Manifestations of Masculinity among Major Junior Ice Hockey Players in Canada

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Introduction

Because the demands on a goalie are mostly mental, it means that for a goalie the biggest enemy is himself. Not a puck, not an opponent, not a quirk of size or style. Him. The stress and anxiety he feels when he plays, the fear of failing, the fear of being embarrassed, the fear of being physically hurt, all the symptoms of his position, in constant ebb and flow, but never disappearing. The successful goalie understands these neuroses, accepts them, and puts them under control. The unsuccessful goalie is distracted by them, his mind in knots, his body quickly following.

-Ken Dryden (1983: 119)

Ken Dryden’s account of goaltending in ice hockey captures the experiences of several male hockey players both on and off the ice. A goaltender for the Montreal Canadiens of the National Hockey League (NHL) between 1971 and 1979, Dryden was an all-star, yet by no means a typical member of a Canadian hockey club. For example, he embarked on a season-long hiatus in 1973-1974 when he chose to complete a law degree over hockey. He retired at age thirty-one after the 1978-1979 season, but not before having achieved six Stanley Cups and representing Canada in the monumental 1972 Summit Series against the Soviet national team. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1983 and has since worked as an author, lawyer, politician, and businessman in Ontario (Parliament of Canada 2011; Hockey Hall of Fame 1997; Dryden 1983).
The quotation presented above comes from Dryden’s book *The Game* (1983), a personal account of life as a professional hockey player. Dryden’s story is especially compelling because he was one of the first few who have been willing and able to step back as an outsider and put into words the experiences and feelings of a hockey player—experiences that are often reduced to discourses about fame, entitlement, and violence by those who report on the lives of elite ice hockey players. Perhaps Dryden was an outlier, to some extent, given his choice to pursue an education, speak about his experiences when several others had not yet done so, and leave hockey behind. In any case, he had first-hand experience in the profession and chose the famous words seen above to characterize his trajectory as a goaltender—among them the following: ‘demands’, ‘mental’, ‘himself’, ‘anxiety’, ‘failing’, ‘hurt’, ‘successful’, ‘neuroses’, ‘control’. If read closely, this quotation is contradictory in nature. On one hand, it expresses excitement, pride, epic challenge, and the unwavering respect teammates have for their goaltenders. On the other hand, however, it has distinct connotations of constant struggle, solitude, and angst.

While the quotation only applies, in this context, to the role of a goaltender, it can be taken as a more general commentary on the experiences of many hockey players both on and off the ice. In fact, arguably, the quotation can also describe the hockey player’s understanding and experience of masculinity and life as a male athlete. Dryden largely avoids the subject of masculinity in his book. Though he offers an impressive description of the life of a professional hockey player, he—like many other male athletes—presents masculinity-related themes, but does little in the way of examining them. Indeed, aside from the recent interest in homophobia and the common claim that hockey players are
‘out to prove their masculinity’ by participating in hazing, violence, alcohol consumption, and other traditionally masculine activities, masculinity is a topic that is mainly absent from discussions outside of academia regarding the lives of hockey players.

The contradictory nature of the quotation in question is thus rarely examined in terms of the lives and experiences of male hockey players and what masculinity means to them. The following is an account of research on Major Junior ice hockey players in Canada conducted between 2011 and 2012. Major Junior ice hockey is a central site of socialization in both masculinity and hockey contexts as the players are on the cusp of adulthood and on the verge of professional careers in the sport. In order to rectify the apparent gaps in knowledge about the subject, it is important to conduct exploratory and descriptive research at rinkside with these players to better understand the extent of their gender awareness. This understanding will allow for a better assessment of and, if necessary, a better foundation for more constructive models of masculinity in competitive ice hockey. With this in view, the following study was conducted with a Canadian Major Junior hockey team utilizing quantitative and qualitative surveys and semi-structured qualitative interviews with the players and head coach in order to answer the following research question: In what ways is masculinity made manifest in the lives of Canadian Major Junior ice hockey players? The study sought to examine a claim in the literature which stated that hockey players are likely to exhibit the traits of hegemonic masculinity (or hypermasculinity), a concept that refers to the small group of men at the top of the gender hierarchy that is known for dominating women and other men. Members of this group are often characterized as brawny, aggressive, and misogynistic, among other stereotypically masculine characteristics (Connell 1987).
The study has several outcomes and relevant contributions. Primarily, it adds to the literature on hegemonic masculinity as a concept and critically discusses its usefulness as a tool with explanatory potential. The study simultaneously reveals the limitations of hegemonic masculinity through its focus on the social context in which these hockey players live by discussing the implications of the image of a stereotypical hockey player and a perceived code of silence among them. Specifically, it addresses the stereotypical image of the Major Junior ice hockey player in Canada in relation to the image portrayed by hockey apparel company Gongshow Gear Inc. as well as the emergence of the You Can Play Project, which seeks to eliminate homophobia in sport. The study represents one of the first that seek to clarify the nature of the experiences of Canadian Junior hockey players as well as their relevant perceptions of masculinity by obtaining first-hand accounts from them directly, which scholars such as Stevens & Holman (2013) argue is increasingly necessary in ice hockey studies. Additionally, the study makes cultural contributions in a Canadian context as it was conducted in both French and English in order to allow the players to express themselves as clearly and comfortably as possible while prompting topics surrounding language and geography in connection with the social construction of the Canadian Major Junior hockey player. Lastly, although the following is not a direct objective of the study, it can also offer insight on how to address issues surrounding masculinity and sport including pertinent implications for policy-making.

**Context, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology**

Manifestations and interpretations of masculinity are worth investigating in an era when mainstream media is littered with accounts of problematic athlete behavior such as
hazing, violence, drug addiction, and homophobia. Over the last decade, one need look no further for evidence of visible public concern than the media coverage of events such as the following: the Todd Bertuzzi-Steve Moore hit in the National Hockey League (NHL) in 2004 (CBC Sports 2004), the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) crack-down on hazing in 2005 (CBC Sports 2005), the Jonathan Roy and Bobby Nadeau goaltender fight in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) in 2008 (CBC Sports 2009a), the release of former NHL player Theoren Fleury’s book on his battles with sexual abuse and addictions to drugs, alcohol, and gambling in 2009 (CBC Sports 2009b), the deaths of the NHL’s Derek Boogard, Rick Rypien, and Wade Belak in 2011 (CBC Sports 2011), and most recently, the concern over homophobia in ice hockey (Bella 2012; The Canadian Press 2012). Scholars, although perhaps at a slower pace, are likewise sounding alarms on what can be understood as a growing concern regarding male athlete socialization, behaviour, and lifestyles (Eitzen 2012; Anderson 2010; McCormack & Anderson 2010; Bryshun & Young 2007; Messner 2007; Young & White 2007; Carrington 1998; Messner 2002; Connell 1990; Whitson 1990).

Controversy surrounding these issues is not altogether new. Specifically, academic literature on Canadian ice hockey shows that it has long been accused of promulgating masculine character traits to the extent that they become problematic (Eitzen 2012; Rand 2012; Robidoux & Bocksnick 2010; Atkinson 2010; Gee 2009; Allain 2008; Adams 2006; Pappas, McKenry & Catlett 2004; Robidoux 2002). Since hockey is so deeply engrained in Canadian culture, it is often a primary site for the socialization of young males. This socialization becomes problematic when young men begin to embody traits of a dominant masculinity—often referred to as hypermasculinity
or sociologist R. W Connell’s (1987) “hegemonic masculinity” type—and consequently hold other players to the same standard. Hockey players are expected to be aggressive, stoic, competitive, independent, and to show little emotion, especially in the context of the game (Allain 2008; Atkinson 2010). These descriptors correlate with Connell’s (1987) definition of hegemonic masculinity as well as Ken Dryden’s (1983) words in the quotation as he explicitly states that successful (goaltenders) players are able to “understand” and “control” those expectations—or in his own words, “neuroses”—on the ice.

While the above descriptors do not always constitute negative characteristics, strict adherence to such qualities in hockey can often reach violent and mentally harmful levels of competition and dominance between both teammates and competitors. What is more, a code of silence supposedly exists among young male athletes that states that what happens between them, especially questionable behavior, stays between them (Kimmel 2008; Pollack 1998). These issues are undoubtedly prominent, however, recent studies suggest that although male team-based athletes are more likely to exhibit characteristics of hegemonic masculinity than non-team-based athletes, only some subscribe to this identity to the same extent or at all (Anderson 2011; Robidoux 2001). Much like the Dryden quotation, a contradiction exists between the positive and negative aspects of ice hockey within the same context. That is to say that while qualities like stoicism and competitiveness can be positive personal traits, they can also be extensively damaging if they are over exemplified.

The study did not rely heavily on a theoretical framework to answer the research question. The research was designed to be relatively inductive and based on the claims
made in the literature. Nonetheless, symbolic interactionist theories of performance, theories out of sex and gender studies, and theories of hegemonic masculinity from critical masculinity studies were examined and considered over the course of the study. The methodological strategies are likely more meaningful given the known challenges of gaining access to elite-level ice hockey players and teams as study populations (Allain 2013). The team in question was accessed through personal contacts, which speaks to the importance of networking and building relationships in a chosen field or community that may otherwise be tight-lipped and private (Marshall & Rossman 2011), such as that of male competitive ice hockey.

The active research was comprised of a survey component and an interview component. Upon having successfully made arrangements to work with a Major Junior team, it was imperative to spend a brief amount of time explaining the goal of the research. As a preliminary canvassing of their understanding of the subject, an anonymous questionnaire was conducted with twenty-three players (this constitutes the entire team with the exception of non-English and non-French speakers, one fifteen-year old whom the coach deemed too young to participate, and players away at NHL camps). Questions were centered on what masculinity meant to the players, what they thought it meant to be a man, and what they thought people expected of them as men and hockey players.

Next, an interview was held with the head coach in order to obtain his coaching philosophy as he had often been seen or heard in the media establishing himself as a coach who wanted to impact young players and build a team of accomplished people, not just accomplished hockey players. Lastly, interviews were held with thirteen of the
players (all of which were hand-picked by an assistant coach) to follow up on some of the questionnaire, to see if they echoed the coach’s interview responses, and to further examine their lifestyles, values, and perceptions of success both on and off the ice. In an effort to enter into the research in an unbiased manner (Neuman 2006), the interview guides were generated through active formulation of non-leading questions that evaded notions of hegemonic masculinity in order to determine if aspects of the concept would surface on their own in the players’ responses.

**Study Results**

The questionnaire was a useful tool as a preliminary canvassing of how the players engaged with the idea of masculinity. The more notable quantitative results included the following: sixty-five percent of respondents believed that they were expected to act differently around their teammates than around everyone else. Fifty-five percent of them believed that they were expected to behave in a manly way because they were hockey players. Another fifty-five percent believed that they were expected to act manlier around their teammates than around everyone else. Ninety-five percent of respondents believed in the existence of a stereotype of the Major Junior ice hockey player. Lastly, the same ninety-five percent also believed that it was important for the team to act as a role model in the community. These results indicate that, to some degree, gender expectations are indeed at play in their lives in a hockey context. Despite some common responses, the qualitative questions yielded a wide range of answers where manhood and masculinity were concerned. Some of them associated the word ‘masculinity’ with the way a man presents himself or is perceived and some others felt that it meant traditional or stereotypical masculine traits such as heterosexuality and
physical strength. Moreover, some of them thought that being a man meant being respectful, honest, and accountable, while others simply thought it meant being out of school and earning a living. The variety in responses generated from the questionnaire was quite compelling in the sense that no definite consensus was reached on how manhood is experienced and understood.

Three main conclusions were drawn from the interview with the coach. First, he explicitly indicated that he was education-oriented and believed that successful hockey teams develop through players’ efforts to be good people, be good teammates, and do their best in all endeavours on and off the ice. Second, although the players understood the coach’s expectations, they all had varying views of the Junior hockey experience as some echoed him while others gave much more detailed responses and offered accounts of the more problematic or ugly side of life in Major Junior. Lastly, the aforementioned code of silence ostensibly played a role in the remainder of the analysis because the coach requested that questions about hazing and girls be removed from the player interview guide before he would allow the interviews to proceed. These are two important aspects of hegemonic masculinity that should have been examined.

Transcriptions of the player interviews were separated according to recurring themes within the players’ responses. The players mostly all offered a very ethical and humanistic account of personhood more than masculinity. The responses yielded ten main themes, ranging in order of commonality from hockey, social life, stereotypes, behaviour, success, family, girls, competition, and work. Much like the questionnaire results initially indicated, masculinity was not manifested in unified and linear ways for these young men—some of whom did not yet consider themselves men, but stated that
one becomes a man during his time in Junior. Ultimately, some conversation topics coincided with hegemonic masculinity, some opposed it, and others were hardly related to gender at all. Elements that did fall in line with hegemonic masculinity included the players’ focus on winning, elevated level of bodily training and physicality, heightened sense of competition, and inability of some of the seven players with girlfriends to explain what they thought their girlfriends expected of them as partners. Further, there was absolutely no discussion of homosexuality other than to indicate insults or derisions. These elements resonate with hegemonic masculinity because its tenets encourage dominance over other males, mental and bodily strength, and the denunciation of anything feminine. It would be difficult to contend that these players represent the hegemonic masculinity ideal, however, as they answered many questions differently and very few conversations with them explicitly pointed to problematic or detrimental attitudes or behaviours such as those portrayed in the media. Moreover, some conversation topics were in direct opposition to hegemonic masculinity. For example, the players’ voluntarily expressed themselves regarding subjects such as their closeness to their families, their experiences of missing home and especially their mothers, and the vulnerability they and their teammates sometimes felt when having to perform in front of thousands of people and receive harsh criticism from fans via social media.

A solid conclusion that was drawn based on the interviews was that the stereotypical image of the Major Junior hockey player falls completely within the parameters of hegemonic masculinity as well as the description of athletes in the literature. According to the players, the stereotype exists because of a small group of players who embody it. The stereotypical player is arrogant and is often excessively
tough both mentally and physically. He tends to be somewhat of a philanderer, he consumes a lot of alcohol and causes trouble with girls and other players. He stifles emotion and strongly adheres to the code of silence, but would not label it as such. Several players argued that the few individuals who do embody this image ruin the reputation of the entire group in the public eye as they are the ones who receive media attention or attention in the community for their questionable behaviour.

In sum, the overarching results of the study demonstrated first and foremost that there is little gender awareness among these young men. The raw findings indicated no strong presence of hegemonic masculinity among this team. The players did indicate that they felt the presence of hegemonic masculinity, but the study was not in a position to offer true insight into its reach or impact on the players’ lives. The lack of detail around girls and hazing—which are, arguably, two of the more important pillars of hegemonic masculinity in a hockey context—seriously undermined the possibility for any substantial claims to be made on the subject. Violence also was not a prominent aspect of the interviews. Nonetheless, the team collectively displayed an admirable code of personhood, if not masculinity, that was decidedly humanistic in nature. This opposed many accounts in the literature review of male athletes and ice hockey players, which often pegged athletes as negotiating and maintaining hegemonic masculinity to the point that it is harmful to both athletes and society.

The code of silence was likely at work in the research to an extent and it was thus inextricably linked to a number of the study’s limitations. The coach painted a wholesome picture of his hockey team and some players possibly self-censored given that some interview responses opposed the coach’s interview and were more revealing.
Viewed positively, this situation forced me to focus on things other than sex and violence such as family and education. These areas of enquiry were highly telling and useful, but they did not allow for the painting of a full picture of the ways in which masculinity is made manifest in the players’ lives. This can be explained by the idea that, as the code states, what happens between the players stays between them.

**Highlighting the Stereotypical Image of the Major Junior Hockey Player**

The stereotypical image of the Major Junior hockey player surfaced as one of the more telling and definite aspects of the research. The players referred to the stereotypical player as living the lifestyle encouraged by Gongshow Gear Incorporated. Gongshow is a hockey apparel company that was founded by three Junior ‘A’ players in Ontario, Canada in 2002 (Gongshow Gear Inc. 2013a). They characterized their lives as a gong show, which is a term used to describe rowdiness, antics, or chaotic life experiences. The players stitched the word “gongshow” on their baseball hats and the practice caught on. The company they developed is now the world’s leading brand of hockey apparel with a marketing slogan that consists of the supposed motto of a Junior hockey player: wheel, snipe, party. The three words, which are part of hockey player vernacular, loosely mean “to fraternize with women, score goals on the ice, and consume alcohol while having a good time.” The company sells clothing, posters, and accessories brandished with sayings such as “I can skate, shoot and scrap. I will do anything for my teammates. Girls love me, guys wanna be me. I am the soul of the universe. I am a hockey player” (Gongshow Gear Inc. 2013b). On one hand, the lifestyle touted by Gongshow is visibly problematic in terms of social responsibility and respect for one’s self and others. On the other hand,
however, it demonstrates that the company is not only drawing on, but also contributing to the hockey player stereotype and portraying it as a common reality.

This portrayed lifestyle necessitates a discussion of where stereotypes end and realities begin. The results of this study in particular demonstrate that while the public might assume that most of these players live or strive to live this lifestyle, such is simply not the case. What is more, the Gongshow lifestyle is not compatible with the code of silence because if such a code were in effect, this particular lifestyle would not be openly accessible. Finally, the interview data indicates that the two players whose responses best fit the stereotypical description (or the tenets of hegemonic masculinity) were also the two most willing to share intimate details about themselves and their teammates, alcohol consumption and trouble-making included. In all of these ways, then, the Gongshow marketing campaign can be seen to contradict rather than confirm the realities of Major Junior ice hockey in Canada.

These findings suggest that while the concept of hegemonic masculinity is still highly relevant in terms of understanding the stereotype, the group of concepts to which it is connected and on which it relies is incomplete. Aside from the hegemonic masculinity type, Connell’s (1987) typology of masculinities also includes the “complicit,” the “subordinated,” and the “marginalized.” Sociologist Donald Levy (2007) argues that most men are in the complicit category insofar as they strive, with varying degrees of success, to become hegemonic. Men in the subordinated category, namely homosexuals, are seen as adopting ideas and engaging in practices that are not consistent with the hegemonic category. The marginalized category is reserved for non-Caucasians and the disabled, who are seen as having no hope of ever attaining hegemony.
The limits of Connell’s (1987) typology are revealed when it is used to understand the lives of those, such as the study participants in question, whose attitudes towards and experiences of masculinity cannot be reduced to issues of power and control. It does not attend to qualities such as loyalty, honesty, or respect. Many of the players interviewed were aware of the stereotypical image of a Major Junior hockey player and the hegemonic masculinity with which it is associated and claimed that they accordingly made a conscious effort to behave differently. Some players expressed vulnerability, an ability to be caring individuals, and the value of family and education, all of which oppose traditionally stereotypical masculine characteristics. Ultimately, this research suggests that Connell’s typology requires some re-conceptualization in order to accommodate men who do not fit neatly into the categories she has already established.

Eric Anderson’s (2012) recent work on college athletes, although not as far-reaching as Connell’s (1987) typology, suggests that young men are now less likely to adhere to the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and particularly to the homophobia by which it is often accompanied. For Anderson, this move away from homophobia is crucial insofar as the sports world has reached a point where inclusive masculinity exists alongside orthodox masculinity, making previously marginalized forms of masculinity more acceptable. He has determined that straight male athletes are now more accepting of gay teammates and heterofemininity. Anderson’s work constitutes not only recent but also robustly empirical evidence of change where masculinity and sport are concerned.

This climate of acceptance and openness that contradicts typical understandings of Major Junior ice hockey and hegemonic masculinity has possibly begun to reach the NHL with regards to homophobia. Despite the fact that no NHL players have come
forward as openly gay, the issue of homophobia in ice hockey has become a common topic of conversation. In 2012, the widely-read American magazine *The Atlantic* featured a piece by journalist Timothy Bella (2012) titled “Hockey’s New Battle Against Homophobia,” in which Bella discussed NHL player Sean Avery’s public announcement that he supported gay marriage. The announcement drew some criticism given Avery’s reputation for making disrespectful comments to the media, but Bella has suggested that perhaps this particular remark was exactly what gay hockey activists needed to move forward. Since that time, the fight against homophobia in professional hockey has moved at lightning speed. After an alleged homophobic slur by Wayne Simmonds of the Philadelphia Flyers in 2011, which was never confirmed based on a lack of evidence, the NHL released a statement clearly indicating that “all players, coaches, and officials in the National Hockey League deserve the respect of their peers, and have the absolute right to function in a work environment that is free from racially or sexually-based innuendo or derision” (Johnston 2011: para. 3).

In close proximity to the time the NHL released this statement, an initiative known as the *You Can Play Project* (2013) was coming to fruition, which sought to eliminate homophobia in ice hockey and other sports. *You Can Play* is close to the hearts of many Canadians as it was founded by Patrick Burke, whose father, Brian Burke, worked for the NHL’s Toronto Maple Leafs. By the beginning of 2013, *You Can Play* was working alongside sixty NHL players, eighteen Canadian colleges and universities, ten American Hockey League teams, and The Sports Network’s hockey panel, among others (Shoalts 2013). With that said, Patrick Burke wrote in the opinion section of *The Washington Post* that there was still work to be done. He stated that “in the same week
that much of the [United States] was congratulating Washington Wizards center Jason Collins for coming out as the first openly gay male athlete on a major league sports team, I was meeting with an NHL player about why tweeting ‘no homo’ is unacceptable” (Burke 2013: para. 2).

In any case, a conclusion that can be drawn based on the link between the Gongshow Gear Inc. image, the recent concern over homophobia in ice hockey, and the study results on the stereotypical image of a Major Junior hockey player in Canada could be summarized as follows: the image of the male ice hockey player in Canada remains contested. This image has been both widely criticized and celebrated. The scholarly literature has tended to focus on the fact that hockey players are likely to adhere to a hegemonic form of masculinity and a traditional definition of manhood. As the study results indicated, a small group of players do indeed adhere to this image. Many of them do not. Both academia and the athletic community are beginning to complicate our understanding of masculinity and sport.

Moreover, whether Ken Dryden (1983) knew it or not—and regardless of his intentions—he was accurately portraying the experience of a Major Junior hockey player in his quotation. He did so by alluding to the contradictory nature of masculinity for these young men and the public reception of them. This form of masculinity is perhaps not best described as hegemonic since it is understood to be at once both noble and problematic. This study, however, found that the small group of players that adheres to hegemonic masculinity is largely responsible for negative public perception of Major Junior ice hockey players and companies such as Gongshow Gear Inc. also contribute to such perceptions. By conducting academic work to further uncover rinkside
manifestations of masculinity, a more accurate description of gender awareness and portrayals among Major Junior ice hockey players will surface.

References


http://www.legendsofhockey.net/LegendsOfHockey/jsp/LegendsMember.jsp?mem=p198301&type=Player&page=bio&list=ByPosition&pos=G


