

Assessing the Sociology of Sport on Changing Masculinities and Homophobia

Sport sociology has been intricately tied with the study of masculinities since the early 1990s in the West. The field was first established in examining white male athlete's masculinity, particularly noting its root in homophobia in the forging of a hegemonic form of masculinity. However, contemporary masculinity scholarship shows a changed relationship between men's masculinity and hegemonic dominance. Current research examines men's masculinities in an era of decreased homophobia, finding teamsport athletes inclusive of homosexuality. This simultaneously permits heterosexual men to live within greatly expanded gender terrains. The challenge for sport sociologists concerned with masculinities today, is to expand the locus of investigation to the intersectional demographics of varying races, geographical locations, religious beliefs, age and other important demographics.

Trajectory of Masculinities and Homophobia in Sport Studies

Much of our cultural obsession for competitive teamsport came at the beginning of the 20th Century. Here the social structure of work changed from agrarian labor to men sacrificing their health in dangerous occupations, such as coal mining or factory work. With Western societies shifting toward industrial occupations, sport mirrored the attributes of desired workers.

Turn-of-the 20th Century sport also found purpose because of growing concern over homosexuality, which Freud (1905) attributed to a form of gendered wrong-doing. While being disproved today (LeVay, 2010) Freud's theorizing sent a largely homophobic population into moral panic. Sport became part of the project of muscular Christianity to provide the requisite male and moral vapors to assure heterosexuality among male youth.

Thus, a significant use of Western sport in the 20th Century has been to reproduce what Connell (1995) describes as hegemonic masculinity by turning young boys away from qualities associated with femininity or homosexuality. This was most salient in the 1980s, which marked an apex of homophobia (and consequently homophobia) in the West. General Social Survey data from 1988 documents that 81.8% of American respondents indicated homosexual sex was always or almost always wrong, up from the 1970s. In the 1980s, gay men were socially feminized and highly stigmatized. This is attributable to the rise of moralistic right wing politics, the politicization of evangelical religion, and the AIDS crisis (McCormack and Anderson, forthcoming).

Crucially, because the social perception of homosexuality is determined by behavioral actions and social identifications, rather than ascribed characteristics like skin color, heterosexuality had to be continually proved and reproved (Kimmel, 1994). This meant that young men of this generation went to great lengths to demonstrate that they were not gay. They deployed homophobia against those who violated requisite gender norms, and esteemed masculinities remained within narrow gender boundaries that precluded emotional intimacy and physical tactility. This zeitgeist *required* homophobic attitudes and aggressive behaviors if young men were to distance themselves from being thought gay.

It is the historical and cultural specificity of this time—specifically the exceptional levels of homophobia in most Western cultures—that made Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity particularly suited toward understanding the social organization of stratified masculinities. This concept was successful in describing intra-masculine stratifications, and

the marginalization of gay men, precisely because it powerfully and pragmatically captured the masculine zeitgeist of the era in which it was conceived.

Whether using Connell's model or not, researchers largely agreed with the perspective of homophobia being central toward the creation of acceptable masculinities. Pronger (1990, 26) wrote: "Many of the (gay) men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with team sports...orthodox masculinity is usually an important subtext if not *the* leitmotif." And Hekma (1998, 2) wrote that, "Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise."

Matters were less extreme in the preceding decade, where research on NCAA Division 1 athletes found 8% identified as gay; anywhere from 15 to 36 percent had at least a couple of homosexual orgasms within the last two years; and 62% said that they would let another man give them oral sex (Garner and Smith, 1977). While their instrument did not control for jokesters, even if half of these men were attempting to pollute the research, the results indicate a culture of less homophobia than that of the 1980s.

Assessing the Challenges of Masculinities and Homophobia in Sport Studies

General Social Survey data, along with a plethora of ongoing polls and quantitative instruments, highlight that cultural homophobia has decreased rapidly since 1992. In the early 1990s the concept of metrosexuality became popular, men's bodies began to be commercially sexualized, and gay rights were thrust to the forefront of American politics.

By the time I began systematically exploring the experiences of both heterosexual and gay men in sport in the early 2000's, I began to see matters returning more toward that of the 1970s. In one research project I even documented that 40% of my sample of ex American football players engaged in some form of physically sexual contact with another male (Anderson, 2009). In the second decade of the new Millennium, colleagues and I found 89% of heterosexual undergraduate males in the UK had kissed another male on the lips (Anderson, Adams and Rivers, 2011). Recent research shows this trend spreading to America (Anderson, 2014).

It is precisely because of the shifts in undergraduate athletic perspectives on homosexuality that I developed inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009) where I postulate that high levels of homophobia during the period Connell developed her theorizing was historically situated and contingent on a number of social factors. In order to understand the intersection of masculinities and homophobia, I postulated that we needed to account for the effect of how homophobia changes and how homophobia operates differently in a culture that believes it exists or not.

I thus augment homophobia and masculinity studies with the concept 'homohysteria.' This represents a homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion of homosexuality permeates; or an individual's social fear of being socially perceived as gay (Anderson, 2009). I argue that in order for a culture of homohysteria to exist, three social factors must coincide: 1) the mass cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population; 2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval towards homosexuality; 3) cultural disapproval of femininity in men or masculinity in women, as they are associated with homosexuality.

Inclusive masculinity theory argues that when cultural homophobia is high—coupled with the knowledge that homosexuality exists in one’s culture—males go to great lengths to demonstrate they are not gay. Thus, boys eschew feminized terrains, behaviors and emotional expressions; they buff up physically or support sport teams in lieu of their own physicality; they talk in explicitly sexual and misogynistic language; they avoid feminine entertainment choices, clothes or sports and they adopt homophobic attitudes and marginalize those suspected of being gay. It is this last characteristic that is most effective in securing masculinity.

However, as homophobia declines, the stigma associated with homosexuality also reduces. This has the effect that boys and men care less about whether they are socially perceived as gay. As they are less motivated to avoid a ‘gay’ identity, homophobia loses its power to regulate masculinities. In the absence of this policing mechanism, boys (of all sexual orientations) are permitted to engage in a wider range of behaviors without ridicule. This includes choices of clothing, expressions of friendship and emotional intimacy, hobbies and friendship patterns. As straight boys then become friends with gay peers, they further undo residual homophobia. McCormack (2012: 63) describes this as a “virtuous circle of decreasing homophobia.”

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the empirical acceptance that (black and white) teamsport athletes have in coming out to their teams in recent years in America (Anderson, 2011). At the time of this writing Michael Sam (black) appears to be posed to be drafted into the NFL; Jason Collins (black) has appeared as America’s first openly gay professional athlete in a top four sport by playing for the Brooklyn Nets (NBA); and Robbie Rogers plays as an open gay (white) player for the LA Galaxy soccer team. My (Anderson, 2011) research into openly gay male high school and university athlete’s shows acceptance is the rule, and this is verified by the multitudes of men’s coming out stories on Outsports.com

Future directions

Empirical research into the lives of today’s young male athletes and their masculinities is excessively well-documented among both British and American undergraduates (see Anderson, 2014). However, these research projects are based mostly in white men. Although some have described inclusive masculinities among older athletes (Daspher, 2012), football fans (Cleland, 2013), and lower class non-athletic youth (McCormack, 2012), these populations also remain about 80% white. Given that recent quantitative data suggests changes in relation to attitudes toward homosexuality in the West are not restricted to white, middle class youth (see Pryor et al., 2011), we should avoid the null hypothesis of expected homophobia until more research examines the intersection of decreasing homophobia according to race, geography, age, and other confounding variables.

More research is also required on the value today’s young male athletes may take toward women. Inclusive masculinity intentionally avoids theorizing patriarchy in order to avoid the structural trap of hegemonic masculinity: which asserts causation between the hegemonic masculine stratifications of men and patriarchy, while simultaneously postulating that hegemonic masculinity will always exist. Thus Connell prescribes perpetual patriarchy to society, privileging social theory over social reality. It is for this reason that inclusive masculinity theory avoids the attempted explanation of patriarchy, optioning instead for the

measurable impact of decreasing homophobia on masculinities. Still, others might desire to theorize how inclusivity may impact upon patriarchy.

Finally, more attention needs to be paid to the manner in which decreasing homophobia and homophobia might impact upon the lived-experiences of other sexual and gender minorities in the West, and how growing homophobia in other countries (i.e. Uganda, Nigeria, Russia) impacts upon the construction of heterosexual masculinities in those locales.

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