The Best of the Best Discourse on Health: Poetic Insights on how Professional Sport socializes a Family of Males into Hegemonic Masculinity and Physical Inactivity

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Abstract

This study examines how four males from the same family, representing different generations, construct health from their perceptions of professional athletes. Many men are socialized and participate in sport discourses that promote certain truths about being a man that often have detrimental effects to their health. The capacity of research to inform men’s construction of health is limited. In an attempt to engage male participants’ within the research process and cause a form of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991), transcripts from interviews with the males were analyzed and thematic findings were represented in a poetic form and shared with the participants for discussion and refinement. The findings revealed how the male participants reiterated messages that the media promotes, such as the importance of physical and mental strength for a man. More significantly, the males became aware that they assumed a narrow definition of health, portrayed by professional athletics, that perpetuated a hegemonic masculinity, a “culturally idealized form of masculine character” (Connell, 1987, p. 83). Reflections on changes in the males’ lifestyle choices after engaging in the research process are offered in the conclusion.

Introduction

According to the Toronto Men's Health Network (TMHN), an ongoing, increasing and mostly silent crisis in the health and well-being of men and boys. Due to a lack of awareness, poor health education, and culturally conditioned behavior patterns in their work and personal lives, the health and well-being of men and boys has been steadily deteriorating. In Canada and in several other countries, men and boys experience significantly higher rates of addiction, violence, crime, accident and premature death in comparison to their female counterparts. As well, men show significantly higher rates of death from cancer, heart disease, homicide and suicide. (TMHN, 2005)

This health issue is serious. How are men socialized to believe or view health in ways that are detrimental to their health? Are they able to become aware of the choices they have in how they view health? Family, school, community, and media play major roles in directing males to behave and believe certain things about physically healthy lifestyles. It is our belief that these influential forces set and enforce certain gender roles and expectations that a male needs to meet in order to be accepted. We understand a physically healthy lifestyle as a way of being physically active, eating a nutritionally balanced diet and engaging appropriately with others and the environment. We propose that this “maleness” socialization limits males in how they make healthy lifestyle choices, and how they understand the notion of being physically healthy.

The media’s portrayal of men within a hegemonic system is a pervasive influence on peoples’ understanding of a healthy lifestyle. In order to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity, people need to become aware of how this type of masculinity is being promoted and reproduced (Bramham, 2003). It is our contention, supported by research that those involved in sport draw on and are highly influenced by the role of the male professional athlete (Brown, Basil, Bocanea, 2003; Messner, Hunt, Dunbar, Perry, Lapp & Miller, 1999; Rowe, 2001; Stump, 1999). Discourse surrounding professional athletes emphasizes a hegemonic masculinity that promotes strength, power, war metaphors, and deemphasizes healthy lifestyle choices, such as exercise and food choices, sensitivity to others and appropriate social interaction in society. This paper will examine how four males in a sports oriented family have constructed their perception of health from the media’s portrayal of athletes in professional sport. We consider how masculinity is formed and maintained by images, status, and messages surrounding professional athletes and how these personas affect males’ concepts of health. Drawing on Sparkes (2002), Denzin & Lincoln (2000) and Richardson (1992, 2000) the data collected through interviews is represented using the poetic representation genre. Poetic representations can allow a more realistic depiction of how people speak, allow participants in a study to engage in a critical reflection on their own interviews, and create spaces for readers to develop their own interpretations of the text.

Gender discourse, masculinity and sport media

Gendered discourse

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1 TMHN is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of men and boys by building awareness of important health issues through health promotion workshops, a newsletter, a website and community projects.
As noted by Mills (1997) “The term ‘discourse’ implies the view that language is not
simply expressive and representational, but that it is a system with its own rules and
constraints that have a determining effect on the way that individuals think and express
themselves” (p. 8); therefore a person’s understanding of self comes from the language
that has been available and used to define who they are. Family, work, school, local
community and sport frame discourses that position males. Images and messages of
professional athletes in the media offer a dominant discourse, especially if selected by
males, which situates a certain type of male in a position of power (Skelton, 2000).

Gender is socially constructed and is not an inherent characteristic of men and
women. Gender can be understood as a social construction applied to the biological male
and female; this understanding of gender “denotes a hierarchical division between
women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices” (Jackson &
Scott, 2001, p. 1). The inequities that exist between being male or female is an important
factor when considering how boys come to understand who they are and what their
‘correct’ role is in society. Within sport this understanding of being male is to be
physically dominant, stronger and more powerful than females and when needed
excessively aggressive in order to be a ‘winner’.

Children learn to become gendered beings through various discourses. In order to be
considered ‘normal’ children learn how to act, talk, behave, look and even think in ways
that the rest of society will recognize and accept from them as male or female (Davies,
2001). According to Pattman et al. (as cited in Dowling Naess, 2001), “Maintaining a
gendered identity is thus a kind of work – for men and women. As such genered identity
is a social process, embedded in power relations and underpinned by a socially induced
fantasy structure” (p. 128). In other words, males learn how to fit into society as is
expected of a man.

There is no single identity that people have; they have different identities depending
on the particular discourse that they are involved with in that particular moment;
therefore, a person can have conflicting identities (Davies, 1989). Gender is understood
and practiced in different ways depending on the available discourses. For example, a
man may not be able to express any emotions or concerns at his workplace, but at home
with his wife, he may be expected and able to share his feelings and concerns: he never
stops being a man, but he practices being male in different ways because of the discourse
available to him.

Understanding language to exist in the way that it can be disrupted and changed
suggests that people choose to take up language that will enable them to participate in the
social discourses that they want or need to belong to. Language organizes the practices in
a certain context; for example, the way people behave and talk on a baseball field, or how
they understand the unspoken rules of the road, or how they behave in a library. Often
people have some choice in the language that they use in certain contexts, so, depending
on their circumstances, they have a choice to change the way they take up language
which can affect their behaviors and their understanding of the social rules and
expectations.

**Masculinity**

Masculinity and femininity are terms to explain beyond the sex differences between
males and females (Connell, 1995). According to Connell (1995) masculinity is “the
practices through which men and women engage that place them in gender, and the
effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (p. 71). As Connell (1990) explains ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is the “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” that emphasizes “the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness” as well as “the subordination of women” and “marginalization of gay men” (pp. 83-94). As Burgess, Edwards, and Skinner (2003) explain the acceptance of this idealized form of masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is seen as normal and used to reinforce the dominant gender ideology of a culture. For males this masculine identity is created as they interact in the discourses available in a social setting. Indeed, Dowling Naess (2001) notes that many males invest “in an identity which currently provides public status and who perceive a rejection of it as indicating inadequacy or self-weakness” (p. 139). A dominant male identity is that of the athlete.

**Sport and media**

Sport has been considered “a site for the celebration of male physical superiority and difference” (Birrell & Therberge as cited in Dowling Naess, 2001, p. 126). Connell (1995) explains that sport is an institutionalized setting that is organized to not just teach males a game, but to maintain a “hierarchical, competitive structure” (p. 36) that purposely produces a specific type of masculinity to be valued (Burgess et al., 2003). However, as Dowling Naess (2001), Sparkes (1999) and Light & Kirk (2000) points out, there are costs to obtaining and maintaining athletic masculinity, such as physical and emotional harm in the search for being the best athlete. There is only minimal space for being the best in this sports context (i.e. professional athletes), with the effect being exclusion of most males and all females (Connell, 1995; Skelton, 2000) and undermining the development of a healthy lifestyle for the athlete (Sparkes, 1999).

As Dowling Naess (2001) notes “The sports body is…continually presented in the media as a symbol of health, success and wealth where global capitalism uses sports stars to sell its goods and ideals, whilst at the same time legitimizing patriarchal values” (p. 133). Sports programming is inundated with male figures and sends repetitive messages about masculinity (Messner et al., 1999). These masculine identities and practices are maintained through discourses, the language of which becomes naturalized through the repetition in the media (Young, 2002). Messner *et al.* (1999) found that American children believed that sports programs and news programs on television portrayed athletes positively. Consequently, messages on aggression, violence, race, and gender under representation or misrepresentation become acceptable (Messner *et al.*, 1999).

**Representing the data**

In interpreting and presenting the data in this paper we were aware that the discourses around gender, masculinity and sport reflected in our participants’ responses also influenced our own understandings of health and physical activity. As we collected data, analyzed and represented the data back to the participants we engaged in a process of self-examination, reflecting on tensions in gathering, representing and interpreting the data. One author of this paper had close relations with all four participants. She could speak to their close involvement, investment and continued viewing of sport, in particular high level performance sport. In contrast the other author had no connection to the participants but shared a similar interest and enjoyment of high performance sport. The relationship of the researchers to the participants did not create a limitation to accessing a form of realist or single truth (Van Manen, 1988), but rather created a process of researching where participants showed a sense of trust and support for the research
process. Our commitment to the research project was to examine male constructions of a
healthy lifestyle whilst creating a form of conscientization for the participants (Friere,
1982). The participants became thoroughly involved in examining themselves as part of a
family unit and were very committed to examining how their discourses around elite
sport framed their constructions of health. However, asking participants to read
transcripts and respond did not result in any meaningful reflection other than confirming
what was said. This led us to use poetic representations as a way for participants to
engage in a reflexive process with their own data, to research their own ideas from a
synthesized form and to extend the interactional nature of the data generation
(Richardson 1992; Sparkes 2002; Sparkes, Nilges et al. 2003). As such, the research
study took on a form of critical reflection for the participants, creating a form of what
words the research process developed insights through the inquiry process that directly
impacted those under study as they gained more self-understanding and self-direction.

Poetic representations

In qualitative research, poetic representations are created to “make the worlds of
others accessible to the reader” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 107), to make the worlds of each
participant more accessible to all participants. Our process was to use the participants’
repeated points, underlying themes, and the sentences that summed up their meaning, to
reorganize these lines, while invoking literary devices to make their meaning clearer in a
poetic form. The transcripts were made available for the participants to read however
they focused on the poems we created. The words in the poems are the participants’, but
the organization was ours. All of the participants read the poems and agreed that the
poems used in this paper represented their meaning.

Richardson (1992) argues that “Poetry is thus a practical and powerful method for
analyzing social worlds” (p. 108) because the poems allow the reader to see and feel the
world of the participant more closely. In writing and re-reading the poems we were able
to hear the participants’ voices, as they worked through thinking about the interview
questions, in the words and thematic organization of the poems. Also, the poems allowed
the space for the contradictions that existed for the participants and allowed these
contradictions to be highlighted back to the participants as they read their own and each
others poems. According to Sparkes (2002) poems “reveal the process of self-
construction, the reflexive basis of self-knowledge, and the inconsistencies and
contradictions of a life put together in speech” (p. 111). The poetic form reduces a
transcript to a condensed but crafted form which allows the participants as readers to
access their own thoughts, connect to each others’ experiences. Furthermore, the poetic
representations allow the reader to search for further meaning between the lines and the
structure of the poem; therefore, multiple readings can occur and no single truth needs to
exist (Sparkes 2002; Sparkes, Nilges et al. 2003).

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants

Four males connected to the same middle class family were interviewed: Kelly (Dad,
age 57), Greg (son, aged 20), Mark (son-in-law, aged 30) and George (second son-law,
age 37). Each of the participants had been a keen sports player and was an avid watcher
of professional sport. Professional sports players and the games were often topics of
conversation and interest to these men throughout their lives, although, at the time of this study, only two of the four participants played a sport, and only recreationally, once a week. None of the participants had a regular routine of physical activity.

**Interviews**

To stimulate the participants to unpack their notions of health and the discourse of professional athletes they were asked to provide a photo of themselves at their healthiest and to make a list of their favorite professional athletes. Providing a photo was to compare how they viewed professional athletes’ health to their own personal notions of health. Speaking about and describing their favorite athletes was to have the participants speak about athletes they knew the most about. The initial interviews were one hour each and were videotaped. The photos of their favorite athletes and their own “at their perceived” healthiest photo were present at the interview. As advocated in Ryan and Bernard (2000), the interviewer used comparisons between photos to stimulate discussion on the focus of the study, in this case health and elite athletes. The interview questions were semi-structured to focus the participants on describing their athletes in regards to the athlete’s actions, behaviour and health. They were also asked to consider how these ideas about athletes and their health were reflected in their own lives. The interviews were transcribed and made available to the participants. Follow-up interviews were more informal and focused on reading and reflecting on the poems of each participant.

**Data Analysis**

On first reread of the transcripts we documented major themes. Then working together we used NVivo, a software program designed to “manage, access and analyze qualitative data” (Bazeley and Richards, 2000), to code the transcripts. More specific categories became evident through coding (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). While coding, a process of reading and rereading the transcripts for each participant’s main messages about masculinity and health was adopted. Based on the themes, key words and sentences out of the participants’ transcripts were identified and then arranged into a poem for each participant. The poems offered a thematic play-back of the participants’ own words. In a second interview a more unstructured approach was taken (Fontana and Fey, 2000). Each participant read their own poem and the poems of the rest of the group and a combined poem for the whole group. Reading the poetry in a second interview seemed to help the participants to focus on their understandings of health and masculinity, the meanings of which they were not able to articulate clearly in the initial interviews. Comments, insights and suggestions were noted in this second interview and reflected in analysis of data and final re-creation of the poems. After completion of the poems and analysis, an informal group discussion amongst all the participants allowed a form of members check to develop as the main themes represented in the poetry resonated with the participants, validating the poems messages for them. We found the most insight from the participants into health and masculinity during this last stage of sharing the poem and analysis. We were confident that we were examining key meanings for the participants as they interrogated their own constructions of health and masculinity framed by elite athletes. Further examination of participants’ comments and ideas were critical in examining how perceptions of professional athletes informed how they constructed masculinity and health. Connecting to Gergen and Gergen’s (2002) notion of relation construction, the poetry allowed the participants to consider their own and each others words creating a
dialogical relationship between researcher, participant and participants in relation to health and masculinity.

**Findings**

The findings are represented in poetic prose and organized into four core themes for the participants: (1) understanding of professional athletes, (2) awareness of masculinity in the context of sport, (3) masculinity as more than femininity, and (4) masculinity and health. After each poem our interpretation is offered as a guide but not as the correct interpretation but rather insights on how the poems stimulated discussion with the participants.

**Understanding of professional athletes for all participants**

*Preparing for battle*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines taken from George’s transcript</th>
<th>George’s Sport Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The enemies are disgraceful:</td>
<td>Latrell Sprewell,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strangling, killing, mugging, destroying</td>
<td>Dan Heatley, Todd Bertuzzi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statesman of the game</td>
<td>Magic Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absolute joy and pride wrestling for Canada</td>
<td>Daniel Igali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to be calm</td>
<td>Peyton Manning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the storm of 300 pound guys charging, wanting to take his head off,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I will take this team on my shoulders and take them to the promised land”</td>
<td>Peyton Manning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If they lose, he’ll take responsibility when they win, he’ll share the crown glory a true hero as far as this sport goes</td>
<td>Magic Johnson, Peyton Manning, Daniel Igali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so he has to be protected, so they protect him like they protected Gretzky</td>
<td>Peyton Manning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they always had good battles driving through the lane smashing people down, they love crashes they like to see the spectacle of it all.</td>
<td>Magic Johnson, Larry Bird Michael Jordan Nascar fans Sports fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are the very best in the world</td>
<td>A Professional athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean, you only remember who won. Second place everybody forgets.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Analysis “Preparing for battle”*
War metaphors were referenced throughout George’s interview and these devices construct this poem. The themes of leadership, mental toughness, physical action, and the best of the best represent aspects of masculinity and health that professional athletes reflect and were present in each of the participant’s interviews. These typically masculine traits work to silence the people who try to attain and maintain these characteristics. Nothing but the best is expected from a leader, who should be mentally and physically strong. Therefore, athletes must continually work to maintain this performance, while ‘letting down’ would display failure.

According to George, as a leader, a male athlete is expected to take responsibility for a loss, and share a win; they are in a position of not letting their team down. Mental toughness is the athlete’s focus and ability to endure the pressure which suggests that the athlete must not rest, nor show inconsistencies. Similarly, physical actions are dependent on strength and not being weak, while being the best at the sport does not leave room for second best. For people who emulate these characteristics, they will feel pressure to avoid making mistakes. They have to work hard to maintain these characteristics, and in doing so are pressured to keep silent, because speaking about failure would make them less of a person. This way of being limits a person’s potential to communicate and actively engage in the world around them.

Similar to the observations of Bramham (2003) in his study of adolescent boys’ experiences of physical education in an inner city school, George and the rest of the participants in this study focused great importance on the physical actions that the athletes perform, such as body checking or dunking. Physical actions refer to how a player uses physical behavior in the game verses being skilled or physically fit. The participants admired the athletes’ skills, but they did not mention the skills nearly as often as they mentioned the physical actions. In the same way, the participants rarely mentioned admiring the athletes’ physical fitness. Instead they described how long a football player can throw, how hard or how often a hockey player body checks, or how powerful a pitcher can throw. The value placed on physical actions is not transferable to physical fitness or to a healthy lifestyle. Since physical fitness is not highly valued, so neither then is any other forms of health, such as emotional, social, or mental health. Even when the participants mentioned physical fitness they lacked the language to elaborate and give examples of what physical fitness meant.

The participants valued the best of the best concept, which was evident in the numerous times that being the best was mentioned in their interviews. Agreeing with the males in other studies examining masculinity and sport (Bramham, 2003; Skelton, 2000) the participants in this study believed that the athletes were to be admired for being the best. The athletes were considered masculine because they were the best, and the participants described themselves as masculine because they had excelled at a particular sport.

This concept of being the best at a sport seems to inhibit personal development in a variety of other areas of life. Being the best works against emotional, spiritual, and social health and it even works against physical and mental health if the person pushes too hard to be the best. Even though logic may tell us that there are more important things to engage in, like our family, our community, or our physical health, the language for being the best is more valued. The value of being the best is summarized in the last stanza of “Preparing for Battle” where George reiterates the Western philosophy that winning is
everything and that, as described in history texts, only the best will be remembered. The participants’ reasons for wanting to be the best included being admired, impressing others, and being more competitive. Comments such as “I guess we’re sort of programmed through life with that” and “we are sold the concepts of bigger and stronger” reveal that the participants were aware on some level that the they were being socialized to believe in the value of being the best. These participants recognized the value of this language and choose to accept the value in order to be socially accepted.

After Greg read the poem “Preparing for Battle”, he felt exhilarated and excited about sport and competition for the moment. He overlooked the tone of the last stanza that suggests a sadness about second place. The language is so common to him and carries so much importance that he did not have the space to reflect on how those words work to situate him as a man, as someone who inevitably would come second.

Acknowledgement of Masculinity in the Context of Sport

Within the Rules:

Lines taken from Greg’s transcript

Greg’s Sport Reference

A man is,
physical muscle strength
they throw their bodyweight around
contact other guys
just aggressiveness.

He just plants himself in front of the net
pounding guys and pounding guys and pounding guys
takes a huge beating
two guys just dragging on him
a strong player - he doesn’t give up
only one hand on the puck and
he deaks it in.
   I was always clean
   But sometimes they aren’t sportsmanlike
It’s just insane
He’s such a beast,
he just really takes a beating,
like a martyr,
taking it, then walking it off
he’s very tough,
very masculine,
just keeps ticking,
working hard
   I always played within the rules
   But sometimes they aren’t gentlemanly players

He’s very aggressive,
cross checking, cross checking,
punching, nailing guys
taking a beating

Todd Bertuzzi

Todd Bertuzzi
Growing a playoff beard
he looks scruffy
and he’s got tattoos.

You don’t need to play a contact sport to be masculine.

Great at hitting
  good clean powerful.
One night
he was getting aggressive
he wheeled around
  leveled him,
  lifted him off his skates
just nailed him,
it was awesome.
  The underdog can come back
  and still pound for pound be really strong
  and masculine.

I wish
I was a bit of a bigger guy,
  and tough and mean like Bertuzzi
  and still be fair
  be a good sport.
  I like to be tough and rough
  but you can be masculine in other ways.

I enjoyed that part of the game
Play and be a good sport
  And yet still really deck a guy
  ‘cause man that feels good
  clean, but still,
  it feels good
  a competitive thing
  “I just beat you
  you’re lying on the floor
  I just took you out and
  I’m better than you are.”

As much as you can be a really good hitter
You can keep it clean.
  You don’t need to fight somebody
  or rough somebody up
  or intimidate somebody.

Why would I think it is masculine to win?
A man is...
Analysis of “Within the Rules”

Masculinity is a complex identity for these males. They are aware of the typical sports standard of masculinity and they support this definition of masculinity as having value, yet the contradictions they express hints at the existence of multiple forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Bramham, 2003).

The indentations in the poem represent the contradictions and the time Greg took to think about a contradiction. Like Greg, all the participants would briefly struggle with how to make that contradiction fit into their understanding of masculinity. For example, Greg admires the hockey player Todd Bertuzzi and describes him as the most masculine of his favorite athletes; however, Greg admitted that he does not like when Bertuzzi uses physical aggression in an unsportsmanlike like way\(^2\). In this way he chooses not to accept every trait of this athlete as representing masculinity since, masculinity seems to include only widely recognized “positive” traits, such as leadership, ‘appropriate’ physical aggression and strength, and dominance. This ‘appropriate’ aggression created a tension, a contradiction that is evident in the poem “Within the Rules.” The importance of the athletes practicing physical action, socially unacceptable but within the rules of the game is unquestionable, but what is appropriate within the rules? If the athletes practiced physical action outside of the rules then they were considered as promoting bad messages about masculinity.

The initial version of “Within the Rules” poem was altered after the Greg read it and felt that he had been portrayed as a bully. He did not realize that he had emphasized physical aggression so much in his interview and explained that his meaning was that the physical aggression is to be admired only when used within the rules of the game. This concept of rules in sports led Greg and the interviewer to a discussion about who makes the rules for hockey (men) and why (for entertainment value). Although the poem was able to portray his meaning much more by adding in comments from his transcripts originally left out, we became aware, as did he, as to how his language portrayed his support of socially unacceptable aggression when talking about qualities to be admired in professional athletes.

**Stretching the Commentary**

*Lines taken from Mark’s transcript*  
*Mark’s Sport Reference*

I had a warped view of it.  
One-sided.

You wanted to be the best at one thing,  
probably at the cost of other things,  
and maybe the wrong things.

All my friends wanted to be like them.  
All men watched.  
That’s what men strived to be like  
the power, the strength, the toughness,  
the dominance in their game,  
One sided. One dimensional.

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\(^2\) Bertuzzi received a conditional discharge on a charge of assault causing bodily harm for inflicting serious body injury on Steve Moore in a National Hockey League game between Vancouver Canucks and Colorado Avalanche in March 2004.
physically powerful, mentally tough, making money.

Jordan invincible, that power, that respect, Michael Jordan
I associate that with masculinity
A fabulous basketball player,
but
a great man?

Of being a man.
It can be so much more,
other things to appreciate or to strive to be like
creativity
a passion for business
developing software
a good Dad, a good friend, a man who is giving or caring
or anything along those lines.
Not just physicality, not just making money
not so one dimensional, not so one sided

a whole new avenue

now I wish I would look toward Wayne Gretzky,
he seems to have
more of the other traits
I would like to see
being associated with men
more of a balanced life,
enjoying his family, talking about family,
participating with them
coaching clinics for kids,
proud of his country.

I would like to stretch the commentary of masculinity that way.

Analysis of “Stretching the Commentary”
Interestingly, each participant struggled with how to describe Wayne Gretzky as masculine. He was a favorite athlete of three of the participants, while George only referenced him to describe how a quarterback in football is feminine in that he has to be protected like Gretzky needed protection in hockey. Greg described Gretzky as feminine because “he doesn’t go out there and nail guys, that type of thing. He kind of dances around and plays with the puck a little bit. He’s not particularly masculine because he’s not really out there to do a lot of physical stuff.” The qualities valued as masculine are physical contact, while feminine qualities are seen as skilled skating and stick handling. To Kelly, Gretzky was masculine in that he was so skilled: “Bobby Orr and Wayne Gretzky didn’t have to do the physical game because… masculine?… they were skilled players, so from a masculine standpoint, they were true men in that they sucked it up if
something happened to them.” He seemed to realize that being skilled does not seem to be enough to categorize his favorite athletes as masculine, so he added in that they “sucked it up” which is considered to be a more hegemonic masculine trait.

“Stretching the Commentary” is created from Mark’s transcripts. Mark realized that Gretzky is not viewed by others as having valued masculine traits, but he suggested that Gretzky displays positive masculine qualities in other ways, such as being a family man, coaching children, and having national pride. Notice though that these “other” masculine qualities are still considered typically masculine domains, but they are not as highly valued as the physically aggressive, sacrificing martyrs that sports athletes are admired for.

Does being a good athlete directly correlate with being a great man? This correlation is made frequently by the participants when they advocate that their favorite athletes have positive characteristics, such as an athlete being willing to give up some of his contract money to win a Super Bowl, or that a player has a good work ethic, or that they kept with their morals, even though there is no factual evidence for this characteristic. As Skelton (2000) noted in her study, the participants believed that a good athlete equates with being a great man so of course the athlete would believe and act as the participant thinks a great man should. The portrayal of professional athletes is as flat characters without much dimension; this portrayal enables the fans to place the characteristics they most admire onto the player which creates further ways to relate to the athletes. This representation of the athletes allows hegemonic masculine traits to be further promoted.

Being a new father of twin daughters has caused Mark to question his role as a man and to search for new understandings of masculinity. In the middle of “Stretching the Commentary” Mark wants to explore what else a man can be defined as, but he is still limited by language when he suggests admiring qualities that a business man has, such as “creativity, a passion for business, developing software” and he runs out of examples, “or anything along those lines” and tries to develop the definition of masculinity as “not just” the limiting characteristics of being a man, such as “physicality or making more money.” Within the context of sport and professional athletes, the language used to define masculinity is limited.

**Masculinity as more than Femininity**

All four of the participants’ voices are woven into this poem. The poem’s main theme reveals how masculinity needs to be defined as power and strength so that men can be distinguished from women. The concern of blurring the boundaries of masculinity and femininity is evident when the participants explain how a characteristic like accepting responsibility, handling difficult situations or being hard on themselves is perceived as more masculine than feminine. This poem reveals the participants’ understandings of the differences between male and female athletes.

**Perceptions of athletes as better and best**

**Participants’ Sport Reference**

Sports a male dominated field the men play they fill up the stands hockey, fast-pitch

If I had to choose would I watch the men or the women
I’d watch the men.
   We’re programmed through life with that.
They are the best of the best
The men have physical dominance,
height dunking hitting strong, going faster.

Women could never come up to the level that the men do
don’t have the action that the men have
   The only thing men have over women is the physical strength
Male physical dominance.
   Physical strength and dominance but that’s all.

In sports, guys have, an advantage,
more skill than girls
guys tend to have more strength, endurance
   Not always.

My two daughters involved in hockey?
I doubt it.
It wasn’t a girl’s game.
   When my son’s team played a women’s hockey team…
      the women were very good…
      they were better hockey players…

Girls at their peak physical condition may not be able
to do the things that guys can
If girls take steroids
Maybe they could get up to a level where guys are
but it’s not allowed.

It’s 99% advertising about men
   It’s on TV about men,
      It’s in the magazines about men,
   It’s on the internet about men,
      I’m looking for it about men.
I would have zero ways of relating
to a female athlete.
You’d think that
if there were a lot of female sports on
guys would want to watch too… cute girls… in shape…
sports where girls would fit very well soccer, tennis, swimming,
are not on TV.
They had the lingerie bowl
that’s been it
in football.

If you are watching a game
You want to see the very best in the game
You want to see men playing
The very best in the world
entertainment
that is what you pay to see
the best plays,
the best hits
They are the best of the best.

If a woman could be the very best in the world
I’d have no problem at all
but they’re not
They are in a different league.
It doesn’t mean it is better or worse,
It is just a different league.

The national curler
she took it “like a man”
because she took responsibility
I hope someone says ‘she’s a hero of mine’
because she took responsibility.

What we hold up to be brilliant of sports
is recognized around men
We are sold the concepts of bigger,
stronger,
faster
more physical…
but
to recognize other talents
like teamwork, perseverance, overcoming
obstacles

3 Colleen Jones is a Canadian curling champion. In February 2005 her team was unsuccessful at the Tournament of Hearts despite being favourites. She took responsibility for the loss as the skipper.
you could probably find
more female role models.

there needs to be a change
of perception
of what an athlete is.

**Analysis Perceptions of Athletes as Better and Best**

According to the comments in this poem, the only way that women could be valued in sports by men is to get bigger and behave “like a man” or to be sexualized beings for men’s entertainment. Although all the participants in some way blamed the media for their lack of naming a female as one of their favorite athletes, they also expressed that they have no ability to relate to a female athlete unless she displays masculine qualities. That their identity is so influenced by the hegemonic masculinity promoted by professional athletes limits these participants from engaging in feelings, behaviors, or communication that is outside what is considered masculine. In addition, feminine qualities were most often described in derogatory ways by the participants as seen in the following example quote from Kelly the father about his dad:

Kelly: “Poooh… You’re joking. These guys can’t be my hero and be feminine. Are you kidding me? They can’t be my heroes if they are feminine! My father would come back and haunt me if I said that. Why? In what way would they be feminine? There is no femininity in any one of them. Because they epitomized what a man was.”

Mark acknowledged that what are valued about athletes are concepts that revolve around men’s body size and strength. He suggested that other traits will need to be valued before female sports can gain recognition. The ideology of bigger, better, and best works to keep men and hegemonic masculinity as most valued (Bramham, 2003; Skelton, 2000) and excludes other qualities that do not compare, like teamwork, caring, perseverance, and elegant technical skills.

**Masculinity and Health**

This theme of health has been left to last because initially the discussions about health with the participants were very limited because of their focus on masculine qualities in professional athletes. Health and high-level sport performance were intertwined. A concept of ‘being healthy’ as more than sport success was not understood until the participants reflected on their own and each others’ interviews through the poems. The following poem is based on Mark’s transcripts from follow-up interviews. All the participants felt that Mark’s poem captured how their perceptions of health were being challenged.

**Leaving the Beaten Path**

*Mark’s Sport Reference*

*Bo Jackson*

Of strength and power...
I wished and dreamed that I would grow up to be
6 feet 2 inches, 220 pounds,
what thought I needed to be
what I aspired to be
    that is not my body frame
    I couldn’t have been that at all,
yet that’s what I thought
a healthy man was supposed to be like
    I used to think this was healthy
Athletes today having to push themselves
to such extremes
to be better, to be the best
physically strong, independent, strong willed, strong minded
Pushing their bodies and minds to very far limits
That’s what I thought a healthy man was…

On the surface,
they appear healthy
the most physically fit people,
seemingly
pushing their bodies
to a point of being extremely healthy
channeling their minds
like a meditation
visualization
that is healthy

They push themselves
raising that bar
past the point of health
incredibly unhealthy
one dimensional lives
    the amount of money, the exposure to bad things
I started to question
what about the rest?
I started to question
What else do I consider important
I started to question

Is it all just about being physically fit?
I started to question
What other aspects of my personality are my strengths?
What do other people appreciate about me?
What is important in my life that I want to be good at?
What are my other interests?
I started to question.

I see myself
    having a good time,
relaxed,
with good company,
enjoying a hobby,
I feel good
we’re outside, it’s warm, I have a tan, I’m smiling,
I look like I’m confident.
That espouses health.

Analysis Leaving the Beaten Path

To these participants health most often meant bigger and stronger and being the best both physically and mentally. Kelly and Greg still maintained that health is what is defined in stanzas one, two, and three with the focus on physical strength and mental focus. Both Greg and Mark had wanted at one point to be bigger than their natural size and George had become unhealthily skinny at one point in his life. Most participants perceived that an athlete being in top shape was a positive quality because being in top shape enabled the athlete to be the best of the best. Health was so entwined with their definition of being a man that a balanced healthy lifestyle is, in fact, largely ignored for the purpose of maintaining masculinity instead.

Balanced health for the athletes was overlooked because the participants based most of their judgment of the athletes’ health on their appearance and ability. The third stanza of this poem mentions that athletes “appear” healthy, but the participants do not know what food these athletes eat, how much sleep they get, their mental state, what their exercise routine is, or whether they take medications or steroids, never mind what their social health or emotional health is like. The participants admit that they do not know what goes on in the athletes’ minds, that the fame and fortune might not make for an admirable life and that some athletes are too hard on themselves; however, these concerns were quickly ignored and escaped contemplation in exchange for either more talk about the athletes’ ability to perform or silence.

Only Mark was able to acknowledge that only recently had he noticed that the athletes are pushing their bodies too hard, to the point of injuries, and that their bizarre lifestyles of fame and fortune must result in unbalanced lifestyles. The rest of this poem reflects Mark’s questioning tone asking ‘what can health be if it is not what athletes portrayed?’ There are still plenty of aspects of health missing from his redefining of health, but he is now open to more possibilities.

The last stanza is indented way over to the right to suggest that although Mark knows what good health feels like, the health that is portrayed by professional athletes does not leave room for this definition of health. Furthermore, males involved in sport culture need to know more about the possibilities of what health can be before they will be able to redefine health. Unfortunately, the sport culture works to idolize hegemonic masculinity that leaves little room for expanding concepts of health.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The literature on masculinity and health supports the notion that these participants are not the only males who work hard to maintain hegemonic masculinity through sport. The messages of professional athletes regarding masculinity and health are powerful. As Messner et al. (1999) states,
According to the sports programming that boys consume most, a real man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a man’s world. To be a winner he must be willing to compromise his own long-term health by showing guts in the face of danger, by fighting other men when necessary, and by “playing hurt” when he’s injured. He must avoid being soft; he must be the aggressor, both on the “battlefields” of sports and in his consumption choices. (p. 11)

By continuing to let these messages go unquestioned, males and females who are framed a lacking in comparison to these messages, will continue to support the socialization of males into rigid moulds that restrict their behavior, thoughts, and feelings and limit how they engage in the world. The consequences of this seem evident in current trends in men’s health (TMHN, 2005).

Language situates people as gendered beings and they (unconsciously and consciously) choose to practice gendered discourses for certain purposes, by changing or altering the language constructs (including behaviors, perceptions, and words) they can resist and challenge the inequities that exist because of language. Males and females need further awareness about how the discourse of professional athletes in the media situates them as gendered beings. By understanding how the images, messages, and lack of multiple definitions of masculinity and health construct the value that we place on them, males and females may begin to question and then challenge the messages that the media is selling. They will begin to be aware of the power structures that have been governing their lives and they will feel a need to challenge the restrictions imposed by the privileging of masculine discourses.

These interviews alone got the participants and their family members to have further discussions about gender and health issues. Further discussions took place when the participants read over the poems created using their transcripts. Even though this study was conducted on a small scale, the effects of it have already made a difference. The poems caused participants and researchers to reflect on our own notions of health constructed by professional sport; that our beliefs, behaviors, and choices have been highly influenced by how sport is portrayed and sold to the public.

In future research we would recommend having focus groups meet to discuss poetry or other representational genres created from interviews. While the interviews enabled the participants to think for the first time about these issues, the dialogue on these issues can move further than the interviews allow. The creation of these poems was extremely essential to our understanding of the males’ perspective of masculinity and health. The complexities of masculinity and health were given validation by using poetic representations. The study and the paper created reflexive spaces that changed the participants and us, and caused us to challenge our taken-for-granted notions of masculine health, a form of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991; Sparkes, 2002).

The four participants have since had time and opportunities in which they have discussed issues that were raised for them from this study. The father of the family, Kelly, came to realize that his son mirrored his beliefs about masculinity which did not support a healthy lifestyle. Kelly was aware that he himself was socialized to value toughness, excessive effort, and sacrifice of other aspects in order to succeed and he knew that this is not supportive of a healthy lifestyle; however, he had hoped that he had raised his children differently and that his son would have been socialized to value balance. This was not the case in the son’s interview (see “Within the Rules”). This
revelation was upsetting for Kelly and since the interviews and reading the poetic representations he has spoken with his son on several occasions to encourage Greg to balance his lifestyle. This influence and effort has had a positive effect on Greg’s approach to his summer job where he is more focused on balancing his friendships, his job and his own recreation.

In addition, within weeks of the interviews, Kelly attended a recreational slow-pitch game of Greg’s for the first time since his son began playing recreationally two years ago. This is significant because Kelly had coached Greg for several years in competitive fast pitch and worked closely with his pitching. When Greg quit high-level slow-pitch Kelly saw this as a failure. However, now he sees participation at whatever level as an important need for his son’s health and feelings of success.

The repeated message from the participants was that to be an athlete you must give 100% effort, dedication, and commitment to the game; consequently, there is no room left in the equation for anything else, especially notions of physical health. This view of sport as being a passion and commitment requires much time and effort and is likely a reason why the participants do not engage in sport even if they desire to play. However, since this study Mark and Kelly who had not been participating in any sports or regular activity have both begun taking yoga classes once a week.

As indicated by Bramham (2003) and Sparkes (2002) more research needs to be conducted regarding how to create more awareness on how we are socialized by hegemonic masculinity, especially the masculinity constructed by elite sport, that restricts our understandings and practice of a healthy lifestyle. The reflective spaces through interviews and discussion over the poems were for the participants critical in creating the awareness of how masculinity and health were constructed in relation to elite sport. The discussions that followed these reflective spaces created opportunities to challenge the hegemonic masculine discourse that limits constructions of being male, encouraging in a small way the participants to develop a more enabling view of a healthy lifestyle.
References


