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*Men and Masculinities* published online 16 April 2014

DOI: 10.1177/1097184X14526699

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**Christopher R. Matthews<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

As knowledge about the biological foundation of the modern patriarchal gender order is increasingly challenged within late-modern social worlds enclaves persist in which men and women can attempt to recreate understandings of the “natural” basis of sex difference. Within “Power Gym,” male boxers were able to symbolize their bodies and behaviors in such a manner. The language and logic of popular scientific discourses authored and authorized notions of an “innate” manhood. The ability to instrumentally deploy one’s manliness in symbolically legitimate ways could then be represented and emotionally experienced as a man’s biological right and obligation. Through scripted performances of “mimetic” violence and self-bullying, the boxers were able to experience this discursive naturalness and carve out a masculinity-validating social enclave. As such, they accessed a “patriarchal dividend” by securing a local pastiche hegemony in which discourses surrounding men’s natural place as physically and psychologically dominant remained largely uncontested. Through the reflexive appropriation of “science,” within appropriate subcultural codes, these men could negotiate taboos and restrictions that are characteristic of late-modern social worlds. When considered in this way, the power of “scientific” truth claims to explain and justify a certain level of violence, aggression, and behaviors coded as masculine, comes to the fore.

## Keywords

pastiche hegemony, biology ideology, men, testosterone, violence, boxing

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Writing twenty-one years ago, Judith Lorber (1993) described the place that sports worlds can occupy within the generation and maintenance of sex difference. Starting out from a position informed by Foucault's (1998 [1976]) and Laqueur's (1990) historical analyses of sex, she located certain Western sports within the naturalization of a "biology ideology." In so doing, she drew further attention to the place of scientific discourse within the social construction of men and women as innately different. This process of naturalization has been a theme within feminist literature (Bleier 1984; Haraway 1991; Ortner 1996; Merchant 1983; Schifellite 1987) and the sociological analysis of certain sports' articulation with gender (Connell 2005; Messner 1992; Theberge 1987). As Messner (1992, 67) notes, men "often view aggression, within the rule-bound structure of sports, as legitimate and 'natural.'" The assumption then tends to follow, that "sports" are social enclaves in which these natural behaviors can be channeled and released in a relatively "safe" manner. This catharsis model (Lorenz 1963), which can be traced to Aristotle's writings (Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]), has informed research exploring sport participation.<sup>1</sup> Critiques of such works are plentiful (Dunning 2003; Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]; Smith 1983) and will not be revisited here; rather, I will locate popular interpretations of catharsis, in combination with biological narratives, within a story of localized pastiche hegemony (Atkinson 2011). Moreover, the ways in which these situational and contingent stories of manhood shaped and legitimated acts of largely "mimetic" (Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]; Maguire 1992) violence will also be discussed. By way of an introduction, I will briefly explore some of the literature that has sociologically investigated the science of sex.

## The Biological Science of Sex

A point of departure for this article is the pervasive appeal of biological and anatomical narratives that shape understandings of social worlds. As Erickson (2005, 224) notes:

We live with science: Science surrounds us, invades our lives, and alters our perspective on the world. We see things from a scientific perspective, in that we use science to help us make sense of the world—regardless of whether or not that is an appropriate thing to do—and to legitimize the picture of the world that results from such investigations.

These scientific discourses form the basis of notions about the natural differences between men and women (Foucault 1998 [1976]; Laqueur 1990; Lorber 1993; Oudshroon 1994; van Den Wijngaard, 1997). For Lorber (1993, 568–69), the origins of such cultural codes can be found within Enlightenment thinking:

When scientists began to question the divine basis of the social order and replaced faith with empirical knowledge, what they saw was that women were very different from

men in that they had wombs and menstruated. Such anatomical differences destined them for an entirely different social life from men.

Connell (2005, 46) shares this stance and suggests, “since religion’s capacity to justify gender ideology collapsed, biology has been called in to fill the gap.” This “science of sex” then becomes the foundation of *the* dominant classification system within modern western societies, thus categorizing the individual, by which it “marks him [*sic*] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him” (Foucault 1983, 212). These biological “laws of truth” are then habituated and lived through the bodies, emotions, language, grammar, and actions of groups and individuals (Dingwall, Nerlick, and Hillyward 2003; McCaughey 2008; Schifellite 1987). Here, then, “western ideology takes biology as the cause, and behaviour and social statuses as the effects, and then proceeds to construct biological dichotomies to justify the ‘naturalness’ of gendered behaviours and gendered social status” (Lorber 1993, 568). Scientifically framed “natural” gender is then “normal” gender, and such normalization, as Foucault (1991) reminds us, is a central dimension of power relationships. These processes are then a foundation from which patriarchal social hierarchies can be gained and maintained. Key within this process has been discursive representations of the “sex hormones.”

## The “Male” and “Female” Hormones

Of particular interest for this article is the part played in stories of manhood, by the “male hormone.” The examination of testosterone and estrogens has traditionally been the preserve of positivistic research within a variety of fields (see Bleier 1984; Lacqueur 1990; Merchant 1983; Sapolsky 1998). However, interpretivist researchers have explored the genealogy of this knowledge in an attempt to deconstruct the generation of “scientific” narratives about men and women. This historical development cannot be divorced from the social process in which it is embedded, as Oudshroon (1994, 149) notes, “the story of hormones is a story of multiple and mobile power relations.” In this regard, van den Wijngaard (1997) has documented the part played by endocrinology in the *Reinventing of the Sexes*, while Oudshroon (1994) describes in detail the political and cultural framing of research that produces scientific “facts” about “male” and “female” hormones. More recently, Hoberman (2005) has explored the contemporary addiction to hormonal explanations of male behavior within *Testosterone Dreams*. Each of these studies has done much to advance our critical understanding of the power dynamics that shape “scientific” knowledge about sex, bodies, and biology.

What remains relatively underdeveloped within these accounts (although less so in Hoberman’s) is the use of such discourses in the framing of day-to-day life outside of the scientific community. The transfer of knowledge that underpinning such public narratives is problematic for van den Wijngaard (1997, 93), who argues:

Generally, when knowledge is transferred from fields where it was developed, to be used in other fields, various subtle details are sacrificed. Researchers in one field of study expect unequivocal answers from researchers in another field. Users of knowledge, such as doctors, are, if possible, even more interested in unambiguous information.

This process of simplification and characterization can reduce the academic subtlety of the original research into simplistic binaries (Dingwall, Nerlick, and Hillyard 2003; Haraway 1991; McCaughey 2008; Schifellite 1987). In the case of sex hormones, this reduction of complexity results in testosterone being equated with men and estrogen with women, despite evidence suggesting a far more complex relationship (Hoberman 2005; Oudshroon 1994; Sapolsky 1998; van den Wijngaard 1997). Hoberman (2005, 25) describes this process:

That both 'male' and 'female' hormones occur naturally in both sexes, albeit in different proportions, is not widely understood, because it does not conform to the hormonal folklore of our culture, which remains rooted in archetypes of hormonally determined masculine and feminine essences.

The transmission of scientific knowledge<sup>2</sup> into "hormonal folklore" is then intertwined with socially constructed assumptions about sex difference. Such stories of gender can override aspects of research that do not resonate so neatly with hegemonic discourses regarding the categorisation of men and women (Haraway 1991; McCaughey 2008). Although this process has been shown to be pervasive and powerful, it is by no means all-encompassing nor without significant contestation and tension. As a means of beginning to explore this complexity, I will outline shifting social patterns that contextualize the manifestation of the "biology ideology" (Lorber 1993) within the micro-politics of late-modern life.

## **Pastiche Hegemony in Late-modern Life**

Late-modern movements toward gender equality have challenged the dominant forms of masculinity that once prevailed in many social situations. Changes in the institutional organization of politics, education, the work place, governance, religion, media, and the family, it is argued, have eroded assumptions about the legitimacy of the traditional patriarchal order (Anderson 2009; Atkinson 2011; Faludi 2000; McDowell 2003; Merchant 1983). Within a Western European context, this equalizing shift, with its roots in the parliamentarization of conflict (Elias 2002 [1939]) and increasing sanctions being placed upon men's unrestricted use of aggression, violence, and physical domination (Brinkgreve 2004; Dunning and Maguire 1996; MacInnes 1998), has partially undermined the means by which certain groups of men have traditionally maintained hegemonic social control over women and other men (McDowell 2003). Moreover, within this social landscape, biological narrations, which had earlier replaced religion as symbolic proof of men's

anatomical and psychological superiority over women, have also begun to crumble. As Atkinson (2011, 5) argues:

The gendering of social roles and responsibilities along biological, or what have been also called essential, lines is a primary basis of patriarchy and the sexed ordering of societies across the planet. Over the course of the twentieth century, the biological-social connections between sex, gender, and social power were progressively debated and resisted by both women and men.

Atkinson (2011) and others (Dunn 1999; Giddens 1991) argue that increasing distrust in meta-narratives truth claims arising from such fields as biological science is a hallmark of our movement toward late-modern social life. This breakdown of modern cultural institutions has penetrated, splintered, and fractured stories that had traditionally framed and signified our bodies, identities, and social stratifications (Atkinson 2011; Faludi 2000; Giddens 1991; McDowell 2003).

Claims of male superiority based on natural size, strength, and innate psychological characteristics have thus become blurred and increasingly difficult to maintain. Indeed, the “hegemonic man,” this mythical normative symbol, is increasingly represented as an archaic vestige no longer “fit for purpose” (Anderson 2009; Atkinson 2011; Faludi 2000; McDowell 2003; Pease 2000). With modern patriarchal patterns of manhood increasing undermined, certain men, Atkinson (2011) argues, can experience a “crisis” of representation and identification. “Macho” narratives discursively linked to social power through aggression and violence can then become mythologized into late-modern “folk devils” (Acland 1995; McDowell 2003). Such narratives have not gone unnoticed by men. Pease (2000) describes the transformative politics that have spread among some men in response to the frustration of being framed in such ways. Indeed, recent research within sport settings has confirmed such shifts in men’s social practices (Anderson 2002, 2005, 2008; Channon and Matthews in press; McCormack 2011). It seems then, that the modernist “gender order” (Connell 2005), and its associated biological narratives, is eroding both discursively and through embodied praxis.

Yet still unequal gender relations persist. This “residual patriarchy” rests not on the shaky structural and institutional narratives of modernity, although these clearly still provide some direction; rather, it is increasingly manifest within the micropolitics of the day-to-day (Atkinson 2011; Beal 1995; McCormack 2011; Muggleton 2000; Woodward 2007). Social power is then wielded within diffuse cultural representations in a situational and localized manner. If a late-modern hegemony can be gained and maintained, it exists in a pastiche (Atkinson 2011) and self-reflexive (Giddens 1991) form. In Atkinson’s (2011, 41) words:

Power is based, then, on being able to frame one’s (masculine) identity in a chameleon-like way, and to embrace, incorporate, and reorder all identities that are struggling for cultural legitimacy. Such men realize that aligning one’s sense of performed

masculinity, for example, with insurgent gendered, racialized, working class, and other heretofore marginalised identities and related physical practices can make one appear as culturally progressive, cool, sensitive, moral, genuine, correct, or liberal in one context or another; each of these becomes techniques for achieving power in a liquid modern, reflexive identity-based society.

This process has winners and losers; for instance, those generations and individuals more likely to be entrenched in a “modern” view of the sex divide and men’s place in the world might be considered to be in “crisis” (Atkinson 2011; McDowell 2003). Their worldviews having been tossed in the air in front of their very eyes, such men can become increasingly alienated and disempowered (Faludi 2000). Meanwhile, those able to reflexively represent themselves in situationally appropriate and validated ways can continue to access the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 2005) in an albeit negotiated and contingent form (Atkinson 2011).

This social context, although undermining the pervasive appeal of biology, does not negate its use (McCaughy 2008). Indeed, if Atkinson’s (2011) argument holds water, such gender narratives will be available to men in zones that compliment such a representation. Sports worlds have been and continue in varying degrees to be such spaces. I will argue that within these “male preserves” (Sheard and Dunning 1973), despite clear challenges (Anderson 2002, 2008; Channon 2013; Channon and Matthews in press; Messner 2002; Theberge 1987), physicality, the instrumental and expressive use of aggression and violence, and the often androcentric nature of participation and spectatorship, can make the symbolic logic of innate biological differentiation more resistant to subversion (Woodward 2007). This is one of the ways in which the tone for vaunted displays of athletic identity is coded and enmeshed with the symbolism of manhood (Dunning and Maguire 1996; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Messner 1990, 1992; Sheard and Dunning 1973). In such spaces, the ability to define the meanings attached to behaviors, bodies, and language forms a localized hegemony. These pastiche forms of power do not exist in isolation from the late-modern social processes that shape our lives. Rather, the contingent and situated usage of such life narrations, one might suggest, are to be found within the negotiated tensions of daily life (Atkinson 2011; McCaughy 2008; Woodward 2007).

It is such day-to-day micro-political power plays that are the focus within this article. While conducting an ethnographic exploration of emotionally significant experiences of sports violence within a boxing subculture I repeatedly heard men use biological explanations and justifications of their behaviors. In what follows, I will detail the ways in which the discourses that were stitched into their experiences inside and around a boxing ring were used to form stories of manhood. In particular, I will explore how, and in what ways, these men produced a localized hegemony through the pastiche arrangement of selected truths that resonated with their understandings of the emotional experiences of boxing. This article, thus, contributes an empirical dimension to the continued analysis of the power of “science” to frame the ways in which “appropriate” gender behaviors can be imagined, while also

demonstrating the utility of Atkinson's (2011) notion of pastiche hegemony as a means of interpreting the complexity of men's identifications with violence, biology, and narratives of manhood within late-modern social relations.

## Method

The evidence presented here was obtained by combining participant observations and interviews recorded during ethnographic fieldwork at Power Gym.<sup>3</sup> During a two-year period (September 2009–2011), I trained and socialized at Power Gym on most days of the week. This allowed me to form relationships with some frequent users of this space, while also developing my own ability to engage in the sport of boxing. Over time, the position I adopted within the gym became increasingly "involved." I formed close and trusting relationships with the regular users of the gym's boxing facilities, while investing large amounts of time and energy learning the skills and tactics of the sport. I found myself navigating a path between researcher and gym "native." As de Garis (2010, 936) notes:

Sporting communities such as boxing and wrestling are defined largely (though by no means exclusively) by a physical practice, the ethnographic demarcation of self and other can become blurred. One can, at least marginally, become a 'boxer' or 'wrestler' by the act of boxing or wrestling.

Indeed, I did become a "boxer" of sorts. As my boxing ability developed and I began to be accepted as a regular within the gym, I was able to join in with the "established" group of boxers in sparring and training sessions. Here, my status as a heterosexual man in his late twenties with roots in the local area and an ability to engage relatively competently in most sports was key.

With this increased "closeness" came insights into the boxers' lives and experiences. While some aspects of gym life were drawn into sharp focus, others were undoubtedly deemphasized. Kath Woodward (2008, 547—emphasis added) reminds us of the importance of attempting to appreciate the effects of moving along this continuum:

The research process can never be totally 'inside' or completely 'outside', but involves an *interrogation of situatedness* and how 'being inside' relates to lived bodies and their practices and experiences. There are myriad ways of being 'inside' in boxing, although actually engaging in the sport physically is the most dramatic.

This inside/outside debate has been reconceptualized by Elias (1987) and latterly Mansfield (2007) as involvement and detachment. In this regard, Mansfield (2007, 124) has argued that "involvement is a necessary requirement if ethnographers are to be able to understand the realities and identities of the members of different sports groups, to make that which seems strange become familiar." While



Maguire and Young (2002, 16) argue that “at one and the same time, the sociologists-as-participant must be able to stand back and become the sociologists-as-observer-and-interpretor.” Here, transcribing interviews, reviewing and coding field notes, and exploring this evidence in relation to extant literature and theory was useful as a means of maintaining some degree of critical detachment (Elias 1987). Moreover, reflective attempts to place myself within the research setting enabled some of the biases that accompanied my “involved” position to be highlighted.

Over time, I began to habitually “see” the world as the boxers did. As this process developed, the curiosity with which I had originally viewed behaviors, particularly “hard” sparring, began to fade. This temporary decrease in detachment was also evident within my occasional adoption of language and grammar that dominated the gym. Although time away from this setting enabled certain of these less critical moments to be observed using the sociological imagination, they are significant in terms of locating the production of the knowledge that is presented here. This involved position enabled, but also limited, the interactions that were possible within the gym. I did not, for example, get to know key members of the gym who spent more time weightlifting than boxing. My focus on boxers meant I did not get to learn in detail how other groups and individuals experienced this space. Identifying myself as a heterosexual man allowed me to easily fit in with the established group of boxers, but certainly limited my ability to access the stories of the women and homosexual men who were represented as outsiders by this group. As such, my account is limited to a small group of men and does not represent the picture of the whole gym.

In all, I interviewed twenty-five men of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds; this number represented the majority of those who regularly used the boxing area and a selection of men who frequented the gym less often. Interviews were conducted in a quiet corner of the gym before or after training sessions and away from the gym in a space agreed upon with the interviewee. Interviews conducted inside the gym, despite taking place in a private space, may have encouraged the respondents to live out their “gym identities” more fully than if they had taken place elsewhere. As no claims are made within this study to know these men’s “true” identities, such possible location biases serve to demonstrate further the significance these men place on certain narratives while in the gym space. Permission was granted to record the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. After an initial period of participant observation, salient themes and theoretical insights that emerged were interwoven with discussions during interviews. As such, interview transcripts offered additional evidence that enabled explanation and clarification of observed phenomena. Initially, a semistructured interview schedule was used to frame discussions, however; as time progressed, interviews became extensions to informal chats that had begun during training. As such, the use of a schedule became increasingly restrictive and at odds with the trusting relationships that I formed with the men at the gym. This flexible interview process enabled me to develop further rapport with the interviewees. Field notes and interview transcripts were categorized into salient and theoretically

informed themes. In the remainder of this article, I will focus on aspects of these themes that can help us to understand the ways in which discourses about biological maleness were used and experienced within the day-to-day micro-politics of Power Gym.

## **Power Gym—A Zone of Pastiche Hegemony**

Atkinson (2011) describes a set of social spaces in which men could experience a localized masculine hegemony. These zones of pastiche power are sites for a “retrenchment into hyper-real hegemonic masculinity that anchors the self in a form of embodiment and praxis that women still do not venture into with great gusto” (Atkinson 2011, 63). In particular, Atkinson’s discussions of the mythologized and hyperreal violence of backyard wrestling and the self-bullying and sport-related suffering of ultra-endurance running appeared to have counterparts in the experiences of a selection of boxers at Power Gym. Here, action inside and around the ring was often represented using masculinity-validating biological narratives to mark out certain men as different and superior to women and “other” (read effeminate and homosexual) men. As a first step toward unpacking these initial comments, I will briefly describe the environment that in part enabled this discursive tone to be maintained.

During the time I attended Power Gym, a group of men maintained a dominant position in and around the boxing area. This “pugilistic space” was full of symbols that might be associated with patriarchal hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). The famous image of Muhammad Ali standing triumphantly over a prone Sonny Liston occupied a central position over the ring. Along the walls, pictures of local “champs” intermingle with hyperreal images of bodybuilders advertising body-enhancing supplements. Motivational slogans littered the walls encouraging bodily sacrifice in the face of adversity: “Winners never quit and quitters never win.” The meanings of such imagery, which can be interpreted in radically contextualized ways (Jones and Leblanc 2005; King 2013; Klein 1993; Madden 2013), were generated and maintained through the micro-political milieu of daily life in this “male preserve” (Sheard and Dunning 1973). Women members were usually restricted to the “women’s only” and “cardo” areas. Although exceptions were observed,<sup>4</sup> the gym was mainly populated by men and boys. This was even more so the case in the boxing area. Here, boxers experienced certain actions inside and around the ring as demonstrating their biological maleness. The finality of such narrations of innateness formed an organizing principle within this localized, patriarchal structure. In effect, this “male preserve” was explained, justified, and legitimated by the boxers’ reading of themselves as a natural product of their biological sex.

## **The “Naturalness” of Masculinity and Male Violence—“It’s Testosterone and That”**

The boxers at Power Gym tended to believe that masculine behaviors and qualities came from an innate biological source. Moreover, the relative absence of women,

and behaviors coded by these men as feminine, from the boxing area, was deemed to be evidence proving the difference in physical nature. As Dave (field notes, October 14, 2010) told me, “chicks don’t come down ’cus they just don’t like doing what we do, they ain’t built for this shit.” Simon, who did some boxing coaching at the gym, described the apparent absence of women from the gym as a matter of instincts:

Christopher: Why do you think it’s all men down here?

Simon: It’s a man’s sport ain’t it.

Christopher: Do you think girls learn to not like it then?

Simon: Yeah a bit, but *it’s not instinctive with them, they haven’t got it in their blood*, I’ve trained a few birds and they just don’t take to it, you’ll get some lad off of the street give him ten minutes and he’ll just pick it up, like he was born ready. (Simon interview—emphasis added)

This biological sex binary neatly explained the world these men experienced, indeed, the “convenient innocence” (McCaughey 2008, 7) of these “legitimizing concepts” (Schiffellite 1987, 54) absolved these men of any responsibility for generating and maintaining this masculine space. As has been previously described by McCaughey (2008), a story of men’s place within human genetic and evolutionary development was used as an explanation for these ‘innate’ qualities:

Christopher: Do you think you learn those traits [aggression, dominance, leadership, physicality] or are you born with them?

Gary: *It’s testosterone and that in’t it, every man’s born wiv ‘em kid*. Who don’t wanna look after their wife and kids?

Christopher: So it’s a part of being a man?

Gary: That’s our job ain’t it, we weren’t put on this earth to bake cakes and do washin’ was we? You g’back to when we was huntin’ an’ gatherin’, it’s the men what do all the fightin’ ain’t it. It’s in ya genes youth. (Gary interview—emphasis added)

Like Gary, the other boxers tended to believe that the ability to instrumentally use their innate manliness to protect family and friends was a man’s biological right and obligation. When considered in this way, the power of such “scientific” reasoning to explain and justify a certain level of violence, aggression, and behaviors coded as masculine, comes to the fore.

This biology narrative, and its accompanied patriarchal ordering, largely resisted subversion due to its firm anchorage in scientific truth claims. Take the following example, when in a supplementary interview Gary developed his ideas with further reference to hormones as the driving mechanism:

Christopher: You told me in the past that being aggressive and even violent is something that is left within men following our evolution?

Gary: [Nods]

Christopher: What exactly do you think is the physical thing that makes us aggressive?

Gary: It's testosterone ain't it, 'ave you ever seen any of those lot [motions toward the bodybuilders] when they're on 'roid rage? Fucking 'ell if you wanna know about the power of that shit just go into town with 'em when they're on it, mate, they're mental! So they've loads of it in 'em in an unnatural way and it fucks 'em up, but even in a normal way if you 'ave naturally high testosterone then that will make you aggressive at times. (Gary interview)

Such gendered knowledge about hormones was largely informed by the boxers' limited association with bodybuilders at the gym and narratives connected to doping in sport. Hoberman (2005, 30) explores these later connections and convincingly argues that "the notoriety of testosterone drugs has grown out of highly publicized and often ineffectual campaigns, dating from the 1970s, that seek to drive anabolic steroids out of the sports world." This link between notions about "male" traits and the use and abuse of "male" hormones was a powerful evidence base for endocrinological assumptions within the gym. As *the* male hormone, with physical (size, power, strength, speed, and endurance) and mental (aggression, focus, resolve, and drive) outcomes, narratives about testosterone provided an explanation and legitimation for men's supposed innate emotional states and biological superiority over women.

This "hormonal folklore" (Hoberman 2005) was regularly the final destination for discussions that centered on explaining sex difference, often despite evidence that might make such conclusions appear logically difficult to maintain. In clarifying an earlier statement, Phil told me the following:

Christopher: So, women don't have testosterone so that's why they aren't as aggressive as men?

Phil: Yep.

Christopher: But aren't there women that get angry and blokes that are super chilled?

Phil: Yeah, but they're the extreme cases, mostly it's the other way innit. Maybe the dude had his nuts chopped of in an accident or somefink [laughs], or the birds just caught her bloke shaggin' around [laughs]. (Phil interview)

The "extreme" exceptions that Phil described, partly in jest, mark out the primacy that was afforded to the biological foundations of maleness even in the face of contradictory evidence. Here, a loss of testosterone, and with it masculinity in the form of innate aggression, could be caused by castration, while "unnatural" female aggression was an anomaly caused by an unfaithful male partner. Such interpretations of gender using the "biology ideology" (Lorber 1993), of which the logic and scientific basis seemed to only vaguely hold together under light questioning, were able to remain as largely unquestioned, dominant narratives.

The powerful symbolic connection between men, behaviors coded as masculine, and the "male hormone" meant that there was little requirement for consistency within such accounts. This enabled "testosterone" to be coded as a "floating

signifier” for the biological origins of various dimensions of what the boxers largely thought to be male nature. Hoberman (2005, 28) neatly captures this relationship:

The word *testosterone* has entered the vernacular as a synonym for both male unpredictability and impressive displays of physical dynamism and virility. Of the many hormones that flow through the human body, only this one has been dressed up as a persona, an ‘attitude’, and has acquired a kind of cachet.

In this way, testosterone, and its place within a story of innate male physical superiority, violence, and aggression, was employed by the boxers as an explanation and justification for the pattern of local patriarchy at Power Gym. This narrative and the apparent physical proof in the form of their enjoyment of boxing “violence,” combined to form a powerful means by which these men could define themselves as worthy of their situational dominance, while limiting the opportunities of women and “other” men to challenge this hierarchy and to engage in the habituation, naturalization, and reification of this socially constructed maleness.

Testosterone was one aspect of an intertwining of discursive threads, informed by the “biology ideology” (Lorber 1993), which was used to narrate the boxers’ experiences. Notions about genetics were also employed to construct explanations of men’s differing bodily habits with respect to social class and sexualities. Discussing young men he believed to be from the lower working classes, Ernest (Field notes, May 4, 2010) angrily said they had, “no fucking respect. I tell ya, it’s in their genes, their dad’s probably just the same, fucking wasters.” Meanwhile, when I quizzed Gary about the apparent lack of homosexual men in the gym he told me:

Gary: They couldn’t hack it down ’ere, I know some of ’em do weights and that, but it’s to look pretty not ’cus they’re real men or owt.

Christopher: What makes them not be able to hack it?

Gary: *They’re born like that* [laughs then pauses], look, I don’t mind ’em, but they’re just different, if they weren’t then they’d be in ’ere trainin’ with us, and they ain’t. (Gary interview—emphasis added)

In these ways and more, ideas about biology were used to explain differences between men, thus enabling a “scientific” explanation of caricatured and stereotypical notions about “outsider” groups. Such representations of innate qualities effectively marked these “others” as physically and mentally inferior in ways that the men thought were important for engaging in boxing. At the same time, such physical “facts” symbolically confirmed the picture of manhood that these men found to be significant (Lorber 1993; Messner 1992), confirming Connell’s (2005, 45) argument that “true masculinity is always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body.”

Such “biopower” (Foucault 1998 [1976]) is a means of normalizing gendered behaviors as natural. However, the power of this biological logic had to be tempered. In the above quote from Gary, he paused and qualified his argument about

homosexuals. After attempting to ensure that I was aware of his more “inclusive” side (“look, I don’t mind ’em”) he quickly returned to the extant “fact” that biology was the reason gay men were absent from the gym. In this way, Gary attempted to negotiate the liberal narratives associated with gay rights, while still maintaining his understanding of the biological base to heterosexual maleness. Although such an observation falls some way short of the inclusivity empirically presented by Anderson (2002, 2005, 2008) and others (Adams 2011; Channon and Matthews in press; McCormack 2011), it is characteristic of a decrease in “homophobia” (Anderson 2009) and the ways in which certain men have become more mindful of the symbolic violence that their words can cause. The ability to locate the “biology ideology” (Lorber 1993) within an awareness of prevailing late-modern social trends, even in such a piecemeal way as Gary did, was a hallmark of the majority of the men’s discursive organization of their time at Power Gym. Here, the boxers were able to maintain their pastiche hegemony by knowing the “codes and rules dictating wanted versus unwanted (gender) performances” (Atkinson 2011, 208). Nowhere was such a nuanced weaving together more so on display than within experiences of training.

### **Channeling Male Biology—“Letting the Beast Out”**

Alongside jogging, lifting weights, shadow boxing, sparring, and skipping, “working the bag” was a central aspect of training at Power Gym. The boxers believed the punching bag was a legitimate target for innate male urges:

Some people just lack that aggression so you need to get them to start letting it out, that’s when the [punching] bag can be handy ’cus we’re taught that we have to not be aggressive when we’re kids right, so when you’re a man and you do sometimes have to be aggressive, ’cus you do, then it’s about being able to go back to that animal inside and use that testosterone as it’s meant to be used. The way the world is nowadays we can’t be ruled by our instincts all the time but sometime you ’ave to be able to let go, I’ll sometimes get lads on the bag and just get them to go mental for 20 seconds, they feel stupid but that’s what it takes sometimes. (Simon interview)

This was one of the ways that the boxers learned the “appropriate” manner in which to “unleash” their “natural manliness.” As Nathaniel (field notes—April 8, 2010) told me, “ya come in and get all that testosterone out ya system in here. Then you can chill and do other shit wivout worryin’ about flippin’ out on someone, like you can concentrate betta.” These “channeled” displays of aggression were framed as an opportunity for the boxers to unlearn the social constraints they believed had limited their natural masculine expressions.

Hitting the bag offered them a brief opportunity to experience their supposedly innate potentials for violence. In the following extract, I tried to capture a feel for these experiences:

There were a lot of us on the bags tonight, all-marching to the rhythm of the buzzer. Although some guys were working technique, the majority were wailing into the bag, waging an un-winnable battle against the padded leather. Some worked at range, driving straight punches home, others got in close for some dirty boxing. Faces contorted with aggression, as punches were dug in with real spite. The unmistakable growls, hisses and barks of full effort accompanied the resonating sound of right hands slamming into the bags. To the outsider it might have looked like the place was going to erupt at any second, such displays must surely represent the participants' loss of control over their emotions. But when the buzzer went, the snarls were replaced by smiles, the grunts by friendly 'eh-up's, punches by sips from water bottles. Then the buzzer sounded again, and the social niceties were once more replaced by displays of aggression, anger and the release<sup>5</sup> of tension and frustration. (Field notes, March 2, 2010)

This training, which traditionally would have been a means of preparing the body for "real" violence, was for most of these men an end in itself. Displays of "violence," which are largely restricted and sanctioned within late-modern Western societies (Atkinson 2011; Brinkgreve 2004; McCaughey 2008), were here temporarily acceptable and celebrated in a "mimetic" form (Elias and Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Maguire 1992). As McCaughey (2008, 3) describes, such mythologized understandings of man's evolutionary need to do violence offered these men "a way to think of their masculinity as powerful, productive, even aggressive—in a new economic and political climate where real opportunities to be rewarded for such traits have slipped away." These often collective displays were a chance for boxers to experience what they interpreted as a release of their biological nature in a socially safe manner.

During training, the boxers would revel in the unison they reached through choreographed displays of aggressive physicality and the pastiche hegemony that accompanied them. Through such sessions, they were realizing what they interpreted as their natural propensities to physically and mentally dominate. In so doing, these men were performing a script of acceptable boxing "violence," coordinated temporarily by the buzzer, spatially by the swinging bags and culturally by their knowledge of correct boxing movement patterns and by an understanding of appropriate codes of aggression. Dan and Dean told me about their experiences on the bag:

I needed that, I love a hard session on the bag, lets you forget everything and have a good old work out. Nothing like it for having a smash about and letting the beast out, you know what I mean? (Dan, Field notes—March 2, 2010)

I've been sparring with mates all week and I've not 'ad any time to do my own thing, I don't really wanna do any sparring tonight, I just wanna get my head into da bag and work on some shit. I wanna unload a few bombs innit. Let some fucking aggression out, I'm gonna think about all them times I could have knocked them jokers [his friends] out [in sparring, but held back]. (Dean, field notes, July 23, 2010)

These examples highlight how such emotionally significant acts of “mimetic” violence (Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]; Maguire 1992) were experienced and defined in important ways as different to the illegitimate, “real” violence that took place beyond the walls of the gym. The boxers described enjoying cathartic displays of “innate” masculine aggression and physicality that would be considered taboo within other social realms. Phil told me:

I 'ad to get in here today, I 'ad the shittest night at work last night right. Dickheads everywhere, and the cops 'ave been clampin' down on us crackin' skulls so I've 'ad to keep it in check. As soon as I got up I felt like getting in 'ere and smacking the shit owt [of] a-bag, if I don't do it 'ere I'm gonna do it at work later. (Phil, field notes, March 13, 2010)

Phil, who worked as head bouncer at a bar in town, was acutely aware that he could not physically impose himself at work with impunity.<sup>6</sup> However, training at Power Gym guaranteed that the cathartic release of his mythologized masculine biology could be satisfied. Such emotional and physical experiences thereby validated the boxers' understanding of their instinctual manliness (Lorber 1993; McCaughey 2008; Messner 1992).

During one of his first sessions back at the gym, after a brief hiatus, Dave took a break from “working the bag” to tell me:

Dave: It don't matter how much weed ya smoke, I still wanna fucking do somefink. I was sat at home fuckin' bored to fuck, figitin' all the while and when anyone said owt I'd be on edge, like jumpy and angry an' that.

Christopher: What even after smoking [marijuana<sup>7</sup>]?

Dave: In the end it made no difference, it was good to begin with, no pressure to train like, but after a couple of weeks I just felt shit, like I was wastin' away or somefing. I started doin' some running an' that helped a bit. But I was always finkin' 'bout ger-rin' back in 'ere to let some o' this aggression out. (Field notes, October 7, 2010)

This entry within my field notes was followed by a description of how Dave stopped talking and “marched back to the bag, sunk his head into it, gritted his teeth and wailed away with aggressive intent for another round.” Such notions about male biology as a productive force became manifest for Dave and other boxers through every punch, strain, grunt, and thump but only via their reflexive understanding of the situational appropriateness of these experiences. Thus, these men could experience a pastiche form of masculine power based on a biological narrative, the use of which was largely taboo within other areas of their lives (Atkinson 2011; Brinkgreve 2004).

Such “mimetic” displays of violence targeting the inanimate punching bags were also powerful examples of self-bullying. These men would aggressively push their bodies to and past exhaustion in a manner similar to the ultradistance runners described by Atkinson (2011). This was a socially legitimate form of physical performance that these men coded as self-mastery and self-domination. These



behaviors, although targeting and potentially harmful to the self, could form an aspect of these men's local social hegemony, as Atkinson (2011, 62) argues:

Bullying and violence still abound as part of winning and doing local, pastiche forms of male hegemony. What has potentially changed, however, is what counts as legitimate or tolerable male bullying and violence: what one may participate in as pastiche hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity for men in crisis is won in a pastiche manner by consuming virtual forms of hegemonic masculinity through self-bullying and violence.

The boxers understood that "real" violence, aggression, and physical domination were, broadly speaking, no longer socially acceptable within contemporary society. As such, evidence supporting their beliefs in innate male propensities for such behaviors had to be found within legitimate practices in social enclaves such as Power Gym. In this way, Ben linked his sedentary working environment to increasing hormone levels as a cause for his need to experience some acceptable de-routinization (Elias and Dunning 2008 [1986]; Maguire 1992) in the gym:

Christopher: OK, so what is it about testosterone that makes us want to box?  
Ben: It's not that simple obviously, 'cus it doesn't make you take up boxing. The thing is, life's boring right, I fucking work all day in a pretty shit office and the most exciting thing I get is trying to chat the secretary up. I can't have a whole day of sitting on my arse, by the end of it I need to let some aggression out or do something, train or something. And that's where testosterone comes in, it causes that. (Field notes, August 7, 2010)

Cultural codes restricted the production of behaviors and feelings that Ben and the other boxers thought marked out natural maleness. The significance that was attached to such narrations of manhood encouraged these men to experience them in some form. However, the demands of late-modern social interdependencies meant that a socially safe zone was required in order for these biological narratives to become reified in lived praxis. This social, physical, and psychological "repression" of their assumed innate masculinity was, then, resisted by their actions in the gym without contravening extant social sanctions. As such, the symbolic representation of male superiority could be maintained in pastiche form through their "participation in this hyper-violent recreational culture" (Atkinson 2011, 63).

It was clear that the power of biology to justify their understanding of male physiology was used in a relatively socially acceptable manner. This degree of temperance enabled the boxers to enjoy a relatively "controlled decontrolling" (Maguire 1992) of restrictions placed on what they interpreted as their male nature. By combining such pseudoscientific assumptions with contemporary discursive sanctions placed on male violence, aggression, and domination, these men were "authoring and authorizing male identity in a secular age" (McCaughy 2008, 126). Although Atkinson (2011, 49) has argued convincingly that "the meta-narrative of the natural patriarchal order has been symbolically dismantled" in late-modern Western societies, Power Gym was

a “male preserve” in which “dramatic symbolic proof” (Messner 1990, 204) inside and around the ring enabled men to carve out space for their “innate” manhood. Such zones, in combination with the self-reflexive forms of pastiche hegemony that might reside within them, are phenomena in which we can continue to find men enjoying the production and maintenance of patriarchal discourses and experiences.

## Concluding Remarks

Within this article, I have explored the ways in which men discursively constructed themselves using biological narrations of manhood. By channeling their assumed biological rights and obligations within a socially “safe” enclave, these men could negotiate the tensions between their supposedly “innate” male bodies and the illegitimacy of violence, aggression, and physical domination in most late-modern social situations. Through scripted performances of “mimetic” violence and self-bullying, the boxers were able to validate their understanding of themselves as “real men” within a social world where the modern foundations of the patriarchal gender order are increasingly undermined (Atkinson 2011; Faludi 2000; McCaughey 2008; McDowell 2003; Woodward 2007). As such, they were able to maintain a patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005) by securing a local pastiche hegemony (Atkinson 2011) in which men’s natural place as “protectors” remained largely uncontested. As MacInnes (1998, 67) has argued, “this search for a ‘natural’ basis to human behaviour is ultimately a search for reassurance and psychic security through the romance of authenticity in a disenchanting world.” McCaughey (2008, 3) confirms this position, suggesting that the appeal of scientific stories of men “seem to lie precisely in the sense of security provided by the imagined inevitability of heterosexual manhood.” Furthermore, this knowledge was not simply a resource employed to fit around their understanding of the social world; it was in fact a productive force that shaped and framed physical and emotional sensations. In this regard, the boxers’ emotional and physical experiences were intimately tied to what they perceived to be their nature, and once reified in praxis, these discursive power plays were justified as biological rights and obligations.

The men all believed the presence of testosterone in the male body offered a causal explanation for emotional states and physical prowess. This uncritical acceptance is a crucial aspect of the power invested in what Hoberman (2005) describes as the “hormonal folklore.” He argues, “testosterone has infiltrated modern life in ways that often escape both our attention and our censure” (Hoberman 2005, 277). This was certainly the case within Power Gym; indeed, such ideas acted as “floating signifiers,” able to discursively represent a range of behaviors situationally coded as masculine. The “male” hormone provided the men at Power Gym with a short-hand code for describing, explaining, and justifying their perceived natural masculinity, and with it, the ability to grasp power in a pastiche form.

Although not representative of all boxing subcultures or even all experiences at Power Gym, I would argue that the observations presented here certainly resonate with experiences in other “male preserves” (Connell 2005; Dunning and Maguire 1996;

Lorber 1993; Messner 1992; Sheard and Dunning 1973). Indeed, I have attempted to demonstrate the localized and negotiated ways in which engaging in boxing can clearly establish “the female/male binary with its separate spheres sanctioned by biology” (Woodward 2007, 34). As such, this article details the intertwining of selected late-modern sporting experiences and “the compelling appeal of simplistic biological explanations, especially those that support cultural stereotypes” (Epstein 1988, 55). The “biology ideology” (Lorber 1993) helped men maintain a pastiche hegemony within Power Gym, thus limiting the chances for women and “other” men to access experiences coded as masculine (McCaughey 2008; Woodward 2007). This retrenchment into simplistic pseudoscientific narrations of “real men” was “part of an ideology that attempts to make what are in fact social and political distinctions appear to be natural and biological and, therefore, to justify difference in social roles and also in relationships of dominance and subordination” (Bleier 1984, 7).

### **Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and also Joseph Maguire, Kath Woodward, Michael Atkinson, Robert Dingwall, and Alex Channon for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. Importantly, these understandings of catharsis theory are often stripped of the sociological sensitivity that Lorenz’s thesis contained (see Dunning (2003) for an insightful discussion of this topic).
2. Which is produced within the gendered world of academia (Bleier 1984; Merchant 1983; Schifellite 1987).
3. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the themes discussed in this article where names of places or persons could aid the identification of individuals, pseudonyms are used.
4. A female staff member and a small number of women who frequently attended the gym did occupy relatively established positions and engaged in some weight lifting and training for combat sports.
5. Here, my own recording of the event slips toward essentialist notions of men’s inner aggression.
6. As he claimed, it used to be the case before “things went soft.”
7. Dave had talked casually in the past about his need to smoke marijuana to stay calm.

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