprint mushing has lower barriers to participate, such as needing fewer dogs, which may be one reason why both men and women are equally likely to succeed and win sprint races, whereas men tend to win more often in distance races.

An equal playing field for men and women as distance mushers was a point of pride. A cis-gender male musher stated, “We’re all equal competitors” (personal communication, September 9, 2020). Other participants said, “When I win a race, I’m not the first woman to the finish line. I’m the first person” (personal communication, September 14, 2020). The lack of gendered or sex-based classes in distance mushing means that women cannot “conform to the social prejudice that men’s sport is significant while women’s sport is less serious or important” (Evans et al., 2020, p. 3). There is no men’s sport or women’s sport, there is just mushing.

Clothing worn during races contributes to an all-gender feel. A musher’s bulky clothes and multiple layers cover up the traditional biological signifiers of men and women (Kemp, 1999). In other sports, women may emphasize their feminine appearance “as a means of apologizing and avoiding stereotypes about their sexuality” (Evans et al., 2020, p. 3). Our participants said that mushers will sometimes go two weeks without changing their underwear and will wear men’s clothes for their added bulk (personal communication, August 10, 2020; September 14, 2020). Warmth is far more important than appearance.

Despite the absence of sex-based classes or divisions and the absence of external signifiers, many of the women mushers interviewed stated that they still had to prove to the general public and to men that they were worthy of the same recognition that men receive for their skill and effort. One woman musher explained that men often predicted that they or another man would win particular races, failing to consider that a woman could possibly win (personal communication, July 17, 2020). Geographical location influenced this attitude, with a lower-48 participant expressing dissatisfaction with how long it took women to dominate podiums in regional distance races (personal communication, July 17, 2020).

Mushing lacks gendered divisions. Transgender and nonbinary people do not have to pick a division that aligns with their gender identity to compete (personal communication, July 28, 2020). A nonbinary musher stated that the lack of sex segregation is another reason to love mushing (personal communication, July 28, 2020). Where scholarship of outdoor recreation discusses the importance of single-gender programming, mushing provides an example of all-gender competition (Evans et al., 2020). All-gender programming downplays differences in gender and sexuality and is gender blind. Martin and Phillips (2017) found that gender-blindness, downplaying rather than celebrating gender difference, increases women's "perceived fit and therefore their confidence" (p. 29). Gender blindness as a strategy is particularly successful for women in male-dominated or masculine environments, as it supports their ambition and has a positive effect on women's behavior (Martin & Phillips, 2017).

"If You Work Hard, You Will Be Given Respect"- Pushing Limits and Earning Acceptance

Evans et al. (2020) found that female athletes might take unnecessary risks, risking injury to prove themselves in the male-dominated world of outdoor competition. None of our participants suggested that they would take unnecessary risks to prove themselves. Particularly in Alaska, where mushers can be hours from the nearest hospital or road, risk-taking does not earn respect, as it also puts dogs at risk, contradicting the key ethos of good dog care.

Finally, every participant noted the prominent participation of, as well as the contemporary and historical successes of women in the sport, particularly in the Iditarod. Due to past trailblazers, women may feel a reduced sense of needing to prove the value of their whole gender within mushing communities (even if they feel the need to prove themselves as an individual). This sense of security appeared particularly in discussions with distance mushers.

More than one participant emphasized meritocracy, regardless of gender, in both mushing and outdoor recreation sports. Once a musher earns acceptance by consistently demonstrating a serious commitment to the sport, other mushers support and encourage them, but acceptance is not guaranteed. As only a small number of mushers share the same trails, most mushers within those subgroups know each other. Our participants shared that they are skeptical of new mushers, with a shared recognition that it takes time and experience gain entrance into their community. While definitions of how to achieve acceptance and recognition varied, every participant agreed that acceptance by other mushers is conditional. For example, acceptance can be lost with poor treatment of dogs. The transgender musher and nonbinary participants asserted that gender had little to do with their acceptance by other mushers, as prior connections in the mushing community and full commitment to mushing accelerated this sense of belonging.

"Yes, I'm Really Going to Do This"- Microaggressions On and Off the Trail

While none experienced transphobia themselves, queer mushers had heard of such occurrences and took steps to protect themselves. The queer mushers we interviewed intentionally avoided other mushers who they believed only wanted to work with men or who they thought held transphobic views about the ability of queer people to race. Such avoidance strategies as well as experiences of microaggressions discussed below demonstrate that as participants talked more about their experiences, they revealed how and when gender mattered.

Several participants recalled incidents that made them feel uncomfortable and were forms of microaggressions, a subtle form of speech or action that re-affirms dominant social norms and leaves the person on the receiving end of a comment or incident wondering if they are just being overly sensitive (Evans et al., 2020). Microaggressions that our participants shared included: publicly questioning their choices about how they care for their dogs or being reluctant to sell them dogs from their kennel. Women participants had micro-aggressive encounters with both men and women. For example, with respect to selling dogs, one woman participant stated, "I felt like she [the seller] just didn't take me seriously. She was only offering me rejects and old dogs and I'm like, this is not what I want, or need ... I just was not being taken seriously" (personal

communication, August 10, 2020). Women participants echoed frustration with feeling like other mushers did not take them seriously as competitors capable of winning a race. One woman shared that social media posting (for example, on mushing Facebook groups) left her feeling as though she needed to justify her choices (personal communication, August 4, 2020).

Participants expressed frustration with the words and actions of other social groups, such as spectators, fans, and the journalists covering races. One participant who identifies as a woman discussed how spectators reacted to her in a way that she felt was “different” from the way spectators treated male competitors, such as questioning their abilities or their intent to race (personal communication, July 17, 2020). Two other women participants critiqued how the press discussed women mushers, highlighting their gender rather than their accomplishments. One woman participant said,

when you're picked out as the first woman to do X, Y or Z, it feels like people are amazed that you're there in the first place, which is like the inverse... [it] attaches to the feeling of wondering whether you belong at all (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

This statement confirms how microaggressions work, with women questioning how others view their right or ability to race, which ultimately might affect self-esteem and self-confidence (Evans et al., 2020). Another woman participant discussed feeling “othered” when the press wrote about her being “the first woman” to achieve an accomplishment even though she was the very first person ever to achieve it (personal communication, September 14, 2020). This example shows how the press reproduces the stereotype that women engaging in outdoor sports are transgressive or exceptional given normative expectations about a woman's assumed competence to compete (Mitten et al., 2018). Most likely, journalists who make such statements intend to praise and promote women mushers as role models to younger girls interested in the outdoors and are either unaware or unconcerned about perpetuating gender inequality.

Warren (1996) describes the “super-woman,” as the woman who, in demonstrating competence in the outdoors, becomes disregarded as an anomaly by her peers. Since she (the super-woman) is competent in a way that women are not supposed to be, she is not really a woman (1996). Participants see this phenomenon in coverage of mushing. According to women mushers, journalists and other non-mushers often describe them as if their gender is the most interesting thing about them. Five of the participants felt that any musher of any gender is inherently transgressive or even a little weird. Even with the “super-woman” frustration, none of the women interviewed felt as though the superlative challenged their conception of themselves as women. The resilience, independence, and empathy required to succeed in mushing (Kuhl, 2011) either affirmed their sense of self as a woman or they felt that mushing removed the surveilling eye of society with respect to their gender identity (Meyer & Borrie, 2013).

While the cisgender male musher said that he began feeling like he belonged as a musher in his second year of mushing, persons of other genders spoke of mushing for nearly 10 years before feeling like they belonged. One woman participant stated that it often seems that male mushers “can start as a mediocre white man and already know they belong” (personal communication, July 17, 2020). Scholars suggest that people generally assume that men are more inherently competent in the outdoors (Gray, 2016; McAnirlin & Maddox, 2020).

“I Feel like I’m an Extra Badass”- Challenging Gender Norms

Despite obstacles that mushers of all genders encounter, the benefits of mushing stood out in interview transcripts. Mushing allows people of all genders to face challenges: through competition, developing empathy to bring out the best in their dogs, and survival in harsh conditions. By conquering these challenges, participants expressed increased confidence. As mushing violates norms of femininity, many women felt that breaking those norms was empowering.

One participant said, “If I was [a] male, who is also a musher, I might be like, I’m a badass, I’m a musher. But because I’m female, I feel like I’m an extra badass, because I’m a musher, and I’m female” (personal communication, September 9, 2020). To succeed in mushing, people of all genders practice empathy, strength, and resilience, and by moving beyond classifying whether these particular traits are masculine or feminine, mushers experience a profound sense of freedom.

When asked to describe a time when they felt validated as a musher, four participants’ answers included not just reaching a milestone, but having that success affirmed and recognized by peers, mentors, and competitors. For some, this moment occurred when they placed high in a difficult race, while for others it was when fellow mushers asked them for advice about dogs. One participant said, “the fact that I had done it [finished a huge race] with seven dogs in the stupid cold temperatures was kind of a moment when I realized like, oh, okay, maybe you are a badass” (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

In addition to providing a venue for new discoveries about oneself, mushing provides a space where participants feel more relaxed in their own skin. One woman said that mushing allows her to “show up more as [her] true self” (personal communication, July 17, 2020), highlighting the freedom from gender norms that has appeared throughout this paper. Mushing does not change participants’ gender identity, but allows them to more freely express their authentic self. This freedom is important for women and for the queer mushers interviewed.

Moving Beyond the Gender and Sexuality Binary

There is an emerging scholarship on queerness in the outdoors (Meyer & Borrie, 2013; Jacobs, 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Our interviews with a queer musher and two non-binary mushers contribute to this scholarship and illustrate how the outdoors can free queer people from normative expectations of behavior that are associated with their assigned gender at birth and allow them to express themselves outside of the gender binary.

“There’s More Queer People than You Think in Mushing” - Queerness in Mushing

Meyer and Borrie argued that being alone outside in a wilderness setting allowed persons who self-identified as transgender or queer an escape from “social definitions,” which forced them to focus on their outward appearance (2013, p. 304). Similarly, the queer mushers with whom we spoke noted that mushing provided them with freedom to focus on their inner self and not their outward gender presentation. One queer participant said that mushing “allows me ... quite easily not to have to fit into a gender box” (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

“Coming out” can be a stressful experience, particularly in insular communities, but one trans-man stated that he never worried about being accepted in the mushing community, though he did say that this was not the case for all the mushers that he knew (personal communication, July 7, 2020). On the other hand, one non-binary musher explained that they rarely felt the urge to come out to other mushers because they felt that mushers do not treat each other in gendered ways (personal communication, July 28, 2020).

Learning more and knowing about a growing queer mushing community was important to these mushers, with social media being a key element in establishing connections among queer people. While outsiders may not see these communities, participants noted that “there’s more queer people than you think in mushing” (personal communication, July 7, 2020). Equally important was non-queer mushers accepting them into the mushing community, either when they entered new circumstances (racing for the first time, working a new job as a dog handler, etc.) or came out to as queer. Participants shared multiple stories of accepting mentors and allies who were not queer themselves, but who took steps to ensure that they felt included (using correct pronouns etc.). Every musher with whom we spoke clearly stated that they valued their connections to mentors, often crediting such mentorship with their entry into the world of mushing.

Networks between queer mushers and mentorship are essential to queer people succeeding in the world of mushing.

Our study has limitations to be addressed in future research. One, we were unable to recruit as many cisgender men as we were members of other gender-identity groups and that makes it difficult to draw conclusions about how men experience gender as mushers. Two, we relied on one data collection method, interviews. Conducting participant observation at race checkpoints, finish lines, and press events would provide insight into a range of gendered interactions from dog care to media interview protocols and act as a source of method triangulation (Patton, 2002).

Conclusion

This research shows how different genders experience mushing as a form of outdoor recreation and perceive what it means to be a musher. From our analysis of interview data, we found that the gendered nature of mushing is more nuanced than prior scholarship indicates. When out on the trail, gender might not seem to matter (Kemp, 1999), but gender as a range of socially constructed identities operates before and after races, in the prediction of winners, and in other activities such as selling and caring for dogs and interaction with the media, even though mushing may be more gender-blind than other outdoor sports.

Women participants noted that spectators and journalists often made statements implying that they should question both their competence and whether or not they belonged in mushing (Evans et al., 2020). While the use of microaggressions is evident in mushing, as it is in other outdoors sports, participants still expressed a profound sense of freedom and empowerment when mushing, specifically the sense that they could more openly be their “true” selves. The relationship that mushers have with dogs makes it unique among outdoor sports, as mushers fulfill parental obligations of raising, bonding with, trusting their dogs instincts, and helping their dogs to reach their full potential (Kuhl, 2011).

Our research shows the merit of asking how and when gender matters and using a methodological approach that focuses on lived realities. In our participants’ voices, we heard how complicated gender is with respect to when and how gender does or does not matter and to whom (e.g., a musher’s own sense of self, other mushers or non-mushers such as journalists and fans). While our participants struggled with being definitive about and qualifying when gender matters, such inconsistencies are not weaknesses in the data, but rather show the complexity of gender as the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). We showed how our participants contend with media depictions that they believe are misleading and how they find acceptance and ways of being that help them be true to themselves.

Our research builds on prior gender-related scholarship that shows how women negotiate microaggressions and charges of incompetence, and how the wild is a refuge to escape societal constraints by focusing on a lesser studied sport, mushing (Jacobs, 2020; Meyer & Borrie, 2013; Mitten et al., 2018). The difficulty we had recruiting cis-men emphasizes the need for research on masculinities in mushing (Warren, 2015). As mushers who do not identify with traditional gender and sexuality binaries continue to openly compete in races, how cis-men understand the entry of new groups into this space will broaden understandings not only of what it means to be a musher, but also how cis-men negotiate, and to what extent and how they accept difference.

Our research provides insights for leaders in outdoor recreation. Educators and program administrators should acknowledge that even if rules and procedures require equitable treatment of participants, sexism often remains hidden. Participants in outdoor sports and recreation may not completely understand how commonplace words and actions constitute microaggressions. Establishing policies and systems that create an accountability mechanism for participants to report such incidents not only would set new behavioral expectations, but also provide leaders and administrators with knowledge about the form and prevalence of such hostilities in order to create training programs and take appropriate follow-up action.

Mushing programs can promote the self-acceptance important to youth, women and transgender empowerment. Outdoor educators that work in competitive racing might teach participants strategies to address microaggressions directed at themselves or others. Race registration forms might include a wider range of demographic choices beyond male/female and a space to indicate preferred pronouns. Taking such actions would be a guide and start to set standards on equity, inclusion, and acceptance so that outdoor education, sport, and recreation can become a “location for progressive social justice” (Warren, 2015, p. 360).

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