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Negotiating masculinities via the moral problematization of sport

Abstract

Numerous researchers have raised concerns about the construction of dangerous or problematic masculinities within sporting patriarchiesⁱ. Yet little is known about how male sport enthusiasts who are critical of select hypermasculineⁱⁱ performances negotiate their continued involvement in sport. The aim of this paper was to examine how purposefully selected male interviewees negotiated sporting tensions associated with hypermasculine performances and how these negotiations shaped their (masculine) selves. We drew on Foucault's (1992) theorizing on the modes of subjectivation to analyze how our interviewees problematized their respective sport cultures in specific relation to the sexualization or abuse of females, public acts of drunkenness and excessive training demands. Results illustrated how the interviewees produced selves, via the moral problematization of sporting pleasures and specific technologies of self, that rejected the values or moral codes of hypermasculinity in an attempt to create ethical masculinities. Although not a revolutionary solution, we suggest that a proliferation of techniques of self that struggle against hypermasculine forms of subjection could be *one* form of ethical response to the well-documented problems surrounding masculinities and sport.

Introduction

Within the contours of what Giddens (1991) calls “high modernity” (p. 10), identities can be understood as peculiarly robust and fragile (Bauman, 2004; Gergen, 1991). Although many individuals may feel that they have a stable and coherent understanding of self, Giddens (1991) warned that “on the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks” (p. 36). This chaos pertains to the recognition that our identities are not grounded in bodies of an essentialized nature, but are constructed through social understandings and power relations that are changeable and, at times, overtly fragile (Foucault, 1972). Numerous commentators, for example, have illustrated how life in the late modern age is increasingly image-based, mediated, fragmented and depthless (Baudrillard, 1981; Bauman, 1992, Beck, 1992). Embedded within this cultural context, contemporary individuals are assumed to negotiate life with an increased awareness of catastrophic risks, the destabilization of identity categories and a pervasion of often indeterminate fears. An existential angst, dread or ontological insecurity is, accordingly, a well-documented aspect of contemporary life (e.g. Bauman, 2004; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) argued that it is abnormal for individuals to “spend everyday worrying about such possibilities” (p. 183) yet he suggested that these existential anxieties cannot be fully bracketed out and they insidiously impact understandings of social life and self-identities. Bauman (2004), correspondingly, illustrated that contemporary life abounds with uncertainty, coercion and opportunity so that “there is always something to explain, to apologize for, to hide, or on the contrary to boldly display, to negotiate, or to bargain for” (p. 13). Eagleton (1996), more broadly, surmised, “if the postmodern subject is determined, however, it is also strangely free-floating...if this subject is slippery, it is because it acts as the friction between clashing cultural forces” (pp. 90-91). The construction of a stable, coherent and sturdy identity can, in this manner, be understood as a particular challenge of the conditions of high modernity.

The task of constructing a coherent identity is not simply related to one’s social performances or the “reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going”

(Giddens, 1991, p. 52). Self-identity, more specifically, can be understood as “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). Yet, as Foucault (1978) observed, humans cannot simply create any understanding of the self as they please, as identities are constructed in relation to the workings of power, life experiences and the availability of discursive resources. Moreover, particular discursive resources are not equitably distributed (e.g. discourses related to age, body size, ability, beauty and sexuality frame different people differently), therefore, people do not have equal ability to develop and sustain what Hall (1992) called “comforting stories of self” (p. 277).

The capacity to sustain a comforting story of self has been assumed to be a complex and specific challenge for many males, particularly given the cultural dominance of sport and its discursive linkages with dominant forms of masculinities (Burgess, Edwards & Skinner, 2003; Hickey, 2008; Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000). Although sport has long been recognized as “one of the central sites in the social production of masculinity” (Whitson, 1990, p. 19), this does not mean that sport typically facilitates the development of coherent and fulfilling narratives of self. In contrast, sport can be understood as a context of competing discourses that produce a diversity of masculinities and, at times, ethical dilemmas and identity tensions (Pringle & Markula, 2005).

These identity tensions appear pervasive amongst males. Hickey (2008), as an example, illustrated that although many boys “choose not to participate, or even take an interest, in the hypermasculine male sports, they are very likely to have their identities calibrated against the sorts of masculinities such games project” (p. 156). The sporting context for these boys can be an indirect source of tension as their stories of self can be framed (in part) by the circulation of derogatory nouns, such as “‘nerd’, ‘geek’, ‘poofta’, ‘girl’, ‘pussie’, ‘pansy’, and so on” (Hickey, 2008, p. 157). These deprecating labels signify forms of masculinity failure, disparage females and, simultaneously, play a crucial role in the constitution of idealized understanding of masculinities: as these understandings are “constructed partly in relation to images of men who don’t measure up” (Messner, et al., 2000, p. 392).

Even for the males who do ‘measure up’, the task of developing a robust narrative of self is often assumed to be an ongoing challenge within sporting contexts. Messner et al. (2000), for example, argued that a sportsman who attempts to construct his identity in relation to respected images of sport masculinities – “strong, tough, aggressive and above all a winner” (p. 390) - exists in a precarious position, as “he has to come out and prove himself all over again tomorrow.” (p. 390).

The pervasive influence of the sporting world can cause tensions for many males in their processes of attempting to construct understandings of self. These tensions, in conjunction with a backdrop of existential anxieties, trouble the construction of coherent and comforting masculine selves. And these troubled or ontologically insecure masculinities have been linked (not in a direct causal manner) by several sport researchers with a configuration of problematic sporting practices as related to violence, injury, homophobia, alcohol abuse and sexism. Muir and Seitz (2004), as an example, linked participation in deviant hazing rituals, involving public nudity and offensive treatment of women, with sportsmen who were desperate “to become part of the group” (p. 318). Klein (1993), in a similar manner, argued that some male body builders suffered from insecurities to such an extent that they funded their obsessive training regimes – with desire to create exemplary masculine bodies - via homosexual prostitution. Messner (1990), more broadly, argued that many sportsmen are attracted to participation in combat sports, as they desire to construct a respected form of masculine identity. Injuries, as such, were not problematized but read as signs of masculine respect. In this manner, we recognize that sporting tensions that trouble an individual’s identity can have broader social implications. Such tensions, however, do not always work to entrench social problems and inequitable relations of power but can also provide opportunities for social change.

Connell (2000), for example, suggested that, “masculinities are often in tension, within and without” (p. 13) and “it seems likely that such tensions are important sources of change” (p. 13). Giddens (1991) similarly asserted that if identity tensions cannot be smoothly worked through they could lead to “fateful moments” (p. 202) that disturb routines so that “an individual is thereby

forced to rethink fundamental aspects of her existence and future projects” (pp. 202-03). Sporting tensions that produce fateful moments can, accordingly, encourage some athletes to critically reflect on their involvement in sport and the values or “moral codes” (Foucault, 1992, p. 25) that circulate in their sporting cultures. These moral codes, as examples, can relate to drinking practices, treatment of ‘others’ or the ability to tolerate or inflict pain. The sporting tensions, in this sense, can provide opportunities for individuals to transform practices of self in relation to these moral codes. These tensions, as such, have implications for masculinity constructions.

In this regard, we suggest it becomes sociologically valuable to examine how male athletes negotiate sporting tensions, with respect to understanding masculinities, the workings of ethics and the construction of ‘moral’ subjects. To understand how some sportsmen negotiate sporting tensions and its associated connections with masculinities, we conducted in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of seven men who had revealed that they were critical of select aspects of their diverse sporting cultures (volleyball, football, softball and rugby union). We begin this paper by detailing our research method and how we utilized Foucault’s (1992) concept of the technologies of the self and the modes of subjectivation to interpret the interviewees sporting stories. We then discuss our results and the sociological implications of this study.

Research method and theoretical lens

In desiring to understand how some men negotiate sporting tensions we invited select individuals, via personal contacts, to be interviewed. We selected men on the basis of our knowledge that they were still passionately connected to sport - as either players, coaches and/or fans - yet were critical of select aspects of their sporting cultures. The ‘select aspects’ related to performances or behavior that have previously been identified by numerous researchers as connected to the formation of dangerous, abusive or problematic masculinities (e.g. see Crosset, 1999; Curry, 1998; Loy, 1995; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2004; Muir & Seitz, 2004; Young & White, 2000; Young, White & McTeer, 1994; Sabo, 2004; Schacht, 1996; Welch, 1997). These

performances, as examples, typically relate to relatively youthful males interacting within patriarchies in a manner that glorifies (or, at the least, does not penalize) acts of sexism, violence, dangerous/risk taking activities, excessive and public performances of alcohol consumption, and sexist abuse of females. Given the linking of these values and/or practices with the formation of masculinities deemed problematic, we refer to these performances as hypermasculine (while, of course, recognizing that these practices can be performed by males or females). The interviewees as critical of these hypermasculine performances, revealed themselves as typically sympathetic towards feminism, tolerant if not celebratory of diverse sexualities and ethnicities, and respectful of others.

To gain understanding about how these men negotiated their involvement in sport, we undertook “empathetic” interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 696). By inviting the interviewees to narrate their life-history accounts of sporting involvement we aimed to understand how their critical perspectives of sport developed, how they negotiated any related tensions and whether these tensions induced transformations in stories of self and/or participation in the broader sporting culture. More specifically, we hoped the information gained from the interview conversations could aid understanding of how critically reflexive individuals participate in sport.

Our research aims and critical biases were revealed to the interviewees before informed consent was gained and the interviews conducted. Four of the interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings and three via international phone conversations to Japan, Ireland and Australia. The interviewees all identified as heterosexual and white. All of the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and were conducted by the lead author. Our interpretations of the interviewees’ stories were guided by Foucault’s (1992) theorizing on morality and practices of self.

Morality and the formation of an ethical subject

Foucault (1992) stated that morality refers to a set of rules of conduct that are promoted by various regulatory agencies, such as the church, health promoters or schools. Although these rules

or values are, at times, clearly detailed and circulated they can also be conveyed diffusely “so that, far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out on certain points, thus providing for compromises or loopholes” (Foucault, 1992, p. 25). Within sporting cultures, written rules and values are often clearly stated with respect to what is deemed as cheating and/or standards of fair play. The related study of sport ethics “has almost exclusively been interested in the conduct of participants in relation to the proscribed rules of a contest” (Shogan & Ford, 2000, p. 51). A moral athlete, as examples, may be judged simplistically as one who does not use banned substances or who shakes hands with an opponent at the end of vigorous competition.

Foucault, however, argued that compliance with a moral code is not necessarily *ethical*. Ethical work, he suggested, can be understood as “the manner in which one ought to ‘conduct one self’- that is, the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code” (Foucault, 1992, p. 26). Ethical performances, therefore, revolve around “the relationship of the self to the code and on the methods and techniques through which this relationship is worked out” (Shogan & Ford, 2000, p. 51). This relationship to the self, Foucault (1992) argued, is linked to self-awareness and self-reflection and, more broadly, a process of “self-formation as an ethical subject” (Foucault, 1992, p. 29). This process of self-formation requires an individual to initially problematize or critically reflect on the code of conduct (Markula & Pringle, 2006), then determine how he/she will act in response to this code and, subsequently, “to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself (sic)” (Foucault, 1992, p. 28).

The task of doing ethical work within sport can be considered complex, as unwritten codes of conduct circulate in many sporting contexts in a manner that does not necessarily form a ‘systematic ensemble’ with the official rules or broader sets of values. The resulting moral milieu allows possibilities for the production of athletic tensions, contradictions, “loopholes and compromises” (Foucault, 1992, p. 25). Numerous researchers, for example, have illustrated that

within some sporting cultures circulating official/unofficial codes of conduct encourage athletes to perform various acts that contradict mainstream codes of conduct (e.g. see Atkinson & Young, 2008; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Stebbins, 1996). Male and female athletes, for example, can be encouraged to take pride in humiliating or physically hurting an opponent, the denial of body damaging pain, the consumption of illicit drugs, the performance of taboo breaking off-field practices and, in some cases, sexual abuse. Such cultures undermine mainstream codes of conduct and may be a rich source of athletic tension that troubles the formation of a coherent and ethical self.

To gain insight into how our interviewees negotiated ethical tensions within sport and how these negotiations shaped practices of self, we drew on Foucault's (1992) framework for understanding the process of forming oneself as an 'ethical subject'. Foucault (1992) suggested that this process is dependent on the "modes of subjectivation" (p. 28) or styles of self-constitution, which he divided into four modes: the ethical substance, mode of subjection, ethical work and telos. In brief, the *ethical substance* is concerned with determining an aspect of the self (e.g. an aspect of one's identity, set of behaviors or emotions) that needs to be problematized. The *mode of subjection* is concerned with how an individual reflects on one's relationship to the code of conduct associated with the ethical substance, with particular respect to why he/she respects or disregards this code. Through critically reflecting on the *mode of subjection*, the individual can then determine strategies for performing *ethical work* or *practices of self* to create new ways of performing and being. Foucault (1983a) stated that this type of ethical work requiring specific forms of practice, as he observed that "no technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise" (p. 246). In other words, he acknowledged that one could not change one's self without deliberate strategies and the implementation of actual technologies of self. Through his analysis of ancient Greek practices of self he noted that various technologies of self were recommended, including practices related to speaking the truth (*parrhesia*), writing exercises (*hypomnemata*), seeking advice from a mentor, "abstinence, memorization, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, and listening to

others” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, pp. 181-82). Foucault suggested that these various practices of self were related to the *telos* or the broader goal of determining what type of person one wants to be, such as free from desires, pure, or the creation of a beautiful life. Overall, Foucault (1992) referred to the formation of oneself as an ethical subject as the “arts of existence” (p. 11), which he defined as:

Those intentional and voluntary actions by which men (sic) not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria. (Foucault, 1992, pp. 10-11)

Through using Foucault’s framework related to the modes of subjectivation we now examine how our interviewees negotiated morality tensions associated with hypermasculine sporting performances and their subsequent constructions of self.

Ethical work in the context of hypermasculine sporting cultures

The seven interviewees, named with pseudonyms, were initially asked to talk about their histories of sporting involvement. Through hearing their stories it was clear that they had all played a variety of sport but by their late teens had typically narrowed down their participation to one particular sport. Stewart (aged 28) had been a successful teenage football (soccer) player within New Zealand but he eventually rejected the demands of elite level sport in favor of social participation. Peter (aged 38) lived in Australia and had played competitive volleyball from age 10 through to his early 30s. His love of volleyball encouraged his tertiary sport studies and he is now lecturing in kinesiology at a university and coaching female teams. Will (aged 29), Dave (aged 26), Robert (aged 51) and Mitch (aged 42) had all been passionate rugby players. Mitch, an American, played soccer and volleyball to an All Star level in his youth, but after shifting to San Francisco as a 21 year-old soon became a committed rugby participant. Whereas, Dave, Will and Robert, in somewhat typical New Zealand fashion, had been influenced by the dominance of rugby since their

boyhoods. Dave and Will had crafted their identities around rugby and were now working as physical education teachers in Japan and Ireland respectfully; although no longer playing competitively they were both passionately involved in coaching rugby at private secondary schools. Robert, in contrast, had only recently reclaimed his passion for rugby (now as a fan) after having rejected the game in his early 20s, as a sport of violence. The oldest interviewee, Teddy (aged 78), had had a “try-out” for the Cleveland Indians baseball team in his early 20s but after migrating to New Zealand played and coached softball. His subsequent track record of international and world champion victories as a softball coach, for the men’s and women’s national sides, has left an unmatched coaching legacy within New Zealand.

Despite the interviewees’ diverse ages, nationalities and sporting backgrounds, their interview accounts revealed that their prime sporting involvements, as adults, took place in contexts that sheltered or promoted hypermasculine performances. All of the interviewees, for instance, revealed that they had been highly competitive and dedicated athletes, and accepted pain and injury as somewhat normal. They also detailed that alcohol had played a significant aspect in after-match socializing in typically male dominated contexts. Robert, for example, simply reflected on his adult rugby club environment: “they were quite boozy, boozy years.” Dave similarly reflected that his “most vivid memories” of his rugby team environment was “a drinking blokes culture ... with a swilling sort of nature in the club-rooms... and very male dominated and with a very chauvinistic perspective of females.” Although deliberate acts of violence did not occur regularly within the interviewees’ accounts of their sporting experiences (with the exception of Robert’s rugby reflections), all of the interviewees did tell stories of being personally involved in at least one sporting fight and witnessing others.

Mitch’s account of playing rugby in San Francisco resonates most closely with the taboo-breaking environments that North American rugby commentators have typically revealed (e.g. Muir & Seitz, 2004; Schacht, 1996; Wheatley, 1994). He reflected:

One thing that stands out for me was the rookie night and how new players, as part of sort of a membership of joining the club, were subject to really degrading humiliating activities... Like somebody would get assigned to be what was called 'piss boy' and he would have to carry – I mean I'm laughing and I don't know why because it is both funny and horrible – but he'd have to carry a pitcher, an empty pitcher of beer around. And anybody that had to take a piss, he had to hold the beer pitcher out so that they didn't have to go to the bathroom. And then I can remember guys thinking it was funny to stand on the roof of the clubhouse, which was like a two-story high roof, and have him down the driveway trying to catch the piss as they were pissing off the roof: So here he would be trying to catch it and it would be bouncing all over him and hitting him in the face.

Mitch's account of his North American rugby culture was somewhat unique. Although the interviewees who played or coached rugby in New Zealand, Ireland or Japan did comment on the frequency of binge-drinking they did not report on bizarre hazing rituals, public acts of urinating or the singing of crude songs. Dave, however, did state that at his club's end of year function "they would hire a female stripper and 'raffle her off' to one of the players": the club, therefore, endorsed prostitution. In clear contrast to Dave's experiences, Will reported that within his rugby club,

female partners and girlfriends were seen as almost part of the family, you know, and treated with a lot of respect.... It was more like a family environment in the clubrooms, with children running around and with a heavy influence of Māori and Polynesians. Once you were in that family you were treated like a brother or sister.

Peter similarly reflected that his volleyball club, which had successful and male and female teams, appeared to operate within a liberal, "perhaps even pro-feminist" environment.

In this manner, the seven interviewees revealed that they had played sport in quite different social contexts. Nevertheless, select hypermasculine performances existed within all of their sporting contexts and these performances and related moral codes eventually became sources of tension for the interviewees.

All of the interviewees identified the aspects of their sport involvement that caused them tension as connected to masculinity issues or, at the least, as linked to ‘boys behaving badly’ (see Safai, 2002). Stewart, as an example, explained that in his late teens he would drink a lot of alcohol to “try and prove my manhood through drinking ability.” And Robert remarked, “I was dissatisfied with the relationship I had with them (rugby teammates), which I could only describe as being very sort of stereotypically male.” Despite the broad connections to masculinity issues, the interviewees typically identified their *ethical substance* in relation to particular feelings, desires or actions rather than an aspect of their masculine identity. Mitch, Peter and Robert, for example, were primarily concerned about the positioning and/or treatment of women; and, Will, Dave, and Teddy questioned alcohol practices as an ethical sport problem. Only Stewart identified his sporting (masculine) identity as the ethical substance in need of problematization, which occurred after he realized that he had become excessively competitive in pursuit of an elusive sporting dream. Each of these three problematizations of sporting culture (e.g. as related to sexism, drinking practices and excessive competitiveness/sporting identity) will now be discussed in turn in relation to Foucault’s (1992) framework for analyzing the formation of one’s self as an ethical subject.

Alcohol as an ethical sport problem

Will, Dave and Teddy did not confess to having a drinking problem but identified the drinking culture within their sporting contexts as the *ethical substance* in need of problematization. Teddy, for example, reported:

There were many things I didn’t like about the drinking. Well, for a start it didn’t help softball playing the next day. Of course, vomiting in front of other people at functions...not that there would be a lot, but it doesn’t take very much of that sort of thing to spoil an evening...And the alcohol would lead to other trouble, serious trouble. I can think of road accidents and fighting.

Although Dave enjoyed drinking alcohol he was also concerned with how it was drunk in his rugby club (his first club since leaving high school) and how he was initially forced to participate in the drinking culture:

After the first game for my new club - we played on a boiling hot day, start of the season, and I was not match fit - I was shattered at the end. And got into the changing rooms desperate for water. But cos I was new to the club they gave me a 'shot gun', where they put up the beer and they punched a hole in the can with a knife, and beer goes flying down your throat. I wanted some water but got beer and this carried on for a while. I didn't enjoy it.

Dave thought the team desire to get him drunk would be a one-off experience yet he soon found that binge drinking was a normalized part of the after-match experience:

The boys were very boisterous and ... aggressive when they were drinking together, and the noise they made and how they would dominate the bar and that sort of stuff. It wasn't my thing.... They always set to making a scene...there would be glasses smashed and things like that and I felt very um...odd. They seemed to be looking for trouble, and I really didn't want any trouble.

The negative feelings – tension, disappointment, fear, embarrassment, worry - that were induced by the binge-drink sport cultures encouraged Dave, Teddy and Will to recognize their moral obligations. Foucault (1992) suggested that the *mode of subjection* is the “way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself (sic) as obliged to put it in practice” (p. 27). This mode, therefore, asks: “To what principles does he (sic) refer in order to moderate, limit, regulate that activity? What sort of validity might these principles have that would enable a man (sic) to justify his having to obey them?” (Foucault, 1992, p. 53). The unofficial sport rule encouraged an understanding that it was important for team members to drink heavily after sport, yet through their experiences Dave, Teddy and Will did not feel obliged to follow this unwritten code of conduct. In contrast, they felt compelled to respect a broader rule of alcohol conduct, which was to enjoy alcohol in moderation. Teddy further suggested that the principle that

validated the need for moderation was related to a more significant moral rule, which he tied to Christian influences, called “the golden rule: treat others as you would want to be treated yourself.” In this manner, Teddy did not identify alcohol as an inherent problem but was concerned with how people who were drunk would treat others and themselves. He was specifically concerned about the “fighting, intimidating, accidents ... people making fools of themselves ... back to the vomiting again”. Dave was also concerned by how his teammates in a public bar would intimidate and upset other patrons: “As an example they would usually give the waitresses a hard time, cheering and making jokes. You could see the waitress did not like it and that would make me feel very uncomfortable.”

Having identified the alcohol culture as problematic (*the ethical substance*) and an underpinning principle (*mode of subjection*) to justify a moderate drinking approach (e.g. respect others), Dave, Teddy and Will undertook varying degrees of ethical work or *practices of self* in an attempt to transform themselves into ethical subjects. The focus of this ethical work, accordingly, was not to directly challenge existing relations of power or to transform broader social practices within their clubs. Dave, for example, reported that at the time when he was first playing rugby as a senior he did not have the “confidence to confront the team about the drinking.” In contrast, he stated, “I would stay and have only one or two drinks in the clubrooms, which I enjoyed, and would leave soon after that. So I simply removed myself from going to the bars with a group of drunk men.” He further reported that at the end of the season he switched clubs in search of a more respectful team culture: “this was in hindsight a somewhat fruitless task, I ended up playing for three different clubs. In my last club, it was a long way from home and so I would just leave straight after the game.” Dave reported that a cost associated with his practice of self (moderation), was that he did not develop any close friends: “I could always have a laugh and a chat with the guys during trainings but I always felt a little bit like an outsider.”

Will similarly reported that he made a conscious decision to switch clubs as he was critical of the “drinking blokes’ culture”. Yet rather than joining a pre-existing club (and culture), he helped

form a new social club: “The core of the club was old school friends, we were all about 29 or 30 years of age and were now predominantly working in professional occupations.” He added: “There was a much better emphasis on families. Wives, girlfriends and kids were all welcome in the clubrooms, and there was much more emphasis on barbecues and things like that, and a lot less drinking.” Within his new club, Will reported he was conscious of being a good role model to help promote a more respectful and less alcohol-fueled environment.

Teddy, in contrast to Will and Dave, was interested in attempting to change the existing drinking culture of his softball club through undertaking various practices of the self. He reported that he had not been a teetotaler but “when I saw the harm that was being done, I refused to have another drink and I had no alcohol.” Indeed, Teddy had been somewhat shocked by the drinking culture. He did not, however, fully remove himself from the after-match culture, “I wasn’t going to divorce myself from my friends, I still went to the same places they did and we had a good time, I would have a coke or ginger ale...but I learned to leave by 10.30pm to avoid the trouble.” Yet Teddy said “I made it very clear, if the subject did come up, why I wasn’t drinking and why I thought people shouldn’t have too much.” In this manner, Teddy used *parrhesia* to influence others: *parrhesia* is an ancient Greek term which Foucault (1999) defined as a truth teller or as “someone who says everything he (sic) has in his mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse” (§ 1). Through revealing his ‘truth’ about the problems of alcohol, Teddy revealed a subjugated knowledge in the context of his sport with the aim to encourage broader transformation. The use of *parrhesia* involves a degree of self-risk as the speaker is telling the truth from a marginalized position with the aim to challenge a governing authority (e.g. the dominant softball drinking culture). Yet Teddy reported that he was confident enough to upset some people to help avoid alcohol-fueled problems: “I can recall pulling the keys out of the car of players so that they couldn’t drive. They didn’t like it, but it is what had to be done.” In a similar manner, he remembered an occasion when he took alcohol away from people in clubrooms who were causing trouble: “they became very belligerent about it and even threatened

me ... but nothing came of it.” Although Teddy could be critiqued for attempting to impose his own moral view on others (to an extent that his actions even risked violence), his prime practice of self was alcohol abstinence within the softball environment.

The ethical practices of self, according to Foucault (1992) are not necessarily isolated practices but contribute, in association with other practices, to a “mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject” (p. 28), which he called the *telos*. The *telos*, more specifically, is the type of being to which one aspires to be. Will and Dave, however, were unable to clearly articulate what their *telos* was: they were not critical about alcohol per se and even acknowledged that on occasion they still enjoyed its intoxicating effects. Yet they were clearly critical with *how* alcohol was consumed in their homo-social rugby environments. They subsequently did not support the hypermasculine drinking culture by abstaining from drinking excessively within this context. This practice of self appeared to be underpinned by a desire to alleviate personal tension yet they also believed it important to treat other people with respect (e.g. waitresses). In this sense, we suggest that their *telos* appeared related to the construction of a respectful mode of being.

Teddy, in contrast, had reflected more carefully about the type of life he valued: he stated that he wanted to create the “good life” for himself and others. The ‘good’ referred to a quality of life associated with happiness and contentment but as underpinned with a critical attitude and doing the “right things” even if it meant challenging people. He reflected: “life was better for those who didn’t over-drink. That became obvious. We all know that. Even those who drink too much know it.” He was, therefore, willing to moderate his drinking desires and abstain completely within the softball culture to “set an example” to help create the good life. In this manner, Teddy was secure enough to be different from his teammates and to create him self as an ethical subject in the pursuit of (what he believed was) a moral mode of being.

Sexualization of females as an ethical problem

Peter, Mitch and Robert identified the inequitable treatment and/or sexualization of females as a prime moral problem within their sporting cultures. Robert, as an example, identified his rugby teammates as “misogynists” and complained they were “dismissive of women, regarding them only for their kind of sexuality”. Through participating in conversations that objectified women, Robert reported: “I felt really uncomfortable...there was always part of me that didn’t feel good about the sort of very anti-women kind of humor that many of the guys of my peer group were into.” For Robert, the *ethical substance* of concern was not just feelings of tension but the creation of a sexist identity: through participating in inappropriate conversations, even if he was just listening, he felt sexist. Mitch similarly felt tension through objectifying women in conversations but also through *using* women for sexual satisfaction in an uncaring manner:

I remember one night I just sort of connected with this woman at the party and I don’t think we said five words to each other. We may have danced one dance. I was drunk. I’m sure she was drunk. We went upstairs. We had sex and I ended up saying, “Look, I’ll get you a beer” afterwards and she said “Okay” and I never went back up stairs. And she came down. We never talked. We never had a conversation again and it was both exciting and I just felt like shit about it. Like ... I mean ...that’s not what I stand for as a person.

Peter, in contrast, suggested that his participation in volleyball in Australia did not take place in a male dominated overtly sexist environment: “I grew up with the women’s team, who also played at the highest level, we grew up as juniors as ten, eleven, twelve year olds, with the same team and clubs to the age of thirty.” He explained that the male and female players were generally friendly and respectful with each other: “the behavior of my teammates and myself towards women were never derogatory, we never considered them inferior.” Peter believed that the coaches were helpful in instigating a code of ethics that pervaded his youth experiences of volleyball: “if anyone acted inappropriately... you know if the guys started to make rude comments or gestures, the male and female coaches and other players quickly froze them out.” Yet, as an adult, when he started coaching youth female teams he became aware of problems that discriminated against female

participation: “I had to deal with obstacles that were placed in front of young females, you know, I had to deal with parents...uniform issues... game times...many issues that became apparent.” Peter added, “as a coach I then took up the feminist position in trying to remove some of the obstacles to girl’s volleyball.”

Peter, Mitch and Robert problematized sexism, whether internally or externally, as the *ethical substance* in need of moral attention. The *mode of subjection* or underpinning principle that obliged these men to challenge sexism was related to feminist ideals. Robert’s feminist partner, Anne, helped him critically “sharpen” his awareness of the sexist sporting culture: “Anne would sometimes come to the clubrooms and... she certainly made it clear that she felt uncomfortable in that boozy, smoky, sexist environment.” He added:

I didn’t have a sophisticated analysis, just had a vague feeling that this wasn’t right.... So we would talk about it afterwards. She was a feminist and was studying at university...and she talked about the limitations of how masculinity and femininity were constructed ... that was her way of talking about those things.

Through on-going discussions, Robert’s view of the world changed:

I started to see how the world treated Anne differently and I learnt it wasn’t fair because, you know, I’d grown up in a world which I thought was fair because - I was male, I was good at rugby, reasonably bright - so was hard pressed to think of any occasions where I was on the sharp end of oppression ... But as my naïve reaction unfolded, I realized the world wasn’t fair and I thought it should be.

The moral obligation of feminism inspired Mitch, Robert and Peter to develop select ethical *practices of self*. Mitch reported that he had “been subject to abuse as a child and had some knowledge of what it felt like to be treated badly”. The inner tension of his “womanizing” and related “struggles with girlfriends” encouraged him to seek “some counseling to try and figure out what ... (he) could do differently.” In this manner, Mitch actively wanted to change his self through the use of an expert mentor (a specific technique of self that the ancient Greeks encouraged).

Through the subsequent counseling process he reported: “I was exposed to feminist ideas ... and some other ideas that really gave me a whole different way to make sense out of what was happening that I didn’t feel comfortable with.” The counseling resulted in a fateful moment and profound life change:

That was the beginning of some real changes ... being invited into some different kinds of understandings that exposed issues, some issues around power and relationships... From there I was interested in going into the counseling myself with the idea to help other people and provide them with the life changing help that I had gained.

Mitch drifted away from his rugby club and eventually went to university to become a trained counselor. He reflected,

If I had that sort of awareness or that understanding when I was playing rugby, I would have taken some very active stances in challenging some of the abusive and degrading practices. And I’m not sure I would have had much success but I certainly would have been better equipped to know how to speak about what I did not like.

Mitch, who is now working as a trained counselor and is in a loving relationship, reflected: “I still don’t live the perfect existence, but I am much more thoughtful in what I do and say. I am careful to reflect on the words I use, and how my actions might position or influence other people.” In this sense, he recognized that his creation of self as an ethical subject was an on-going project. Despite being critical of the culture that surrounded his previous rugby playing experiences, Mitch did not blame the sport of rugby but the leadership in his old club. Although perhaps surprising, he was still passionate about rugby and stated that he would be happy to encourage his son and daughter into the sport: “I loved the satisfaction that the game produced while I was playing. And when I watch, I watch because I can imagine myself into the game and be playing with the people that I’m watching.” In this manner, Mitch did not view rugby as inherently problematic.

Through discovering feminism via his partner (Anne), Robert eventually quit rugby dissatisfied with his male friends and the lack of depth in any of his male relationships. As a

practice of self to help change his way of being, Robert eventually organized what he termed “men’s support groups”:

With some encouragement from Anne, I got involved in support groups that provided a forum of similarly minded guys, where we could talk about some of the pressures on us as men to conform to a certain model of masculinity. The implications from these discussions were big and so my whole thinking on these issues grew a lot.

Robert found that the men’s support groups, as a technique of self, provided him with the strength to *refuse* his (sexist) self and, as a practice of liberty, to engage in the ethics of self-creation. Indeed, Robert went back to university studies, eventually completing a doctorate in anthropology and became actively involved in anti-violence campaigns. Although he initially rejected rugby as a sport of violence, he has regained a passion for watching the game as a fan:

At first I felt like an alcoholic who had fallen off the wagon but I kind of enjoy watching some of the things that I really celebrated while I played. But I also see rugby as something to be satirized. I no longer see rugby in just shades of black and white, if it is played in a good spirit, it can be a good game and exciting to watch ... and, I know it sounds like a naïve position, but it is one of the few things that can help bring a community together.

Peter, in contrast to Mitch and Robert, felt little need to interrogate his self via counseling or support groups but used his privileged subject position – as a white, university educated, elite level sportsman – to critically raise issues about sexism in female youth volleyball. His public actions contributed to changes in the uniforms (that the teenage girls felt better about wearing), fairer game times and encouraged others to volunteer time to coaching female teams. These liberal actions simultaneously helped construct Peter’s ethical view of self as a pro-feminist male.

The telos or broad existential goal of Peter, Mitch and Robert was a desire to show respect, regardless of gender, to all people or, in the words of Foucault (1988), to “allow the games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” (p. 18).

Problematizing excessive competition as an ethical problem

Stewart, in contrast to the other interviewees, selectively problematized his masculine identity as the *ethical substance* in need of attention and believed his ‘problem’ identity been constructed in direct relation to his elite participation in football (soccer). Stewart had been playing football since he was seven years old and had repeatedly been selected in provincial age group teams. As an 18 year-old he planned to be a professional footballer. Yet this dream and his sense of self were shattered during a trial match for his provincial team:

I often talk about that day ... I had had failures before, as it were, but that was the first time I really bombed and copped flak for it. I felt personally damaged and attacked by it...I’d completely blown it. They didn’t choose me, they didn’t leave me in the squad and so on...I played over and over the things I did wrong and carried them around in my head for years and years. I can still remember vividly all those things that I did wrong.

Stewart’s fateful moment led to him quitting football and “completely crashing”. He reported: “it just destroyed my life for a good two or three years. I buggered about, was unemployed, and I drank heavily.” Yet Stewart did not reflect on this time period as wasted: “if I had not done so badly in that one game, I probably would have gone on chasing the impossible dream and I wouldn’t be where I am now today.” Stewart talked of the ‘impossible dream’ in relation to an idealized form of sporting masculinity:

Previously I had been chasing this thing that I perceived myself to have failed at ...

(accordingly) I came to question what it was that I was actually chasing...I kind of realized that I was just chasing impossible things and that there were no real benefits to it. I was seeking this masculinity that you could never quite get. And it was luring me on to keep trying, keep trying to obtain this status and it was never achievable, no one ever gets there.

You know people who are close to it consistently but they’re never quite there...

Stewart’s process of problematizing his previous life goal (e.g. chasing an elusive form of sporting masculinity) was not worked through in a methodical manner but occurred over a period of

“two to three years” within which he described himself as, “a depressed idiot, doing all that stupid drinking, getting into trouble and associating with people I don’t anymore.” Yet Stewart acknowledged that “while I didn’t seem to be getting much done, I was really. Actually on the inside, I was doing a lot.”

Through this disorganized process of introspection, Stewart accepted that he had a moral obligation to simply be ‘himself’. His mode of subjection, accordingly, was to find the real Stewart inside of him and to liberate his ‘self’ that had been deformed through years of rigorous competitive football pressure. In recognizing that he needed to find ‘himself’ he decided to expel various hypermasculine performances. His ethical work subsequently included shunning the “crazy excessive drinking”: “I’d had enough of that. At some point I thought it was a good way to prove my manhood and then I realized at some point that it was stupid...I don’t even like the taste of beer.” Stewart further reported that he *worked* at developing more respectful ways of relating to women: “by the time I started to have relationships with girlfriends ... I learned to appreciate women on a range of different levels, instead of just what they look like. In fact, I am now very critical of such a shallow understanding of women” He added:

I would say I am pro-feminist. I don’t think I can be a feminist, you know, I can empathize but I can’t really understand a women’s position ...Of course I’ve got all these manly kind of things that are within me, that have just sort of been drilled into me and from time to time I make the odd sort of caveman comment. The difference now I think, is I immediately catch myself after I do it and I think, ‘Why did I say that?’ or ‘I don’t really believe that.’

Perhaps Stewart’s hardest ethical work occurred, not when he initially quit football, but when he decided to start playing football three years after quitting: “I realized I missed something about the game and I went to down to the park and took a few balls and kicked them around aimlessly and it was a real, I guess, Zen spiritual thing, there was no goal to it. I was not doing it to achieve anything.” Stewart realized that there was an aspect of aesthetics to the movement that he missed and decided to join a team once again but without getting trapped into the ‘impossible dream’ of

being world-class footballer. His solution was to seek out a team of reasonable standard but that played primarily for fun. He subsequently joined a Division C team: “Now that I am playing again I often get invited to join the Firsts and I don’t. I decline cos I just want to play socially. I don’t want to do all the training and be back to that stressful kind of thing.” By refusing to play and train at a very competitive level, Stewart is simultaneously refusing to be who he is expected to be (as a talented footballer).

More broadly, Stewart’s telos appeared to revolve around a refusal to be disciplined by the cultural narratives of hypermasculinity: “I stopped trying to prove my manhood ... more recently I’ve realized that there is no need to try to prove anything, full stop. So I’ve just given up (trying to be masculine). I’m just me, I just do my thing.” Although Stewart’s idea that he has a ‘real self’ buried under layers of social pressure is antithetical to Foucault’s anti-essentialism, his strategy of rejecting the allures of hypermasculinity is akin to Foucault’s (1983b) notion of practicing liberty through refusing the type of identity that has been “imposed on us for several centuries” (p. 216). More specifically, Foucault argued that there is a need to “promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal” (p. 216) of a political double bind, “which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures” (p. 216). Such refusal is undoubtedly complex. Indeed, Stewart acknowledged toward the end of his interview: “I was just thinking that it sounds like I’ve dealt with all these things very well, but maybe I’ve just put myself in places that I can feel safe and comfortable?” In this tentative manner, he was unsure whether he had refused his previous self or simply removed himself from previous sources of tension.

On becoming an ethical sport subject: concluding words

This research project has illustrated how seven purposefully selected male interviewees negotiated sporting tensions associated with hypermasculine performances and how these negotiations shaped their (masculine) selves. We found Foucault’s (1992) theoretical ideas concerning the modes of subjectivation associated with creating an ethical self, a useful framework

for undertaking empirical analysis. This framework encouraged our focus on how our interviewees problematized their respective sport cultures, adopted strategies to reduce tension and, in the process, worked on their 'selves'. More broadly, we accepted that the interviewee's self-work was connected with attempts to construct coherent or tension-free stories of self and, at times, with broader understandings and performances of masculinities and associated power issues.

We also found, however, that Foucault's (1992) framework for examining the moral problematization of (sporting) pleasures was not entirely pertinent for three of our interviewees; as the ethical substance or moral problem was external to them (e.g. teammates drinking excessively). Correspondingly, their ethical work was not primarily directed at changing the self. In other words, although these interviewees were self-reflective about their involvement in hypermasculine sporting cultures they did not reflect deeply about, or work towards, creating themselves as ethical subjects. Nevertheless, the tensions these three interviewees faced did impact on their social interactions and how they thought of themselves (e.g. Dave as an outsider, Peter as profeminist): which supports Foucault's (1992) contention that "all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self" (p. 28).

A particular benefit of 'thinking' with Foucault's ideas was that it allowed us to conceptualize the sociological links between moral codes, sporting contexts, practices of self and sport/masculinity issues. Previous examinations of sport ethics have tended to treat ethical decisions somewhat narrowly in relation to individuals reactions to a moral code (Shogan & Ford, 2000). Such examinations underestimate the broader social significance of ethical dilemmas and negotiations. In contrast, Foucault's take on ethical actions allowed us to understand that moral actions have degrees of political significance. More specifically, in accepting Foucault's (1978) notion that relations of power exist between all interacting individuals, we acknowledged that how one presents the self and interacts with others is tied to the workings of power: therefore, the creation and performance of self can be understood as always an ethical and political issue.

Our interviewees, for example, revealed that through either participating in (or witnessing team members') acts of drunkenness, the sexualization or abuse of females, or excessive training demands, they felt certain moral tensions. Through reflecting on these tensions the interviewees problematized the respective hypermasculine performances and recognized their (in)direct connections with the construction of a moral problem, troubled identities and/or harmful relations of power. This self-reflection exercise resulted in a desire to change various practices of self and - in the cases of Stewart, Robert and Mitch - the development of fateful moments and decisive life changes. Techniques used to change the self included the development of support groups, seeking advice from a mentor (e.g. professional counseling or a feminist partner), designating oneself as a role model, strict measurement and moderation of desires (e.g. limiting or abstaining alcohol intake), the use of *parrhesia*, and the refusal to perform aspects associated with hypermasculinity.

These practices of self allowed the interviewees to construct themselves, in part, as supportive partners, respectful of others, cooperative, cordial, sensitive, politically correct, caring, sophisticated and ethical. Moreover, four of the interviewees specifically referred to them 'selves' as profeminists and/or pacifists. These stories of self shaped how the interviewees knew themselves as gendered beings. More specifically, the interviewees produced selves within contexts of hypermasculinity, via negotiation of moral problems that allowed them to reject the values or moral codes of hypermasculinity and create ethical masculinities. Or, in playing with the words of Miller (1998), we suggest that these men had found ways of "not being (problematic) men" (p. 433) through being "discontinuous, conflicted and ordinary, rather than interconnected, functional and dominant" (p. 433).

We wonder, however, to what extent (if at all) the interviewees' practices of self influenced the actions of their team members? And, correspondingly, what impact did these practices of self have on the construction of masculinities within the broader sporting culture? Through reflecting on these questions we speculate that the interviewees' typically *quiet* refusals to indulge in excessive drinking, abuse of women or elite level sport, as examples, would not likely cause others to

critically reflect on their own actions, be confused or desire to make self changes. In this sense, we speculate that the interviewees' practices of self had little political impact on the broader performance of sporting masculinities within the team culture. We, accordingly, support Markula's (2003) observation that Foucault did not envisage technologies of self as akin to strategies of resistance. Our limited findings, nevertheless, suggest that the use of *parhessia* as a form of ethical work (performed by Teddy and Peter) did directly challenge team members' ways of thinking and provoke a "critical, querying reaction" (Lloyd, 1996, p. 258). Such critical reactions, however, may not have reduced hypermasculine performances, as the team members may have questioned, 'what sort of man are you?' rather than 'what sort of man am I?'

Although the interviewee's practices of self did not appear socially transformative, we do not support Best and Kellner's (1991) contention that Foucault's later work on ethics represents a futile attempt to promote an apolitical form of individualism. In contrast, we concur with Hofmeyr (2006) who stated: "The centrality of the ethical perspective in Foucault's late work ... does not signal an abdication of political engagement, but precisely a call for political struggle understood, first and foremost, as a 'politics of our ourselves'" (p. 230). The self, according to Foucault, is not simply the passive product of disciplinary technologies but is created within power relations that individuals are able to critically reflect upon. And through self-reflection and problematization of moral codes, an individual can gain understanding of how s/he is enmeshed within - and subject to - power relations while also realizing that s/he has a certain amount of freedom within these power relations. Indeed, "free individuals have a certain amount of control over their relationships to their own selves and over their relationships to others" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 148). The political challenge for Foucault in his later work was, accordingly, to understand techniques that individuals could employ to allow them to disconnect from dominating power relations and search for new forms of subjectivity or ways of being that minimize harmful relations of power. In this manner, Foucault (1983b) advocated that "the struggle against the forms of subjection - against the submission of subjectivity" (p. 213) is an ethical technique of self.

We conclude by suggesting that a proliferation of specific techniques of self that struggle against hypermasculine forms of subjection could be *one* form of ethical response to the problems detailed by many sport sociologists surrounding masculinities and sport. We are not suggesting, however, that there are any specific techniques that should be adopted or that offer set solutions, but broadly encourage those who are passionately connected to sport to engage in the moral problematization of sporting pleasures. In other words, to critically reflect on moments of sporting tension, attempt to understand the performance of self in these moments, the unwritten/written moral codes and sets of values that dominate, and how the self is situated within these moral codes and existing power relations. The aim of such an exercise is not to realize that one is somehow trapped within a coercive sporting framework but to reflect on potential practices of freedom that could allow the self to move within existing power relations and in relation to moral codes. Indeed, as the feminist dictum employs: the personal is political.

Lastly, although our data represents the moral problematizations of only seven individuals, there is growing evidence that the tensions that our interviewees spoke of are being shared across the wider social spectrum (Anderson, 2005; Kelly & Hickey, 2009; Pringle & Markula, 2005). Increasing levels of sport surveillance and accountability, in combination with changes in community expectations concerning gendered performances (e.g. Atencio & Wright, 2008; Tarrant, 2008; Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton, 2004) offer new opportunities for sportspeople to name divisive aspects of the hypermasculine sporting culture and stand in opposition to them. While there is clearly a long way to go, we think it is useful to signal that opportunities to reject this culture or stand up against it (from within) are gaining legitimacy.

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ⁱ The concept of fratriarchy refers to the “rule of the brothers” (Jewkes, 2005, p. 46) as a form of male domination framed within male homosocial contexts. Jewkes suggested that the concept overcomes some of the “ambiguities inherent in the term patriarchy (the rule of the fathers)...to account for the disjunction between the facts of public male power and feelings of individual male powerlessness” (p. 46). Males within fractriarchies, according to Brod (1990) “stand in uneasy relationships with each other, engaged in sibling rivalry while trying to keep the power of the family of man as a whole intact” (p. 133).

ⁱⁱ We have used the term ‘hypermasculine’ with some hesitation as we recognize that the term ‘masculine’ is contested with different authors, theorists and social groups defining and

understanding it differently. Despite our concerns with the general slipperiness of the term masculine, we have used the term hypermasculine for three prime reasons. Firstly, the term masculine is typically used in relation to degrees of comparison, such as, more or less masculine. The performances that we are defining as hypermasculine relate to what we believe are excessive or problematic masculine practices. For example, if drinking beer is thought of as masculine then drinking excessive quantities of beer can be thought of as a hypermasculine performance. This leads to our second reason, which is concerned with the “moral problematization of pleasures” (Foucault, 1992, p. 33). Foucault argued that a prime issue of moral concern, for the ancient Greeks, with regard to sexual practices, was not the actual type of practice but whether it was practiced moderately or excessively. Immorality in the practices of sex, Foucault (1992) stated was “always connected with exaggeration, surplus, and excess” (p. 45). The moral problem with excessive (hyper) practices is that “the individual is driven to distraction for a large part of his (sic) existence” (p. 45). Thirdly, we are suggesting that there is a link between the concept of hypermasculinity and Baudrillard’s (1981) notion of hyperreality, in the sense that a blurring occurs between the real, idealized and fictional aspects of masculinity. Hypermasculine performances, as such, are not likely to produce individuals with coherent hypermasculine identities but can be understood as relating to the simulation of something that was never real in the first place (Baudrillard, 1981). In other words, hypermasculinity can be understood as an idealized image of an extreme form of masculinity, that few if any, actually embody.