

Masculinities and Sexualities in Sport and Physical Cultures:

Three Decades of Evolving Research

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This article traces the foundation of the study between sport and physical cultures, masculinities and sexualities; principally by examining the homophobic zeitgeist by which the academic discipline was formed. I show that the intense homophobia of the mid 1980s waned throughout the 1990s, and that during the new millennia, researchers found more inclusive forms of heterosexuality. Indeed, research on masculinities and homophobia today shows that even in the traditionally conservative institution of sport, matters have shifted dramatically. This has resulted not only in improved conditions for sexual minorities, but it has also promoted a culture of softer, more tactile and emotional forms of heterosexual masculinities. These studies, alongside those within this special edition, highlight the necessity of developing new ways of theorizing the changing dynamics between masculinities, sexualities and physical cultures in the next decade.

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Although there is a dearth of research concerning the relationship between sport, masculinities and homosexuality before the 1980s (see Garner & Smith, 1977 and Sabo, 1980 for notable exceptions). Gay athletes had not yet begun to emerge from their sporting closets, nor did they exist openly within the sport related occupational industry. For example, when Pronger (1990) studied closeted Canadian gay athletes in the late 1980s, he was unable to find men who were out to their teammates. Whether participating in individual sports (e.g., tennis, swimming and running) or teamsports (e.g., football, basketball and rugby), there were few openly gay athletes in the Western world. They remained closeted because they assumed that the high degree of homophobic discourse, alongside their teammates vocalized opposition to homosexuality, indicated that they would have a troubled experience coming out (Woog, 1998).

Interviewing heterosexual male athletes a few years later, Messner (1992) confirmed this perception: “The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering,” he wrote. “Boys (in sport) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable” (p.34). These attitudes also extended into recreational level sporting leagues. Discussing the Netherlands, Gert Hekma (1998) wrote, “Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise” (p. 2).

This paradigmatic view was supported by the quantitative work university athletes in the United States, too. For example, in (2001) Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morphew found that white male athletes exhibited disproportionate degrees of homophobia compared to their attitudes toward racial minorities. Hence, sport has been widely recognized as an institution which promotes heterosexuality over homosexuality. This is a phenomenon that I experienced first-hand.

In 1994, I became America's first (or at least the first publicly recognized) openly gay high school coach (Anderson, 2000). Although I received tremendous support from the high school runners that I coached, I was maligned by the administration. Worse, my athletes were victimized by many members of the high school's football team; assumed gay through a guilt-by-association process. My athletes were intimidated by a series of symbolic and real episodes of harassment by our school's football team, and because this bullying was not stopped by the football coaches or administration, the harassment escalated. A two-year period of abuse saw damage to our cars, the extradition of my athletes from one locker-room to another, and threats on our lives. Eventually, a football player brutally assaulted one of my heterosexual athletes. My athlete endured a beating that resulted in four broken facial bones, including his pallet, as the assailant called him a 'fucking faggot' whilst beating his head into the asphalt. The incident was determined to be 'mutual combat' by the Huntington Beach Police Department, and the high school principal dismissed the possibility of it being a hate crime.

These experiences led me to abandon my high school teaching and coaching; to instead pursue a PhD in sport sociology under the tutelage of Professor Michael Messner. Here, I was introduced to studies highlighting that not only was men's competitive sport built on the premise of homophobia, but that it was also a social institution organized around the political project of defining certain forms of heterosexual masculinity as acceptable, while denigrating other forms (Crosset, 1990; Messner, 2002). Sport, I learned, was also used in promoting men's patriarchal privilege over women (Burstyn, 1999).

Messner (1992), Pronger (1990) and others (Connell, 1990, 1995; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Plummer, 1999) have shown us that sport, particularly teamsports, traditionally associates boys and men with masculine dominance by constructing their identities and sculpting their bodies to align with hegemonic perspectives of masculinist embodiment and

expression. Accordingly, literature on the relationship between sport and men's masculinities throughout the 1990s highlighted that in competitive teamsports boys and men were constructed to exhibit, value and reproduce orthodox notions of masculinity (Anderson, 2005a; Plummer, 1999).

Theorizing Masculinities

The most prominent theoretical tool for understanding this social stratification of masculinities has come through Connell's (1987, 1990, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. From a social constructionist perspective, hegemonic masculinity theory articulates two social processes (Demetriou, 2001). The first concerns, how all men benefit from patriarchy (Burton-Nelson, 1995; Messner, 2002; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Connell, 1995). However, it is the second social process that has been heavily adopted by the masculinities literature. Here, Connell's theoretical contribution has been particularly adopted for its conceptualization of the mechanisms by which an intra-masculine hierarchy is created and legitimized.

In conceptualizing intra-masculine domination, Connell argues that one hegemonic archetype of masculinity is esteemed above all others, so that boys and men who most closely embody this standard are accorded the most social capital. Some of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity concern achieved variables and attitudinal depositions like athletic ability, the presentation of a masculine identity and the maintenance of homophobia. Other variables, however, concern ascribed variables: whiteness, heterosexuality, and youth. Connell argued that regardless of their body mass, age or sporting accomplishments, gay men are at the bottom of this hierarchy. Furthermore, Connell said that straight men who behaved in ways that conflict with the valorized form of masculinity are also marginalized. It was for these reasons that homophobia was found to serve as a particularly effective weapon to

stratify men in deference to a hegemonic mode of heteromasculine dominance (Connell, 1995).

Connell noted (1987, 1990, 1995) that the power of a hegemonic form of masculinity was that those lower down the stratification of masculinities believed in the right to rule of those at the top. Instead of contesting their position; instead of forming a coalition among the complicit, subordinated and marginalized masculinities that Connell describes, these men instead looked up and referred back to the jocks ruling their schools, sports, and social spaces. Accordingly, multiple studies found high schools to be locations where teamsport players (predominantly football players) controlled school space (Plummer, 1999). These athletes distributed power as they saw fit (Bissinger, 1990).

Hegemonic masculinity theory made sense in 1987, when Connell began theorizing her theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) and undoubtedly it continued to be effective throughout the 1990s. But the level of homophobia at a cultural level peaked in 1988 in America (Anderson, 2009a), and this had serious implications both on how gay men were treated (and therefore acted) and also on how straight men behaved. In order to fully understand hegemonic masculinity theory, I argue that it has to be historically contextualized within its own temporal moment—in a culture that I call ‘homohysteria’ (Anderson, 2009a).

I use the term homohysteria to describe the fear of being homosexualized. It incorporates three variables: 1) cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a sexual orientation; 2) high levels of homophobia within a culture, and 3) the conflation of feminine behaviors in men with same-sex desire. Varying combinations of these three traits determine unique outcomes for men’s gendered behaviors. For example, a highly homophobic culture that believes homosexuals do not exist within their religion is not homohysteria. This is why men in many highly homophobic Muslim countries are permitted to engage in homosocial intimacy without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities: they don’t believe

someone can be gay. Conversely, a homohysteria culture (like Jamaica) is found in a country that understands that homosexuality exists among a significant proportion of people, but cultural homophobia is so elevated that all men (gay and straight) desire to distance themselves from the possibility of being thought gay. Accordingly, men esteemed the most extreme representations of masculinity and position themselves as highly homophobic as an indication of heterosexuality.

America, the United Kingdom and Australia were (among other Western countries) highly homohysteria cultures in the mid-1980s. During that period, it was understood that any male (regardless of their gendered expression) could be gay. It was no longer possible to assume that one was heterosexual simply for 'acting straight.' This awareness (that anyone could be gay) was the result of 'normal' men dying of AIDS in 'normal' families. It was promoted by a vehemently anti-gay Christian Fundamentalism. With homosexuality being so vilified, homosexual suspicion was also rife. Thus, this was a period of time when Western men desired to physically and emotionally resemble Rambo, all in order to 'prove' that one was not gay (Anderson, 2008; Kimmel, 1997).

This has traditionally limited the gendered expression of men wishing to retain an image of heterosexuality. Thus, heterosexual men have had to avoid the expression of homosocial intimacy, sadness or love of their friends. They have been denied the ability to express the emotions of fear or intimidation, and they must adhere to rigid body language while avoiding certain clothing types, entertainment choices (Ibson, 2002). Men wishing to be perceived as straight can only play select sports, or dance in masculinized ways. These are expectations we placed on boys as young as eight throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Pollack, 1998).

It is important to recognize that the discipline of masculinities established itself during the West's most homohysteria decade. It was the time when Messner, Sabo, Kimmel and

Connell and others were writing about the social problems of masculinity. But the social climate towards gay men has changed since then. Increasingly, men are less afraid to associate with behaviors that were once coded as gay. When men wear pink, express their love for their male friends, and freak their gay male friends on the dance floor (Anderson, 2009a) it requires us to rethink the theories that we once used to understand men and their masculinities: the stratification of masculinities and sexualities shifts in accord to changing levels of awareness of homosexuality, and our attitudes toward it.

While hegemonic masculinity theory has maintained great utility in times of high homophobia (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), it nonetheless fails to accurately account for what occurs in a macro or even local culture of *decreased* cultural homophobia. This is because hegemonic masculinity theory only permits one form of masculinity to reside atop a social hierarchy; it does not explain the social processes in an environment in which more than one version of masculinity has equal appeal (Anderson, 2005a). Accordingly, hegemonic masculinity theory is incapable of explaining empirical research that documents multiple masculinities of equal cultural value (Anderson, 2005a; McCormack, 2010, 2011). In fact, it argues that this cannot occur.

Shifting Relations between Masculinity and Homophobia

But by the end of the first decade of the 20th century, studies began reporting a rapidly decreasing level of homophobia, even in men's team sports (Anderson, 2005b; Kian and Anderson, 2009a; Southall et. al., 2009). At the start of this millennium, I interviewed 26 openly gay high school and university athletes throughout a spectrum of sports in the United States (Anderson, 2002). The study provided the first examination of the experiences of openly gay male athletes on ostensibly all heterosexual teams. In the absence of the ability to ban openly gay athletes from sport, heterosexual athletes within team sports, both contact and

non-contact, resisted the intrusion of openly gay athletes through the creation of a culture of silence around gay identities. Although publicly out, the athletes in this study were victimized by heterosexual hegemony and largely maintained a heteronormative framework by self-silencing their speech, and frequently engaged in heterosexual dialogue with their heterosexual teammates.

In this (2002) investigation, I also found more openly gay runners and swimmers than football and baseball players. Pronger (1990) theorized that competitive teamsports that involve collision are more likely to be over representative of macho men, that gay men might be likely to deselect out of them as they grew older. Using data from the 1994 to 1995 Longitudinal Add Health Study of adolescent health, Zipp (2011) empirically validates this: showing that while gay youth played teamsports equally with their heterosexual counterparts in middle school, they began to self-select out of teamsports by high school. Of course it is possible that deeply closeted gay youth play contact sports because of the veneer it offers them against cultural suspicions of homosexuality. In other words, it is those who are more likely to come out that are more likely to run or join theatre, and gays who are highly closeted may be more likely to play American football (Anderson, 2005a).

In 2005, I expanded my work on gay male athletes to 40 openly gay (and 20 closeted) athletes (Anderson 2005a). Here, I found that openly gay athletes were not physically harassed or bullied. However, I found that their acceptance was partially attributable to the stigma of homosexuality being mediated because these were mostly top-performing athletes. Thus, although many of these athletes reported gay friendly team cultures before coming out, others used their athletic capital to work through homophobia. I therefore argued that hegemonic masculinity (as an archetype) seemed to be slipping. I suggested that this would have implications for the use of hegemonic masculinity theory.

Matters have improved for gay and lesbian athletes since publishing my 2005 work. Supporting this, a February 27th 2006 *Sports Illustrated* magazine poll of 1,401 professional teamsport athletes also showed that the majority would welcome a gay teammate; this included 80% of those in the National Hockey League. Matters are even better in other western countries (McCormack, 2010; Weeks, 2007). Doing research on heterosexual male cheerleaders, and finding a rift between those adhering to orthodox versions of masculinity and those to more feminine versions, I began to design inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2005b), formalizing it in 2009.

Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009a) supersedes hegemonic masculinity by explaining the stratification of men alongside their social dynamics in times of lower homophobia. The theory was constructed to explain settings with low homophobia. Here, heterosexual boys are permitted to engage in an increasing range of behaviors that once led to homosexual suspicion, all without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities. For example, fraternity members (Anderson, 2008a), rugby players (Anderson and McGuire, 2010), school boys (McCormack and Anderson, 2010a), heterosexual cheerleaders (Anderson, 2008b), and even the men of a Catholic College soccer team in the Midwest (Anderson, forthcoming) have all been shown to maintain close physical and emotional relationships with each other.

McCormack (2010, 2011a) also shows that young men are physically tactile and that the expression of homophobia is stigmatized among English high school students, at three different schools (lower, middle and upper-middle class). In fact, Anderson, Adams and Rivers (2010) have recently documented that nine out of ten heterosexual male undergraduates in the United Kingdom kiss their male friends on the lips as a form of non-sexual, homosocial bonding. I have also found same-sex kissing as a form of homosocial bonding occurring among 20% of the university undergraduates I interviewed in my research

on American college soccer players (Anderson, 2009a).

Collectively, these studies highlight that as cultural homophobia diminishes, it frees heterosexual men to act in more feminine ways without threat to their heterosexual identity. It suggests that we have dropped out of homophobia: homophobia used to be the chief policing mechanism of a hegemonic form of masculinity, but there no longer remains a strident cultural force to approximate the mandates of one type of homophobic masculinity.

In the 1980s, homophobia served as the primary policing agent of men's gendered behaviors. Homophobia is what kept Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity in operation; homophobia aligned various masculinities vertically. But without homophobia, there is nothing to enforce a hegemonic form; thus, multiple and varied masculinities can flourish without, what McCormack calls (2011b), 'hierarchy without hegemony.' Accordingly, men and their masculinities are not stratified hierarchically, but they exist with more equality, horizontally. This is evidenced by the outright acceptance of gay male athletes today.

Openly Gay Athletes Today

There is increasing evidence that as cultural homophobia continues to dissipate (particularly among male youth) teamsport athletes are coming out in greater numbers. This is clear if one clicks on *Outsports.com*, where hundreds of articles related to openly gay athletes are available. More systematically, in April of 2011, I published a *Gender & Society* article about the experiences of 26 openly gay American high school and university athletes. Compared to my 2002 study, these athletes (who represent the same class and racial demographic) did not fear coming out in the same way or to the same degree as the 2002 athletes. Unlike the men from the 2002 study, they did not fear that their coming out would result in physical hostility, marginalization or social exclusion (either on or off the field). Athletes in the 2011 cohort were a more diverse group of athletes, too. Not only were

teamsport athletes represented equally with individual sport athletes, but they were not as good a group of athletes. Thus, they were not using sporting capital as a shield against homophobia. Still, these men were widely accepted by their teammates. In fact, they report that their teammates are closer now than before they came out: that disclosure of something personal engenders further disclosure drawing teammates to upgrade their opinions of one another. I found that this was as true for a benchwarmer as it was a star player.

This study also found that openly gay athletes evade the culture of *don't ask, don't tell* that characterized the experiences of athletes in my 2002 study. Conversely, athletes in the 2011 cohort found their sexualities accepted among their teammates. These athletes talked about their sexualities frequently, and none reported that their teammates tried to publicly or privately heterosexualize them.

I concluded this research by arguing that because the social demographics of the two cohorts studied are alike, it therefore stood to reason that there are two possible reasons which account for the improvement of experience of gay athletes. First, sport has 'learned' from pioneering openly gay athletes across America; or second (and much more likely), that cultural homophobia has decreased in the local cultures of the 26 men of the 2011 sample. And if this is the case, it speaks to a broader decrease in homophobia throughout the country (see Kozloski, 2011). Accordingly, I suggest that the existence of local cultures with great social inclusivity speaks at some level to inclusivity in the broader culture.

This argument is supported by quantitative research. For example, in research conducted on undergraduate male athletes in the United Kingdom, only 6% expressed some form of reservation about having a gay male teammate share their sporting spaces (Bush, Anderson & Carr, forthcoming). Also, Cunningham (2010) has recently surveyed nearly 700 university athletic department members in nearly 200 institutions to show that while sexual diversity lags behind age or gender diversity, 54% of the universities studied maintained

strong sexual orientation diversity, only 17% showed no diversity. These descriptions of sport, sport institutions, and young men's gendered behaviors clearly do not correspond with research from the early 1990s; and it is difficult to explain them using the theoretical frameworks of former leading figures (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997; Messner, 1992). Rather, they call for new investigations, and new ways of theorizing the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, and sport. It is a need that I hope this special addition begins to address.

The Contribution of this Issue

It is my aim that this special edition of the Journal of Homosexuality will contribute to the discussion of how scholars understand the relationship between sport (broadly defined to include physical cultures and ancillary occupations), masculinities and homophobia. It serves as a valuable collection of theoretical and empirical articles that document and explain how declining homophobia within the institution of sport and physical cultures positively impacts on straight and gay men alike. This special edition makes salient that it is no longer appropriate to cite research from the 1990s as being indicative of youth sporting culture; times have changed.

Today's youth exist within a much improved social and sporting landscape. This is one in which young gay men are more able to be out to their teammates, and older gay men are able to be out at work in the sport's ancillary occupations. The collective findings in this special edition highlight the necessity of conducting new studies and the corresponding need to develop new ways of theorizing the changing dynamics between masculinities, sexualities and physical cultures in the next decade.

In seeking contributions to this special edition, I both requested submissions from individuals who I know to be leading authors in the field, and I also sought to expand the

definition of sport to include physical cultures other than sport. I also sought articles that examined for the contemporary experiences of mostly young heterosexual men in these physical cultures, as it is among youth that we can best chart social progress.

I was fortunate to receive far more submissions than could be published. This was not only helpful as an editor looking for quality articles, but it was encouraging because the articles that did not make it into this special edition also reflected an improving relationship between sport, men and homophobia; no article submitted presented a counter-narrative, which I would have considered as an important addition to the debate.

I was fortunate to revive a variety of articles that empirically examine decreasing cultural homophobia, and analyze the influence that this has not only on gay athletes and other gay men, but on young heterosexual male athletes as well. For example, Adi Adam's chapter, *Josh Wears Pink Cleats*, shows that inclusive forms of masculinity proliferate among the undergraduate students he studies in the American North East. Adams documents that the maintenance of a softer, gay friendly form of masculinity is esteemed among the soccer players of this competitive, Division One University. He shows that not only does one of the players proudly wear pink cleats, but that the men on this team are emotionally bonded to one another in ways that directly contradict research on men and masculinities from decades ago (cf. Messner, 1991; Messner and Sabo, 1990). Thus, Adams shows us that declining cultural homophobia has a socio-positive effect on the lives of heterosexual male athletes (Adams & Anderson, forthcoming a; Adams & Anderson, forthcoming b; Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010).

Jamon Campbell, along with his colleagues Denise Cothren, Ross Rogers, Lindsay Kistler, Anne Osowski, Nathan Greenauer and Christian End, contribute to this special edition by showing us that decreasing cultural homophobia has had a very positive influence on the way young sport fans view professional teamsport athletes who are gay. Among the

young undergraduate men with Campbell and his colleagues conducted their experiment, they reported no increased negativity over a hypothetical situation involving a gay professional athlete compared to a straight player. In fact, they even show that undergraduate women favor gay players over heterosexual players.

The shifting degrees of cultural homophobia discussed earlier affects not only gay and straight athletes however; it also influences how gay men relate to their bodies—indeed, how they move their bodies. Thus, Grant Tyler Peterson discusses how the way gay men dance in clubs has changed in relation to cultural levels of homophobia. Peterson provides a brief genealogy of gay men’s dancing spaces from the 1970s to the first decade of the second millennia, documenting how decreasing cultural homophobia has led to the acceptance of more feminized dance, as well as the sexual adulation of thin boys moving to pop music. His reflections exemplify that physical culture is reflected in more than just competitive sport.

I am also very pleased to have the work of Beth Cavalier in this special edition. Using some of the primary findings of her doctoral work, she focuses on the experiences of ten gay men working in professional, collegiate, and club sport positions; not as sportsmen, but as managers and in other ancillary occupations. While previous work has shown that contemporary sporting institutions near-exclusively draw upon a relatively homogenous group of hyper-masculine, over-conforming, failed male athletes to reproduce the institution as an extremely powerful sexual and gender-regime (Anderson, 2009b), Cavalier finds that five of the men in her study were publicly out to their colleagues. She shows that while those in the closet still retain fear about the implications of coming out, those who have come out lead relatively trouble-free working lives. Importantly, Cavalier uses the narratives of both closeted and openly gay men to show that a person’s *perceptions* of homophobia can be as important as the actual level of homophobia. This has clear implications for the debate

concerning whether gay youth are an ‘at risk’ youth as well as how gay youth are discussed in the media.

In a theoretical piece, George Cunningham and E. Nicole Merton explore how sexual orientation diversity in the sport occupation industry can lead to positive outcomes for the institution. They suggest that sexual orientation diversity can be a source of competitive advantage for a sport organization, and that the degree to which sexual orientation diversity positively contributes to a team’s or organization’s success appears to be dependent upon the degree of LGBT-inclusiveness in that entity.

Next, Mark McCormack provides valuable framework for understanding the changing relationship between homophobia and masculinities. Taken from his research into the experience of boyhood in three British high schools, he tracks how the shifting levels of cultural homophobia are reflected in the changing use of homosexually-themed language. McCormack traces the use of homophobic language, showing us that it has moved from a disposition in the 1980s where its purpose was to both demean and wound homosexuals to one in which the use of homosexually-themed language can have positive social effects; such as bonding between gay and straight youth. McCormack’s framework should be of use to scholars and activists who seek to understand the meanings and effects of language in a particular context.

Finally, the work of Edward Kian, Galen Clavio, John Vincent and Stephanie D. Shaw document that while cultural homophobia is decreasing, and while this has positive impacts on sport and sport media (Kian & Anderson, 2009), decreasing cultural homophobia is an uneven social process. It therefore maintains varying implications for differing demographics. In their research on a sport fan site for American football fans, they document homophobia in a minority of postings. However, when homophobia did occur, it went

uncontested. Thus, even though the vast majority of men did not partake in this homophobic exchange, few felt strong enough to contest it.

Together, these articles help push our understanding of the relationship between men, homosexuality and masculinities in sport and physical culture in an age of declining homophobia. They help shore up the notion that while decreasing homophobia may be an uneven social process, homophobia and homophobia is decreasing across sport and physical cultural spaces. This research therefore substantially adds to an ever-growing body of work which finds that young men today do not represent the same homophobic and hyper-macho disposition that they did two decades ago when the field of masculinities was founded—not even in competitive sport. Thus, as the results of these studies into sport and physical culture find socio-positive improvements for gay and straight men alike, it is necessary to revise our theorizing about them.

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