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'It is what it is': Masculinity, homosexuality, and inclusive discourse in mixed martial arts

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‘It is what it is’: Masculinity, homosexuality, and inclusive discourse in mixed martial arts

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Abstract

In this paper we make use of inclusive masculinity theory to explore online media representations of male homosexuality and masculinity within the increasingly popular combat sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). Adopting a case-study approach, we discuss narratives constructed around one aspirational male MMA fighter, Dakota Cochrane, whose history of having participated in gay pornography became a major talking point on a number of MMA ‘fanzine’/‘community’ websites during early 2012. While these narratives attempted to discursively ‘rescue’ Cochrane’s supposedly threatened masculinity, highlighting both his ‘true’ heterosexuality and his prodigious fighting abilities, they also simultaneously celebrated the acceptance of homosexual men within the sport which Cochrane’s case implied. Thus, we suggest that these media representations of homosexuality and masculinity within MMA are indicative of declining cultural homophobia and homophobia, and an inclusive vision of masculinity, as previously described by proponents of inclusive masculinity theory.

Keywords

Combat Sports, Homophobia, Inclusion, Masculinities, Mixed Martial Arts, Netnography, Pornography, UFC

INTRODUCTION

In late February 2012, a news story broke and quickly spread throughout a network of online media outlets covering the professional combat sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). One of the contestants on *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF), a competitive ‘reality’ television show serving as a talent feeder to the sport’s flagship promotion, *The Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC), was revealed to have previously performed in ‘gay’ pornography. Dakota Cochrane, a 25-year old, professional male mixed martial artist, had acted in several such films, and while not the first UFC-linked fighter to have appeared in porn (Cage Potato, 2012), he was the first man to have performed in homosexual scenes. And, within a sport saturated with the imagery of ‘orthodox’ masculinity (Mayeda & Ching, 2008; Mayeda, 2011), Cochrane’s case immediately invited a flurry of comment debating the significance of

homosexual sex acts, attitudes towards (male) homosexuality and homophobia, and the meanings of masculinity within the sport.

In this paper, we discuss the narratives constructed around Dakota Cochrane within a number of articles published on various MMA ‘fanzine’ websites, exploring how such accounts dealt with his case, and also how they addressed broader issues relating to inclusivity, tolerance, and the meanings of homosexuality and homophobia vis-à-vis ideals of masculinity. In doing so, we make use of Eric Anderson’s (2009) conceptualisation of ‘inclusive masculinity’, suggesting that this isolated case is illustrative of wider shifts in attitudes towards male identity and sexualities in contemporary Western societies; a shift which appears to have penetrated even into some of the most hallowed turf of heteronormative masculinity – professional combat sports. We begin with a short discussion of the history of MMA, and its links to orthodox masculine identity.

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS AND MASCULINITY

Beginning in the mid-1990s, contemporary, competitive MMA has emerged as a major new sport, popular in Western contexts both as a recreational/participation activity (Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Spencer, 2011) and an elite/professional, mass-mediated spectator phenomenon (Mayeda & Ching, 2008). The sport typically involves fighters who have trained at a number of different disciplines (e.g., boxing, judo, wrestling, etc.) competing under a set of rules which allow for a much wider range of techniques to be used than is typical in each style’s own competitions (Downey, 2007). Fights often take place in a boxing-style ring or in an octagonal ‘cage’; hence the moniker ‘cage fighting’, as MMA is often known. The once infamous, but now increasingly mainstreamed UFC was instrumental in developing contemporary MMA, and currently stands as the sport’s premier international promotion, boasting to be ‘the fastest growing sports organisation in history’, whose events are now televised ‘in over 149 countries and territories’ to a purported audience of ‘half a billion homes’ (The UFC, 2012a).

MMA (and the UFC in particular) represents an interesting site for exploring contemporary renditions of masculinity, given the symbolic proximity of the sport and its athletes to the types of manliness described in earlier research into men’s participation in combat-oriented sports (Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1990, 1992; Messner & Sabo, 1990). This masculine archetype typically involves strength, toughness, competitiveness, risk taking, muscularity, and above all else, the ability to dominate others; characteristics typically considered central to constructions of ‘hegemonic’ forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995). This ‘hegemony’ can involve such men’s direct physical domination of women and other men through acts of violence (Anderson, 2009; Messner, 2002), but also through the symbolic capital which embodied images of masculinity-as-power and femininity-as-weakness invest in all heterosexual men, as part of what Connell (1995) terms the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (cf. Messner, 1990). This conflation of heterosexual men with physical power, relative to the construction of homosexual men as effeminate and weak (Jarvis, 2006; Pronger, 1990), and all women as the inevitably weaker and inferior sex, has long been seen to support the power relations at work in a gender order which privileges heterosexual men at

the expense of homosexuals and women (e.g. McKay, Messner & Sabo, 2000; Messner & Sabo, 1990).

Historically, the UFC has offered little departure from the association between fighting, sport, and such orthodox visions of masculinity. The use of imagery and narrative which emphasised the excessive and dangerous violence of ‘cage fighting’ (Brent & Kraska, 2013; Downey, 2007), the ‘realness’ of the fights as stressed by the apparent lack of rules (Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010; van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006), and the resonance which these struck with idealised visions of gritty, ‘working-class’ (American) masculinity (Hirose & Pih, 2010), were undoubtedly important elements in the original appeal of the UFC (Wertheim, 2010). Eventually, the excessively ‘violent’ nature of the UFC’s brand of MMA attracted a notoriety which earned fierce criticism as much as audience interest, and as political pressure forced the UFC to seek a more acceptable, mainstream image (Mayeda & Ching, 2008), the violence of its contests was de-emphasised (Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010). Along with several organisational changes within the UFC itself, this also led to the development of a list of ‘Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts’ during the early 2000s (The UFC, 2012b), which were subsequently adopted by the UFC and many other MMA organisations.

Such changes as these effectively ended the days of ‘no-holds-barred’ fights in the UFC, as well as the sport’s controversial, fringe status as an excessively violent spectacle but not, it would seem, the sport’s masculinised image. Mayeda and Ching (2008) describe how even in spite of its move towards greater mainstream respectability, professional MMA retains much of the heterosexist imagery associated with the ‘male-dominated’ professional sports industry at large. Scantly-clad ring girls are a staple at most MMA events (Spencer, 2011), while ‘the MMA industry is replete with misogynistic visuals, which bluntly encourage that masculinity be built through the accumulation of muscles, aggression, and women’ (Mayeda & Ching, 2008: 181). Female competition in MMA, although having grown in recent years, is still fairly marginal, and at the time of writing in late 2012, the UFC has only recently offered its first contract to a female fighter¹.

Meanwhile, the fan consumption and ‘grassroots’ practice of MMA also appears bound up within these apparent patterns of masculinity. Borer and Schafer’s (2011) research into Christian MMA fans’ online ‘confessionals’ highlighted a moral validation of the sport partly on the grounds that it helped revive an essentialist, ‘natural’ vision of masculinity. In their cross-cultural analysis, Hirose and Pih state that in the West, ‘there is a fairly coherent public image that MMA is dangerous, violent, and thus only for “real” men’ (2010: 198), discussing also how homophobic narratives are used by certain Western audiences to dismiss particular types of martial arts as less violent, feminised, and therefore ‘gay’. This notion was also addressed in Salter and Tomsen’s (2012) paper on the videos posted online by the Felony Fights MMA promotion, which primarily explored how fans drew on notions of race and social class, along with punitive discourses surrounding criminality, to legitimise and validate deeply violent expressions of masculinity. Regarding practitioners, Spencer (2011, 2012) discussed how fighters’ narratives of masculinity involved seeking to ‘dominate’ others to the point of inflicting pain and/or injury on them, and to risk their health by persisting in training and competition despite suffering from the same themselves. While several authors have noted that some within MMA training cultures also downplay or deny the significance of

such orthodox types of masculinity, or even involve normalised ‘feminine’ practices such as care-giving and intimacy between practitioners (Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Green, 2011; Mayeda & Ching, 2008), it is nevertheless apparent that many within the sport continue to endorse elements of traditional masculine orthodoxy.

Thus, we assert that the gendered pedigree of MMA clearly draws on the symbolism developed within the sports milieu critically interrogated by earlier researchers of sport and masculinity (e.g. McKay et al., 2000; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). And, in our view, these highly masculinised images and meanings make the sport an ideal site for the exploration of emergent, alternative masculine types, particularly regarding contemporary attitudes towards male homosexuality, as invoked by the Dakota Cochrane case. In this regard, the development of inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009) potentially has much to offer.

INCLUSIVE MASCULINITY THEORY

In recent sociological work on the relationship between masculine identity, gender relations, and homophobia, inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) has arisen as a new framework for making sense of men’s experiences and constructions of masculinity (Anderson, 2009). Supported by empirical data from a range of studies conducted in the US and the UK during the past decade, IMT suggests that in these contemporary Western societies, culturally valued male identities are becoming less structured around ‘hegemonic’ forms of power relations characteristic of earlier theorising (e.g. Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and typically no longer involve a strong association with misogyny or homophobia. Rather, new forms of identity have emerged, which are increasingly inclusive of both formerly denigrated ‘others’ (women and homosexuals), and also a variety of different expressions of manliness (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; Miller, 1998; Pringle & Hickey, 2010).

Key to the emergence of such ‘inclusive’ forms of masculinity has been a marked downturn in the demonization of male homosexual contact; that is, decreasing levels of cultural homophobia (Anderson, 2009). Previous theories identified ‘hegemonic’ masculinity as being principally dependent upon homophobia as a means of constructing and defending a gender order which distanced ‘real’, heterosexual men from the effeminacy and emasculation implied by ‘being gay’ (Connell, 1987, 1995; Kimmel, 1994). Here, men’s public declarations of homophobia served as ‘the most important policing agent of masculinity’ (Anderson, 2009: 8); to not be loudly homophobic was to be placed under suspicion of ‘being gay’ oneself, and thus to potentially lose one’s masculine capital. But, given the current ascendancy of liberal discourse surrounding discrimination, equality and inclusion, itself driven by a variety of cultural and political movements over the past few decades (Anderson, 2009), the extant tolerance of homophobia in many Western contexts today has significantly declined. No longer fit for validating male identity, homophobia is in fact considered by many heterosexual men within a variety of social contexts to be ‘unacceptable’ (Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Bush, Anderson & Carr, 2012; McCormack & Anderson, 2010).

IMT asserts that the decreasing homophobia in society has also involved a decreasing fear among men of being labelled as homosexual. Thus, the felt need among the majority of

men (hetero- and homosexual) to publicly display homophobia in order to distance themselves from behaviours typically associated with homosexuality has lessened (Anderson, 2011). Described by Anderson and colleagues as ‘decreasing homophobia’ (Anderson, 2009; Anderson, McCormack & Lee, 2012; Bush, Anderson & Carr, 2012), this has resulted in the greater acceptance of homosexuals by heterosexual men (Anderson, 2008a), and also a greater diversity of accepted behaviours among many heterosexually-identified men themselves. For instance, IMT researchers have shown that such men in American and British schools, universities, fraternity organisations and sports teams, engage in same-sex hugging, kissing, and even some sex acts without fear of being regarded as homosexual. Thus rejecting the apparent ‘one-time rule’ of homosexuality, they reconcile their heterosexual identities with ostensibly homosexualised behaviours and homosexual practices (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2008b; Anderson, Adams & Rivers, 2010). In this way, cultural settings which once served as sites for the exclusion of gay men and for the reproduction and promulgation of homophobia, as was the case for particular types of ‘masculine’ team sports (Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1992), today appear able to operate as far more ‘inclusive’ environments, where the boundaries of what counts as acceptable behaviour for men have broadened considerably.

Upon accepting these findings, a tension then exists between empirical observations and theorisations that make sense of continued ‘patriarchal’ cultural patterns with recourse to the dictates of a ‘hegemonic’ style, which actively subordinates homosexual identities. This is not to suggest the complete subversion of patriarchy or the replacement of ‘hegemony’ with ‘inclusion’; such a simplification would belie the complexity of gender processes. Rather, IMT posits that evidence of a subtle, ‘inclusive’ shift in the codes of masculinity calls for a rethink of the place of ‘hegemonic’ theorising in accounts of men’s lives. Indeed, it would seem that that contestation of masculine styles takes place on a more ‘horizontally’ aligned basis (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), wherein struggles over the meaning of masculinity do not occur within a heteronormative hierarchy where ‘hegemonic’, ‘manly’ heterosexuality resides at the top, and ‘subordinated’, ‘effeminate’ homosexuality at the bottom. Thus, while IMT does not suggest that orthodox, sexist or homophobic masculinities have altogether vanished from Western culture, it nevertheless asserts that such types of masculine identity no longer hold ‘hegemonic’ status over all others.

Given the prominence of Connell’s (1987, 1995) ‘hegemonic masculinity’ theory within much previous work on masculinities and sports cultures (see Pringle, 2005), the emergence of this alternative model bears examination across a variety of such arenas. While some recent work has explored changes in homophobia, homophobia, and inclusivity in traditionally ‘male’ team sports (Adams, 2011; Anderson, McCormack & Lee, 2012; Anderson and McGuire, 2010), we locate our present effort as an exploratory application of this analysis to professional MMA – a sport with a past mired in the symbolic and discursive realms of orthodox masculinity. If, as IMT asserts, masculine propriety and acceptability are shifting away from misogyny and homophobia (Anderson, 2008c; McCormack & Anderson, 2010) and towards the inclusion of previously stigmatised or excluded ‘others’, then exploring the extent to which these changes are taking place in such environments is a matter

of some priority. Fortunately, the Dakota Cochrane case provides an ideal opportunity in this endeavour.

METHOD

We take our data for this study from a selection of online MMA ‘fanzine’/‘community’ websites (n=18), principally using their news reporting and feature writing to interrogate the online media representations of Cochrane’s story. This includes a broad selection of written articles (n=38), as well as several audio/visual interviews (n=6), published online between 28 February and 9 March 2012 (after which no further dedicated articles/interviews were found). In addition, a number of earlier articles (n=9) were also taken from these websites’ archives to help contextualise recent and previous discussions of homosexuality, homophobia, and inclusivity within the sport.

We decided to collect data from these websites for several reasons. Firstly, the ease with which information could be freely accessed using the Internet made for a straightforward, time-effective method of exploring the issue. Secondly, the analysis of documentary evidence allowed for an investigation into the politically and morally-charged issue of homosexuality, homophobia and masculinity in a way which was strictly ‘non-interventionist’ (Adler & Adler, 1998); that is, our data was not affected by social desirability bias drawn from our own presence as researchers. Thirdly, the specialist nature of the websites selected for inclusion in the study ensures that we were able to access opinions circulating among contemporary MMA enthusiasts, giving us something of a view ‘from within’ the sport.

As an example of ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 1998, 2002), this method therefore assumes that the websites chosen – which variously described themselves as blogging sites, news outlets, or cyber-groups of MMA fans – represent some semblance of an online ‘voice’ around which specialist journalists, often in collaboration with fans, practitioners, and other stakeholders, can air views, construct meanings, and collectively represent the sport. Such websites are therefore seen to draw on disparate groups of enthusiasts, whose shared interest in MMA in their offline lives gives rise to these online sites as examples of ‘derived communities’ (Kozinets, 1998), where meanings circulating among broader cultural spaces coalesce, gaining globally-accessible representation. While we make no claim to generalizability among all MMA fans, we are confident that these websites nevertheless represent a meaningful location within which possible meanings of MMA are constructed and disseminated, making them useful sites for achieving an informative, if ultimately only partial view of this phenomenon.

The articles were located using web searches of terms including ‘MMA’, ‘Dakota Cochrane’, ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’, ‘pornography’, and various combinations thereof. In addition to returning some generic reference websites, and mainstream or other specialist news outlets (as well as websites containing pornographic material), these searches led us through a series of dedicated MMA websites that had dealt with the story. In addition, we used these websites’ own search functions to find relevant stories (i.e. any explicitly mentioning Cochrane’s history of porn acting, along with other discussions of homosexuality

in MMA that were less than two years old), also using embedded links contained within each article to access others. The articles were jointly examined by both authors, and interpreted using discourse analysis – an analytical method of critically reading texts which balances a ‘data-driven’ approach with the application of interpretive theoretical frameworks (Tonkiss, 2012). In the following sections, we present our findings organised into several discursive categories which emerged from the data, grouped into two main camps: accounts of the problematic nature of homosexuality and the concurrent defence of Cochrane’s heterosexual masculinity; and discourses promoting inclusive, accepting attitudes towards homosexual men whilst criticising or rejecting homophobia.

HOMOSEXUALITY AS PROBLEMATIC

The problematic nature of Cochrane’s performance in ‘gay’ porn was identified within almost all of the articles we analysed. Here, the incompatibility between ‘gay’ male sexuality and combat sport participation – or in most cases, the possible assumption of such an incompatibility – typically formed the basis of the story’s newsworthiness. It was from this recognition that many of the variously themed narratives discussed here were derived.

‘Sordid and degrading’

Firstly, while many reports directly claimed to have ‘no problem’ with the fact that Cochrane was ‘a gay porn star’ (Middle Easy, 2012), in many such articles this did not preclude highlighting the ‘sordid’ nature of pornography (Haggerty, 2012). For instance, UFC fighter and TUF coach Urijah Faber was quoted as referring to porn acting being ‘degrading’ (Martin, 2012), a notion echoed by many of the article authors themselves. According to one piece, ‘the mere thought of homosexuality is enough to upset the apple cart for some men’ (Holland, 2012a), while another bluntly stated: ‘[watching gay porn] was brutal... I dare any straight guy just to look at gay porn... I think my eyes were just traumatized’ (Middle Easy, 2012).

While the clear majority of articles analysed in this study were openly sympathetic towards Cochrane, several suggested that problems with homosexuality ran deeply within wider MMA subcultures. Some made reference to earlier reports of other fighters who had used homophobic language to insult rivals, or voiced aversions to training with gay men, while others speculated that Cochrane’s competitors/housemates on the TUF show ‘may feel uncomfortable sharing close space and/or fighting with him’ (Labate, 2012). Several highlighted how his past had already hindered Cochrane, who ‘has had several opponents back out of fights after learning of his history, as well as promoters withdraw offers to him’ (Chiappetta, 2012a). Further, one earlier piece suggested that ‘a don’t ask, don’t tell policy’ towards the issue of male homosexuality – ‘a stone better left unturned’ – may be favourable, citing the (presumably homophobic) ‘demographic mixed martial arts appeals to’ as a concern for gay fighters wishing to come out (Holland, 2011). The stigmatisation of homosexuality was, therefore, consistently highlighted as a potential problem for any athlete in the sport, including Cochrane.

‘Gay-for-pay’

In addressing this, attempts were often made to justify or legitimate Cochrane’s actions and thus diffuse the negative connotations of gay porn acting. Typically, this involved contextualising them by framing him as a misled victim of the porn industry, as a precarious financial situation during his college years had compelled him to momentarily become ‘gay-for-pay’ (Fightlinker, 2012). Under the headline ‘Dakota Cochrane is not a gay man’, one article insisted that ‘while the statement initially seems absurd... there is a long tradition of married, straight porn actors appearing in gay porn for the money’ (Chiappetta, 2012b). In Cochrane’s own words, ‘It’s definitely a decision I regret... I had money issues and I needed help... I didn’t really think’ (Fightlinker, 2012). Asserting that Cochrane in fact remained ‘a straight man.. [who chalked] the whole thing up to a desperate mistake’ (Wayne, 2012), these accounts attempted to rescue him from the stigma of ‘being gay’ by blaming economic necessity, rather than his own intrinsic sexuality, for his porn performances (cf. Klein, 1986). Such actions thus became explicable as evidence of the exploitation of vulnerable, ‘straight’ men by powerful business interests:

The reality of it is that there are predatory people in our capitalist society who will take a young person, boy or girl, as soon as they are eighteen and they will try to... exploit you as hard as they possibly can, as young Cochrane found out. (Thomas, 2012)

While these attempts to rationalise homosexual sex as an act of financial desperation imply that ‘being gay’ remained profane in the MMA world, they do however speak to an important conceptualisation of sexual acts as being distinct from essentialised sexual identities. That is, such accounts challenge the notion of a ‘one time rule’ of homosexuality (Anderson, 2008b), indicating a broadening of what is understood as possible for heterosexual men to do with their bodies whilst retaining an identity as ‘straight’. Whilst rarely departing from the damning discursive construction of gay porn as sordid or exploitative, such narratives begged MMA audiences to leave Cochrane’s mistake in the past. Building on this, many articles then developed more cogent defences of Cochrane’s manhood, drawing on elements of orthodox, heterosexual masculinity to shore up his image as a ‘real’ man.

‘Family man’

Here, attention was often drawn to Cochrane’s relationship, noting that he was in fact engaged to his long-term girlfriend, with whom he had fathered two children. His relationship with his ‘beautiful fiancée’ (Chiappetta, 2012b) was cited regularly, with some articles carrying photographs of the two together, and others noting that ‘when he admitted to his girlfriend... what he was doing, she asked him to stop, and the short-lived career was over’ (Brookhouse, 2012). The couple’s intent to marry, their two young children, and Cochrane’s fiancée’s knowledge (and forgiveness) of his participation in porn, all helped to construct an image of Cochrane’s true sexuality within idealised depictions of a heterosexual,

nuclear family, representing a clear redemption from his morally dubious past. Further, Cochrane's involvement in MMA was often described in terms of his role as a committed, responsible, bread-winning family man. While this ironically drew both porn and MMA participation together around the notion of paid, bodily performance, the moral difference between the two was nevertheless made clear: 'the decision he made years ago was a selfish one, made for money, but this opportunity to be on TUF isn't just about him; it's a chance to enrich his family' (Chiappetta, 2012a). Thus, taking money for fighting against other men (hard work, honest) was cast as a morally legitimate occupation, while taking money for having sex with other men (sordid, degrading) was not.

As well as his disclosure to his fiancée, the theme of Cochrane's honesty was also frequently emphasised when explaining the UFC's decision to employ him on TUF. Here, he was described as being 'absolutely 100 percent upfront' (Haggerty, 2012) about his past, a quality widely celebrated within several articles as an indication of Cochrane's virtuous character. He was 'candid about his background, embracing honesty as the best course of action' (Chiappetta, 2012a), having long been 'open and honest... even when it cost him' (Fowlkes, 2012). Speaking to well-established images of morally courageous, blue-collar fighter masculinity (cf. Rhodes, 2011), constructions of Cochrane's 'true' identity depicted a moral, straight man who owns his mistakes while struggling to provide for a young family. Thus, while remaining clearly sympathetic towards Cochrane and arguing against a 'one time rule' of homosexuality, such narratives also helped endorse the conservative, heteronormative sexual ethics which had necessitated these discursive strategies in the first place, constructing a favoured masculinity for MMA fighters based in traditional conceptions of male heterosexuality.

'He'll kick your ass'

Similar attempts at re-validating Cochrane's masculinity were also made when discussing his fighting ability. A common theme, the assertion of Cochrane's prodigious athletic and martial competencies often used evocative language to establish powerful masculine credentials, which essentially redeemed him from the assumed emasculation of homosexuality (see Salter & Tomsen, 2012). Here, he was described as a 'bad ass fighter' (Middle Easy, 2012) whose previous record included 'a dominant win over former WEC² champion Jamie Varner' (Martin, 2012), whom he had 'crushed' (Underground, 2012) in a 'beastly performance' (Middle Easy, 2012)³. Further, much was also made of Cochrane's other past – as a competitive track and field athlete – as several articles highlighted this unusual introduction to the world of professional combat sports, implying both a generally well-rounded set of sporting abilities as well as a 'competitive instinct' which well-suited him to prizefighting:

He first tried the sport during some time off when he was bored. He trained for six months, scored a knockout in his first amateur fight and was quickly hooked. "Beating someone up, it's pretty exciting," he said with a laugh. (Chiappetta, 2012a)

Consistent reference was also made to the claim that Cochrane had been selected to appear on TUF purely on the basis of his merits as a fighter, and many articles carried quotes from the UFC's outspoken, charismatic president, Dana White, to that end: 'dude is pretty tough... He's a good fighter. He made it into [TUF] on his fighting skills and what he's accomplished' (Morgan, 2012). Further to this, figures such as White and Urijah Faber were also quoted offering warnings to any would-be detractors – including Cochrane's TUF opponents – who might vocalise any homophobic insults prior to competition. Faber advised, 'I wouldn't make him look too bad because if you're going to break a guy down and then he beats you up then that kind of makes you look bad' (Wayne, 2012), while White commented on how 'any guy who has anything to say to (Cochrane), he gets to kick his fucking ass two days later!' (Rocha, 2012).

The use of homophobia has been conceptualised by masculinity scholars as a means of asserting one's own heterosexuality within cultures of high homophobia (cf. Anderson, 2009), but here the possibility of that strategy backfiring was highlighted. Cochrane's complex positioning relative to typical sexual/gendered categories invalidated any such strategy, because his potentially violent reprisals against homophobic slurs would effectively emasculate those who had sought to gain masculine capital by feminising him. Clearly deployed as a response to the implied effeminacy of male homosexuality (Jarvis, 2006; Pronger, 1990), these narratives simultaneously helped support the link between assumed 'true' masculinity and fighting (Messner, 1990), whilst also destabilising the link between exclusive heterosexuality and this form of masculinity. And this inclusive impulse, wherein sexual behaviours and sexualities were disassociated from fighting ability as a marker of masculine prowess, helped construct more directly anti-homophobic, even pro-gay discourse, forming the second major theme of this story's reporting.

ACCEPTANCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

While the narratives discussed above were generally directed at protecting Cochrane from the homophobic attacks of potential detractors, several other arguments attempted to directly turn the tables on homophobia itself. Highlighting how Cochrane's case was in fact good for the sport, several articles urged readers to either 'get over' Cochrane's assumed sexuality, or recognise its significance as a potentially progressive, transformative phenomenon.

'It is what it is'

Firstly in this regard, the notion that Cochrane was no different from any other fighter was cited in several articles, suggesting that his homosexual experiences did not mark him out as a categorically different type of person in need of any special attention; after all, other fighters 'all have pasts, too, just not ones that everyone else knows about' (Chiappetta, 2012a). In this regard, fellow TUF competitor Mike Rio was quoted as saying: 'He's just like everybody else... he's trying to start a new chapter in his life, which is what we're all trying to do' (Stupp, 2012). Identifying Cochrane as a fellow mixed martial artist, with whom he shared a common struggle against past adversity and mutual pursuit of future glory, Rio

joined several other authors who urged readers to ‘focus on Cochrane as a fighter’ (Labate, 2012). Cochrane himself hoped critics would ‘say what you need to say, then move on’ (Holland, 2012b), while according to Dana White, ‘It is what it is... it’s reality. It’s a part of life... it is what it is!’ (Morgan, 2012). Thus distancing himself from any directly pro- or anti-gay stance, the UFC president bluntly dismissed concerns over Cochrane’s sexuality as something which only ‘homophobes’ would be concerned by.

Interestingly, several articles adopting this line of argument did not distinguish between ‘being gay’ or just ‘gay-for-pay’, as such a distinction thereby became irrelevant in light of the more salient questions about Cochrane’s merit as a professional fighter. According to Mike Rio:

I’m not about to alienate someone or not train with them because of their preference or past. If he’s a good training partner, he’s a good training partner... To be the best, you’ve got to train with the best. If he’s the best, you deal with him. (Stupp, 2012)

Going beyond the notion that having homosexual sex does not make a person gay, this narrative therefore suggests that the use of sexuality as a legitimate category of difference was not appropriate or meaningful in this context at all. Thus making the ‘gay’ question moot, some dismissed the entire story as a non-event, only worth talking about within outdated frames of reference which did not belong in MMA. To such authors, Cochrane’s acceptance therefore stood for the symbolic acceptance of all gay men in the sport, rationalised on the grounds of a more foundational ethos of meritocracy and inclusion, which carried greater significance than the defence of an archaic, exclusive, orthodox masculinity (cf. Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson & McGuire, 2010). For some commentators, this afforded a chance to highlight exclusionary attitudes among other, presumably more homophobic sports: ‘It makes you wonder, would NFL players be so welcoming and non-judgemental? Would the NBA open its arms to a player with a resume like Cochrane’s?’ (Fowlkes, 2012). Such attempts to highlight the progressive, inclusive stance of the UFC, an organisation otherwise well used to being criticised for its apparent barbarism and, indeed, misogyny, were further developed in more direct discussions of male homosexuality and homophobia, and the significance of this case as an acid-test for the state of both MMA and society more broadly.

‘A paradigm shift’

In this regard, several articles eschewed dismissing the matter as irrelevant, instead taking a political stance which suggested the Cochrane case was progressive, struck a blow to homophobia, and was a promising sign of the times, making the episode in fact a ‘truly compelling situation’ (Brookhouse, 2012). That the UFC would take a risk on hiring such a controversial figure was, according to some, evidence of ‘MMA at its best’ (Fowlkes, 2012), improving the sport’s public image in the face of past controversies. Noting that Cochrane’s acceptance by the organisation was something of a watershed moment in the sport’s history, others hoped that ‘more gay fighters [will now] come out and feel welcome in the MMA

community' (Labate, 2012). This argument was often contextualised by referring to broader social attitudes and norms, as many authors directly stated that 'there's nothing wrong with homosexuality' (Middle Easy, 2012), but rather 'taunting about sexual preference is shameful, not the sexual preference itself' (Underground, 2012). This was often accompanied by a widely-cited quote from White, stressing that the UFC's acceptance of Cochrane should come as no real surprise given contemporary social norms: 'I mean, it's 2012. Give me a break!' (Barry, 2012a). Along with reference to White's earlier call for gay fighters to 'come out' and be welcomed within the organisation (Holland, 2011), this was taken as a clear sign in several articles that the UFC promoted anti-homophobic politics, and served as a site for progressive social change.

Endorsing an explicitly anti-homophobic position, such articles also described any fighters' hesitance to practice with homosexual partners as 'silly' (Holland, 2012a), while reminding readers that 'Dana White matter-of-factly says you're an "idiot" if you have a problem with it' (Barry, 2012b). Seizing upon the potential for the sport to adopt a more visibly inclusive, progressive image, one article stressed that:

the emergence of a gay fighter is an opportunity for the world's fastest growing sport to show its ethical colors... A gay MMA fighter is not a stigma on the sport, the stigma is on the people who think it is. (Underground, 2012)

Provocative moralising of this kind was not common to every article or website, but none provided any clear arguments in the opposite direction. In other words, the only moral stance being taken here was one which derided homophobia, celebrated the UFC's 'courageous' move in recruiting Cochrane (Fowlkes, 2012), and advocated more momentum in the same direction. To that end, and perhaps most strikingly, one author explicitly argued that: 'we need a guy like Dakota Cochrane in this sport. It's time for a paradigm shift' (Middle Easy, 2012).

An apt choice of words, this 'paradigm shift' enshrined within Cochrane's case is illustrative of the changes in social constructions of masculinity and sexuality described by Anderson (2009) and his fellow proponents of IMT. Affirming the observation that certain groups of (heterosexual) men no longer depend upon homophobia in developing their masculine capital, the alignment of the UFC with prevailing liberal attitudes indicates the degree to which inclusive models of masculinity are supplanting those based upon hegemonic forms of power, even in highly 'masculinised' cultural spaces. Rather than simply serving to protect the (threatened) privilege of heterosexual men (e.g. Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1992), MMA therefore appears, through the lens of the Dakota Cochrane affair, also capable of acting as a progressive space within which a greater diversity of masculine identities are becoming permitted, and even celebrated.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While recent ethnographic work on MMA participation has suggested that fighters engage in some typically 'feminised' behaviours in training (e.g. Abramson & Modzelewski, 2010;

Green, 2011), Cochrane's example presents a far more direct and explicit transgression of the boundaries of heteronormative, orthodox masculinity than has previously been discussed by scholars of the sport. By having had sex with other men in a highly visible, public forum, whilst also existing within a deeply masculinised sports culture, Cochrane's case provocatively tests the boundaries of contemporary masculine propriety in ways which we feel that IMT is evidently well-placed to explore, with the concept of 'decreasing homophobia' being particularly instructive. Our analysis reveals that MMA commentators tended to deploy narratives which indicated a distinct lack of homophobia, whilst also pre-emptively criticising the potential homophobia of others as they adopted an often self-consciously inclusive vision of masculinity. Within a wider cultural context of an increasing backlash against the 'toxic' character (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) of previously hegemonic, orthodox masculinities, and in particular their tendency towards homophobia (Anderson, 2009), the liberalism of pro-gay political movements has shaped contemporary media discourse about homosexuality – a broader phenomenon of which these narratives must be seen to be a part.

However, given the limited focus of our dataset, we cannot say how the messages of these articles – despite being more-or-less in agreement in many important regards – are received among MMA fans. There is certainly indication that at least some consumers of these media do not share an inclusive outlook; while user comments at the foot of many articles often agreed with the generally accepting stance of the texts, some also involved explicitly homophobic statements/jokes, with warnings against 'offensive' posting on some sites indicating an expectation of such among editors (e.g. Wilcox, 2012). This leaves open an interesting avenue for further research into MMA fans' own online articulations of gender and sexuality, following recent studies of homophobia in fan postings within other, traditionally 'masculine' sports (Cleland, 2013; Kian, Clavio, Vincent & Shaw, 2011).

Another important element of this issue, which our media analysis is not particularly well placed to speak to, is the socio-economic context within which men like Cochrane are introduced to both pornography and MMA. While the construction of porn acting as an exploitive form of labour was briefly noted above, MMA was not similarly framed within these articles, despite the fact that both activities involve commodified, risk-laden, gendered bodily performances. This lack of negative framing of the sport is perhaps to be expected, given that our dataset is drawn from dedicated MMA media. However, while research has posited that the sport can be profoundly exploitive of the marginalised underclasses and urban poor (Salter & Tomsen, 2012), other findings suggest that competitive participation in MMA is not always driven by the exploitation of fighters' economic desperation (Brent & Kraska, 2013), and is in fact popular amongst affluent, middle-class men (Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011). The relationships that men of various social backgrounds have with the sport thus remain complex, and are certainly worthy of further investigation.

Nevertheless, we feel that the dissemination of 'inclusive' discourse within MMA media is still a significant finding, given the previous theorisation that combat sports exist primarily as heterosexist 'male preserves' – 'bastions of masculinity' against the increasing 'feminisation' and 'emasculatation' of society (e.g. Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1990; Sheard & Dunning, 1973). Agreeing with Anderson's (2011) claim that new theoretical models are

now needed to understand contemporary constructions of masculinity, and particularly so within ostensibly ‘masculinised’ cultural spaces, we wish to advocate the usefulness of IMT for future efforts in this direction. The recent ‘coming out’ of both professional boxer Orlando Cruz and NBA basketball player Jason Collins contribute significantly to the growing cultural presence of openly homosexual male athletes, with Cruz in particular making for a more visible figurehead within the world of combat sports to explore discursive constructions of masculinity. Investigations of reports surrounding Cruz will likely provide an interesting comparison with our current findings, particularly given that Cruz identifies as a ‘proud gay man’ (Walker, 2012), and not a heterosexual family man who once ‘made the mistake’ of becoming ‘gay-for-pay’. Meanwhile, other theorisations, which subtly locate shifting patterns of masculinity within a hegemonic bloc, or ‘pastiche’ (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; Jefferson, 2002), may also be able to neatly frame such developments. Exploring the seemingly paradoxical place ‘inclusive’ masculinities might have within the apparent continuation of male hegemony, via boys and men adopting ‘chameleon-like, omnivore masculinity’ (Atkinson, 2011: 208), may also prove instructive in understanding contemporary phenomena such as the Dakota Cochrane case.

Such investigations as these could help better illuminate the changing relationships between masculinity, homophobia and inclusivity, within terrain previously held to be the exclusive domain of conservative, homophobic and misogynistic masculine orthodoxy. As a short, exploratory venture into applying IMT in this direction, we hope that our efforts have revealed the potential value of this approach for scholars interested in similar social phenomena.

NOTES

- ¹ 2008 Olympic judo bronze medallist Ronda Rousey joined the UFC in November 2012.
- ² World Extreme Cagefighting, a now-defunct MMA promotion.
- ³ Despite his evident prowess, Cochrane was defeated before being able to reach the final stages of the TUF 15 contest. At the time of writing, he remains active as a professional competitor, being tipped for a possible future championship fight (Bratcher, 2012).

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