Abstract: An ethnographic approach was used to investigate the increasing significance of basketball participation for junior women to the development of an athletic Jewish female identity in Melbourne, Australia. Informants, especially parents of the players, suggested that participation in basketball, allowed them to remodel adolescent Jewish female identity in positive and sustainable ways for the Melbourne-Jewish community.

Keywords: Jewish; identity; basketball; female; Australia.

Word Count: 2957 words
Junior basketball and affirmation of Jewish female identity

1 Introduction

According to Rubinstein, the position and status of women in the contemporary Jewish community appears to be ‘highly contradictory’ (1991: 117). He explains:

Judaism has always been a male-dominated religion and a male-dominated culture, with traditional Judaism narrowly prescribing the role of women to the expected one of mothers and homemakers… Yet Jewish women have, de facto, probably been more independent and visible than in most other cultures… Jewish women have formed, and comprise today around the world, a very disproportionate share of ‘liberated’ women activists and achievers, as well as radical feminists (1991: 117).

Australian Jewish women participate actively in the spheres of education, business, workplace participation, philanthropy, the media, and culture (Rutland 1987; Rubinstein 1991).

This article describes and analyses the site of Jewish junior female basketball in Melbourne, Australia using the Maccabi basketball club as a case study. We shall commence by explaining the perceived significance of sporting participation to the maintenance of a Jewish cultural/religious identity in Australia. We will move on to explain the significance of basketball participation to identity issues for young females within the Jewish community.
There are approximately 120,000 Jews in Australia, with a population nearing 50,000 in Melbourne (Dacy 2002). The Jewish population in Melbourne is now mostly concentrated in two regions. A large community exists in a band of Southern suburbs from South Yarra to Glen Iris with an impressive array of day schools, synagogues, shops and Jewish institutions in this area, and makes up approximately 75% of the Melbourne Jewish population. A smaller community exists across the Northern and Eastern suburbs from Doncaster to Malvern (Rubinstein 1991: 127-129, 137-140).

According to Rubinstein (1986:10-12; 1991: 1-50), two distinct periods can be observed in the relationship between the Jewish community and Australian society. The first period from 1788 to the 1930s was broadly assimilationist with the Jewish community asserting that there is little cultural or practical difference between it and the general community (Rutland 1988: 141-146).

The period since 1940 has been marked by an increasing assertion of both Jewish difference and the necessity for tolerance towards this difference. The Jewish community has been one that has benefited from the acceptance of multiculturalism in Australia in the early 1970s. According to Rutland, this new philosophy of tolerance has ‘encouraged the development of Jewish culture, of the Yiddish and Hebrew languages, and has allowed the community to be open about its unique cultural heritage’ (1988: 370). The establishment and growth of Jewish day schools has been instrumental in asserting Jewishness in the face of assimilationist forces. Within Jewish communities, there are also a variety of institutions, clubs and organisations that contribute to the maintenance of some form of Jewish identity in the Diaspora (Rutland 1988: 365-381).
3  **Jewish sport in Melbourne**

The development of Jewish sporting clubs in Australia spanned the change from assimilation to assertion of Jewishness that was described in the previous section of the paper. Many of these sporting clubs grew out of a desire to assert and protect Jewish identities from total assimilation, whilst maintaining a ‘harmonious relationship with the wider society’ (Hughes 1999: 381).

Interstate Jewish sporting carnivals commenced in 1926 (Rutland 1988: 156-157). A prime motivation in this development of Maccabiah sporting festivals in Australia was a concern that a distinctive Jewish identity would die out because of assimilation and intermarriage (Hughes 1999: 382). A Jewish woman, Hannah Hart, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Hebrew Standard* in 1924, suggesting the idea of a combined Jewish sports carnival in Australia (Rutland 1987: 118). It was felt that ‘sporting and social activities for young people would provide a rallying point for the unaffiliated and so help reduce the rising intermarriage rates’ (Rutland 1988 cited by Hughes 1999: 382).

The AJAX basketball club in Victoria was established in 1951. Initially it was located in East St. Kilda and serviced Jewish basketball communities in both the south and northeast. In more recent times, these communities have been serviced by two separate organising committees, and play in two separate local region competitions. This research is limited to participants in the larger southern basketball club that has a number of teams that play in the local competitions in the south central Melbourne metropolitan area.
4 Methodology

Interviews were conducted with a representative sample of Maccabi basketball players, parents, coaches and administrators. We employed a qualitative method so as to enable the elicitation of the interpretive frameworks used by the people we interviewed (Denzin 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Other data was gathered by means of observations and field notes made over the extended period that one of the authors acted as a coach for the Maccabi basketball club.

Our observations, led to a working hypothesis that participation in the sport of basketball was a means of expressing Jewish identity for young female basketball players. The interview data was gathered by recorded interviews with a purposive sample of twenty coaches, parents and administrators. Subjects were asked a set of open-ended questions that probed their interpretations of the Jewish community, the importance of sporting participation in the Jewish community, and the specific importance of participation for young Jewish women. The research was constantly shaped and reshaped as the data was collected and analysed (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen 1993).

At the same time, it is important to note that neither of the authors are well versed in Jewish culture or history. The naiveté of the authors regarding this community required constant methods of checking. Different methods were used in order to establish trustworthiness, such as thick descriptions, triangulation and peer debriefing.
5 Discussion

Because our sample was drawn from a very small community basketball club, we have used the concept of identity amalgams to protect the individual identities of our informants. These amalgams are made up of comments from a number of different interviews, but the comments selected reflect general ideas that emanated from a number of sources.

5.1 Importance of the Jewish sporting community in Melbourne

Both Rubinstein (1982; 1986; 1991) and Goldlust (1993) have explained that the post-war period can be marked by an assertion by members of the Jewish community, whether first or later generation, of the importance of a distinctly Jewish identity. Our research indicated that members of the Maccabi basketball club also believe in the importance of this strong assertion. When asked about the significance of being a Jew in Melbourne, players who had played in both Jewish and non-Jewish clubs asserted:

If someone has a problem with me being Jewish he can just get over it. It doesn’t stop me from doing anything, because I… I don’t hide it either… You need to know where your roots are… Judaism should still be a big part of my life... I think we have to observe the chagim [Jewish holidays], and I think my kids would eventually have to go to Jewish schools, because I want them to grow up like I did.
An official of the basketball club expressed this wider purpose of Jewish basketball in
the following way by conveying what an opposition coach had said about Maccabi
teams:

A lot of people fear our club a little bit because we are close-knit… It
brings our community closer together which is very important. As a
community we need to stay together… There are a lot of Jewish people in
Victoria, 45,000 Jewish people… and a number of them do not attend
Jewish schools… Maccabi basketball is a community club that allows all
Jewish people to be part of the community through sport.

Many informants explained a changing position for sport in the Orthodox and
Progressive Jewish day schools (not Ultra-Orthodox) over the last few years. The
wider Jewish community had also taken up this tentative endorsement of sporting
participation as worthwhile practice.

5.2 Female identity issues in Jewish basketball

The elite junior basketball league in Victoria, Australia conducts its competition on
Friday evenings. Regardless of how strictly an individual observes the Sabbath, many
Jewish players and coaches expressed some conflict over being required to play a
sport on the Sabbath. One of the authors has a long-term coaching role with the
Maccabi basketball club. The coach is not Jewish. He was brought into the club ten
years ago by the then club president to offer ‘expert coaching’ to the junior girls
program. The program regularly employs coaches from outside of the Jewish
community to instruct the players. This, according to a number of administrators, is to compensate for the inability of the club to offer opportunities for its players in the elite-level Friday night junior competition.

On arrival at the club, a standing joke made by a number of the parents was that the author/coach would be making the world safe from the JAPs. The author had no idea what the parents were talking about until one parent kindly offered that the term JAP was short for Jewish Australian Princesses. With further questioning, the parents made the following observations:

We love our daughters, as do all parents in the community… But it is difficult to get them to commit to anything. They are concerned with shopping, parties, dressing up and hairstyles…They are pampered and spoilt. We have given our children everything and we have sacrificed much to do so. Many parents may compensate for their absences in their children’s lives by providing them with luxuries. But in so giving, we have produced a generation of children that do not work hard, do not commit… It will have a long-lasting effect on the community.

The final comment explained a concern that was widely voiced amongst parents at the basketball club ten years ago- the children were not committed to the welfare of the Jewish community in the ways that the parents and grandparents had been. The children did not appear to want to attach to much more than the social side of Jewish-Melbourne female identity. The parents, and the broader community, were concerned about the ongoing existence of the Jewish diaspora in Melbourne. They saw their children’s attitudes as being dangerously hedonistic, and hoped that sporting
participation might turn their daughters away from the ‘sex and drugs’ that was available to them as young middle to upper class adolescent members of society.

The term, ‘Jewish Australian Princesses’ continues to be frequently used by parents at basketball but is now used as a term of derision for those Jewish girls who are not involved in Jewish sports teams or cultural activities. The disdain associated with the term captures the anxiety that many Jewish parents feel about their daughters. It was expressed by one group of parents in the following way:

**Q:** Why is your daughter’s basketball participation important to you?

**A:** If my daughter gives up her basketball, then she will spend her Saturdays at the shopping centre with the other JAPs… Wasting her time and money buying clothes and accessories… And she will get into trouble without sport- she will want to take drugs, drink alcohol and go to parties like some of her school friends… At least at basketball, we know she is safe. She may not have a future as a basketballer, but at least she will survive her teenage years.

One of the parents who offered these insights also stated that this concern is probably shared by parents of young women from several non-Jewish private schools across Melbourne. She felt that young middle to upper class females in private schools had to withstand the same forces towards consumption and dangerous behaviour that the Jewish children do. However, she then went on to add that the concern regarding individual behaviour is amplified in the Jewish community by the concern regarding the ongoing survival of the community.
The community has been active in addressing the issue in a number of ways. The Jewish Day Schools promote studies of Jewish achievement, language, community and history within their curricula. The basketball club has also been active in the promotion of Jewish identity amongst the junior players. The author, along with most of the non-Jewish crowd at some team’s games, is regularly amazed and confused by communication amongst the players in Hebrew. This may involve calling plays or motivational cheers at the commencement and conclusion of play. The basketball club has also become a major Jewish community body with large crowds of Jewish children attending and cheering for the senior teams in the club.

The basketball club (and most other sporting clubs) have flourished with the increasing assertion of Jewish identity. The number of junior girl’s teams (and players) playing for Maccabi basketball club has increased by 500% over the ten-year involvement with the club. One of the reasons for this increase has been the desire expressed by a number of parents to produce a strongly-athletic identity amongst Jewish girls:

I used to hate going to watch my daughter play and train. Players would turn up for training in jeans or dresses - gear that was inappropriate for sports. They couldn’t bend to pick up the ball because their jeans were too tight. Or they couldn’t jump because their skirts would fly up. Or they wouldn’t run because sweating ruined their make-up. And their parents would dress them this way and convince themselves that their daughters were being active and healthy… Now, with the increased focus on health and sports at Jewish schools, parents expect their daughters to engage fully and expertly in sports. There is no longer the ‘Jewish excuse’- our
girls are uncompetitive because of their genes. Jewish parents now expect their daughters to be proud of their athletic skills.

The success of the Maccabi basketball club and its Jewish players and teams can produce some negative consequences. In conversations with a group of non-Jewish basketball coaches who coach the Maccabi junior teams, there was a general experience of some anti-Semitic behaviours and attitudes. Many of these coaches had experienced the euphoria of opposition teams’ parents on beating a Maccabi/Jewish team. And for these coaches, all of who had widespread coaching experience with a number of non-Jewish teams, none had experienced these overt displays in any other environment of coaching. It was summed up after one game for one coach when a parent from a rival team was overheard expressing great delight in ‘whipping the Jews.’ One administrator relayed the following:

Two parents on the scorebench had heard a young female player from an opposition team say, ‘fuckin’ Jew,’ during a game against Maccabi. The parents reported this to a Maccabi club administrator, who was also at the game. The administrator went over to the opposing coach and advised him that the Maccabi club would be putting in a formal complaint about the comments...

Eventually the matter went to a formal tribunal. In her response prior to tribunal the player again denied what she said. And then all of a sudden the player and her coach stated that her comment was ‘if only it had been fucking true,’ and that this was in response to a bad umpiring decision.
The player’s version of events was not accepted by the tribunal, and she was found guilty of vilification.

The administrator of the Maccabi club said that she realised that such protestations would draw claims from other people that the Jewish groups are whinging again. Yet this incident was not the first time that a Maccabi player had been racially vilified by either opposing players or parents at this competition.

6 Conclusion

The aim of Maccabi Australia is ‘to promote Jewish identity through sporting, culture, Zionist and social activities’ (Hughes 1997: 384). Sport plays an important role in identity promotion and maintenance in the Jewish community. Given the popular contemporary stereotypes that are attached to the Jewish community by some members of the dominant white Anglo-Celtic population, and especially to Jewish female identity, the twin hopes of protection of a Jewish cultural identity and development of a competitive and esteemed Australian-Jewish female sporting identity, which is not viewed as deficient, is ‘very important.’ Elite Jewish basketball participation may both breakdown stereotypes held about Jewish females by other subgroups in society, and allow Jewish females to see themselves as strongly athletic.

References


