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See table of contents

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Article abstract

This article is an exploration of the construction of masculinity within professional hockey culture, and how this closed environment perpetuates an artificially secure gender identity. Despite the illusion of security provided by this male preserve, it is an inherently discriminatory group that is intolerant of difference, subsequently forcing players to either conform to existing norms, or be completely ostracized. The field research for this project consisted of random interviews held with hockey players in the spring of 1996, and a six month ethnography of a professional hockey team conducted in the 1996-1997 hockey season.

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ARTIFICIAL EMASCULATION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF A MASCULINE IDENTITY IN PROFESSIONAL HOCKEY[1]

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I will never forget my first year playing in the Northern Ontario Junior "A" Hockey League when I was sixteen years old. While sitting around in the dressing room one evening before a game, one of my team-mates — a twenty-year-old veteran — asked me: "Do you know what tough is?" Knowing he was about to tell me, I asked "What?" He coolly asserted, "Tough isn't winning all your fights; tough is getting the shit kicked out of you by someone and going back and fighting him your next shift!" I did not argue with him, nor did I feel any inclination to challenge his assertion.

Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity

The expression of male bravado evidenced in this particular exchange with my former team-mate is not likely a sentiment to be endorsed in contemporary western society, where attitudes towards gender identity are slowly evolving, much to the credit of feminists and feminist supporters. The traditional male role of breadwinner and patriarch is being successfully challenged, as women are gradually occupying positions and spaces in public life that were once exclusively male. As a result of this challenge to male hegemony in North American society, men are being forced to reassess what is expected of them as males, and what value they provide to their communities. As a consequence, the cultural construction of gender identity is being deconstructed, leaving us with the task of having to *reconstruct* these once well-defined identities. Thus contemporary individuals are left struggling to discover what it means to be male and female in a culture where gender is becoming increasingly ambiguous.

The conscious blurring of contemporary gender relationships has been critical for the empowerment of women in North American culture, and has subsequently influenced a relinquishing of male power. Unfortunately this conversion has not reached fruition, as the remnants of a rigidly codified society are still apparent. The definite boundaries established at the turn of the twentieth century were the product, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, of a

1. I would like to thank Diane Tye and Michael Taft for their editorial comments and criticisms. I would also like to thank the outside reader who was instrumental in helping shape my ideas and arguments for this project.

process of "world-mapping", where "every given person ... was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender" (2). Resistance to these "binarized identities", however, has not been well received by the existing male hegemony, and in response, the desire to establish a *definitive* masculine identity remains evident. Moreover, this perception of masculinity is typically drawn from the same "turn of the century" male construct: a white, Christian, heterosexual, physically superior individual.

Arguments are being made by certain individuals, such as B. Mark Schoenberg, who claim that it is necessary to reassert a *definitive* masculine identity in order to correct what, he believes, is responsible for much turmoil and uncertainty in contemporary societies. He argues that traditional "concepts of maleness and masculinity provided men with a set of behavioural guidelines as well as an explicit code of ethics that formed a foundation for personal construct development" (5). Without these "traditional concepts of maleness" he claims that the opportunity for "a boy" to "identify with a male from his own family unit" or "outside the family unit" is currently being put into jeopardy, consequently denying boys the ability to take on a "role model" (7). He continues by stressing that in order to remove these *perceived* dangers of blurring gender division, societies need to return to a more codified experience of gender, where definitive boundaries are maintained to guarantee the roles and behaviour of the sexes. Through the establishment of these unique boundaries, society will supposedly be freed from any uncertainty and/or psychological turmoil.

To establish these divisions, Ray Raphael, in his book *The Men From the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America*, suggests that we reincorporate the formal rituals that tribal peoples used to signify the transition from boys to men, to once again re-establish two[2] distinct gender orders. According to Raphael, the absence of these formal "rites of passage" in contemporary societies has profound negative effects upon the male population:

> Even if traditional initiations no longer appear to be objectively necessary, the psychological function they once served is still very real. The psychic needs of contemporary males have not always been able to keep pace with sex-role liberation and a computerized economy and nuclear warfare, all of which contribute to the obsolescence of traditional initiations (xii).

If, however, contemporary societies were to incorporate these formal rituals to signify the transition from childhood to manhood, what would be the

2. There is room for only two possible gender orders in this model: Raphael does not recognize anyone other than male/female heterosexuals.

successful product of the transition? In other words, what qualities would this "man" have to be properly called a man?

In effect, Raphael and Schoenberg are calling for males to assume highly competitive qualities that can be carried out primarily through intense physical interaction. Males should be defined by their ability to conquer and lead, and fulfil the qualities Marc Feigen Fasteau assigns to the ideal male:

> The male machine is a special kind of being, different from women, children, and men who don't measure up. . . He has armour plating which is virtually impregnable. His circuits are never scrambled or overrun by irrelevant personal signals. He dominates and outperforms his fellows... (2).

There should be no confusion when it comes to the sexes, and men should reassert themselves in their *proper* patriarchal position:

> It is not normal for a male to be in submission to a female and like it... These so-called males are in submission to the warped standards of females who like to set the dress and grooming standards for their mousy husbands, their pantywaist boyfriends or their feminine sons (Simpson 1992:262).

The complete absurdity of these positions is noteworthy because of its unfortunate appeal for many North American men. The danger of these comments becomes even more apparent if we consider these statements in relation to comments made by Don Cherry during a typical broadcast of his much celebrated segment of *Hockey Night in Canada*, "Coach's Corner."

In one particular episode of "Coach's Corner" during the 1996 Stanley Cup Playoffs, co-host Ron Maclean informed Cherry of a list of terms various sport writers used to describe him after a previous episode whereby Cherry announced his vehement disapproval of women in the male, NHL dressing room. The following discussion ensued after Ron Maclean offered a definition of "misogynist" to Cherry (one of the terms used by *Globe and Mail* journalist, Gare Joyce):

> **Cherry:** A guy can be called that [a misogynist] by a woman. A good ol' boy —
>
> **Maclean:** That was Gare Joyce of the *Globe and Mail* called you a misogynist.
>
> **Cherry:** Oh, okay. [Assuming an exaggerated effeminate air] *Gare? Gare* called me that? [Raising a limp wrist, he continues to mock] *Oh!* [Returning to his usual demeanour he continues] Anyhow, they can call me anything they want. I'm a good ol' boy. Born and bred Canadian — two

> hundred years here. Call me anything. You know, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant male. . . (*Hockey Night in Canada*).

Don Cherry's fabricated apology actually subverts any reconciliation, as he parodies a man's masculinity through stereotypically homosexual gestures. He demeans a man for having an *apparently* feminine name, thus suggesting once again that masculinity should not be confused with what might be mistaken for femininity, or in this specific example, homosexuality. Moreover, as a bona fide hero to much of North American hockey culture,[3] Cherry perpetuates a standard for masculinity that embodies the mentality evidenced in the writings of Schoenberg, Raphael, Fasteau and Simpson. With Don Cherry as an unofficial spokesperson for Canadian hockey, it is not surprising that the manner in which masculinity is perceived and expressed by the players themselves is problematic.

"Homosociality" in Professional Hockey

In professional hockey, an exclusively male environment helps shape and define perceptions of masculinity. Hockey players are immersed in behaviour that reinforces a pre-existing construction of masculinity that denies the indeterminacy of gender. My understanding of this context comes from my own experiences as a former Junior and university hockey player; a series of interviews I conducted with both current and former professional hockey players; and from the ethnographic investigation I have been conducting with a professional hockey team since October of 1996. Attempting to get these men to offer information about the construction of masculinity was, to say the least, difficult. I was concerned that the men I interviewed would respond negatively to questions that might portray them unfavourably. In addition, as a former hockey player, I found it difficult addressing issues that would not be deemed problematic for an "insider." Quite honestly, I did not want to give the impression to these people that I had changed, and that they could no longer approach me in the manner they once did. As a result, much of my questioning is filled with false starts and repetition, capturing the awkwardness I felt asking them what it meant for them "to be a man."

I quickly opted for a covert line of questioning, which focused more on the players' daily routines and particular comfort levels. I simply tried to get the men to discuss their feelings about living within this exclusively male

3. On an episode of *Life and Times* that aired on the CBC February 9, 1997, host Gary Pinsent says that Don Cherry's "outrageous style seems to be working. Every Saturday night during the hockey season, about two million people tune into hear what he has to say."

environment. I felt a more indirect means of acquiring information was necessary in order to acquire the sensitive material I was seeking. While remaining honest to my informants, I decided to use the basic paradigm developed by David Whitson. In his essay "Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity", he proposes two basic concepts: first, those in sport who establish themselves in "forceful and space-occupying ways" learn "to associate such behaviour with being a man"; and second, that "sport as a 'male preserve' has served as an important site in the construction of male solidarity" encouraging "men to identify with other men and provides for the regular rehearsal of such identifications" (21). I decided I would begin by simply asking the men to offer any information that would help elucidate this concept of "the male preserve."

The focus of the interviews consisted of the players relating to me a typical day as a professional hockey player. While the times and locations of the events described by the players varied with each interview, Alex[4] delineates a daily routine that consistently represents the routines offered by all of the other men:

> Okay, well, on an off day, we'll get up around nine. Go to the rink, practice for about an hour. After practice we usually do a little, uh, either the bike or do some weights. After that, go out and have lunch. And we don't have a game that night, usually some of the guys will get together and go see a movie or something; that's about it. So that's pretty simple. And on a game day, we'll get up around eight. We have pre-game skate at nine — that lasts for about half an hour. Then we'll go back home at around noon and have a pre-game meal — which is usually pasta. Then we have about a two-hour nap. Get up around four. Go to the rink, get there at five. Have our game at seven-thirty. Uh that's usually over around ten-thirty. Then we usually go out and have a couple of beers. Then go home (Interview one).

Alex never refers to himself in the singular, emphasizing that the players' daily routines consist of a rigid structure that focuses entirely on the group. Any success the team achieves depends on its working as a unit: the players are merely components of a greater whole. Individuality is detrimental to the team's success; coaches thus encourage a group atmosphere.[5]

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4. In order to acquire information that was at times personal and sensitive, I guaranteed complete anonymity for all of the men interviewed. Therefore I have replaced the players' real names with pseudonyms.
5. During the playoffs, Mike Keenan (former coach of the St. Louis Blues) has the players put up in hotels at home and away, dictating a communal existence for as long as the team remains competing. It should be noted that the players generally agree with this tactic and enjoy the unity.

Considering the amount of time these men spend together as a group, it is not difficult to see how a group identity would override any individual reference.

The extended periods of time these men stay together as a team versus time spent with the family even further illustrates the significance of team unification. Even married team members are expected by their coaches to spend long periods of time with the team, as Carl indicates in the following discussion:

> **Robidoux**: Okay, would even the married guys, though, spend most of their time with the guys, do you think? Or would it be more with their family do you think?
>
> **Carl**: Uh I think [*pause*] —
>
> **Robidoux**: Like throughout that twenty-four hour time span?
>
> **Carl**: Probably more with the guys on the team. Predominantly — I bet you eighty percent of the time would be spent with the guys on the team. (Interview three)

In effect, the family at home is replaced by the family that is provided through the hockey organization, as one player states:

> But, it's a family atmosphere. I mean a lot of guys, you know, you're always together; you're always doing something. So, I mean there's not too many times where you're lonely (Interview 5).

Another player, who is currently contemplating retirement after playing in the NHL for fifteen years, said to me, "I have two daughters that live in Minneapolis all the time. And you know, last season I didn't see them for eight straight months" (Interview 6). He was still having difficulty, however, deciding who he was going to place first in his life, his family or his team:

> And you know, it comes to a point, do I still want to [*pause*] put it, you know, [*pause*] do I still want to put hockey before my family, or do I want to put my family before my hockey career? (Interview 6).

The commitment these players are required to make to their teams is profound, yet instead of resisting these demands the players generally appear to revel in this "homosocial" environment.

The concept of homosociality is especially useful for considering the male preserve of professional hockey. The term signifies same-sex interaction, but as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts, it does not connote homosexual relations:

> "Homosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual" (*Between Men* 1).

The distinction between "homosocial" and "homosexual" is an important distinction which directs us to the inherently separative experience of homosociality. Sharon R. Bird points out that it does not only "promote segregation between women and men", but it also "promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and nonhegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups" (121). As a result, the tightly woven infrastructure of professional hockey legitimizes its own existence by "supporting meanings associated with identities that fit [its own] hegemonic ideals" while "suppressing meanings associated with nonhegemonic masculine identities" (Bird 1996:121). What deserves further investigation, then, is the manner in which the players actually identify with their homosocial environment.

I began by asking the men what kind of atmosphere exists in a typical dressing room. Carl responded:

> I know in all the dressing rooms that we, that I played in, we all had TVs and stereo systems in them. I know one thing, we uh, after a lot of practices, we used to watch *Cheers* in the dressing room. But we looked forward to it, you know, watching it all the time as a whole team. . . So I think the dressing room was kind of sacred to us as a team. (Interview three)

Similarly, Don describes the new setting that presented itself with the new stadium built for the N.H.L. franchise in which he currently plays:

> Well, when the facility permits itself. Like the new [*reference to his home rink*] has got a big place with, TV room, weight room. Like it would be very easy to spend half a day there. And that's done most times now. You know, just hanging around, and talking — and what not (Interview four).

Bob extends his description to imply a solipsistic existence, which functions at a purely esoteric level:

> Yeah, well, I don't know. I think, the hockey — first of all is sort of — I mean within a cocoon, that, that shields him from the world's realities... Then uh, I don't know, again, you're part of the group, and that group develops, sort of develops its own, values and its own style of life. And uhm, anyone who doesn't conform with those values [*laughing*] or that style of life is seen as an outsider. And there is really no, you know, there

> is no need, or there is no need to hang out with people outside of that circle, because they simply don't share, you know, how you want to — how you want to live your life at that time (Interview two).

When asked what kind of lifestyle he desired at this point in time, Bob responded with what he described as being a typical "jock existence":

> I mean, you know, the jock, obviously. Uh, you know, the athlete guy who doesn't necessarily have to excel in school. And uhm, who's got to be smooth with the ladies of course. And so I mean again, you're really falling within the clichés there. But I mean, you know, a jock is athletic. Doesn't really care much about school [*laughs*], and tries to pick up girls. That's basically it. And then goes out to bars. (Interview two)

The style of life that is being expressed is a pleasure-driven, carefree existence that is made possible both through their celebrity status in society, and the group which reinforces this behaviour by acknowledging it as normal and expected.

Each of the men is describing scenarios that they appear to enjoy and value, which quite logically serve as focal points in their lives. The affinity the players feel toward their homosocial environment is reinforced by Alex's matter-of-fact response to my question, what he "enjoyed most about playing professional hockey?": to be "Hanging out with the guys" (Interview One). The celebrity status, the exorbitant salaries, the thrill of the game, the opportunities to travel and meet new people do not bring Alex the joy that he derives from simply being part of the group. It is evident, then, that the pleasure these players receive from the consistent male companionship serves "as an important site in the construction of male solidarity" encouraging "men to identify with other men and provides for the regular rehearsal of such identifications" (Whitson 1990:21). Unlike the modern male Raphael describes, who is struggling to discover a masculine identity, the hockey player is seen to be receiving solace existing within this predefined structure. Furthermore, in place for the players are traditions of behaviour that are made "somewhat normative" through the extended periods of time they spend together as a group (Katz 1995:167). One player refers to life as a hockey player (jock) as a "stereotype" of which not only the *players*, but also the *general public* are cognizant. With roles that are predetermined, the players can simply assume a "desired state of existence" unfettered by many of the concerns and complexities of life outside of this realm or, more accurately, "cocoon that shields him from the world's realities" (Interview 2).

Expressions of Masculinity

It is undeniable that hockey is a sport that involves intense physical competition. Bodies undergo enormous physical punishment for the common goal of winning: players are consistently dealt bone-crushing body checks; they put their bodies in front of pucks moving at speeds exceeding a hundred miles an hour; and fighting often occurs to establish a solid physical presence. The sheer brutality of the sport is articulated by George, who describes what goes through his mind before entering into a physical confrontation with his opponent:

> The thought I often put in my mind [before getting into a fight] would be that someone is trying to take money and food from my family. By engaging in a fight and proceeding to physically beat me up they would starve my family. I think this out of all the things would motivate anyone (Interview 7).

These intensely physical aspects of the game require certain qualities from the players that are not necessary outside of a sporting context. Therefore, the very existence of sport provides what Ray Raphael calls a "public arena, a ready-made structure, in which we hope to validate our worth" (110). As superficial as these structures appear to be to those on the outside, for the group members who exist in what Bob called a "cocoon," the sense of validation is quite real. Each day, the players engage in highly demanding physical competition which is celebrated by thousands of screaming fans, reinforcing their successes and failures, and hence, publicly validating their performances as men. By simply performing their occupational demands, the players are fulfilling the perceived qualities of masculinity and ultimately establishing, at least esoterically, their worth as men.

The traditional behaviour that is inherited with each new generation of hockey players is structured around ideals of physical superiority and dominance which Michael Messner argues has "played a key role in the construction and stabilization of a male-dominant, heterosexist system of gender relations" (16). Recognizing this hyper-masculine model of masculinity becomes even more intriguing, however, when we consider that much of the players' behaviour outside of the actual context of the game runs counter to this superior, macho male image that is initially evident. The lack of overt masculine expression appears somewhat confusing if we consider Stanley Brandes's discussion of men in Monteros, Spain:

> Each man in Monteros, as elsewhere in the world, has to determine in what ways he is different from or similar to women ... Men are preoccupied with

> behaving in a masculine manner and with determining in whatever new situation might arise how their reactions should vary from women's (6).

In contrast to the men of Monteros, both privately and publicly the players express themselves in a manner that initially appears to subvert the dominant male image. Alex provides us with a useful example.

At one point in his career Alex was labelled by *TSN (The Sports Network)* as one of the top five scariest men in the NHL.[6] As an "enforcer"[7] in professional hockey, this particular individual is forced to face the possibility of losing a fight and subsequently losing his value as an intimidating force on the ice. Every night his hyper-masculine role is put to the test, and as Marc D. Weinstein *et al* point out, this role is precarious:

> While demonstrating control over an opponent is a method of earning respect from adversaries, backing down is a way of losing it. A player is expected to fight in order to earn respect (837).

Because Alex was well aware that I knew the lore surrounding him as a professional hockey player, he did not need to establish any more of a masculine identity than he had already established through his on-ice performances. Instead, like the other men interviewed, he downplayed the tough, macho exterior he displays on the ice. At one point he stated: "Well, yeah, people who first meet me who don't know me just think I'm the same person on the ice, but I'm not. So, I guess they expect me to be loud, and aggressive and stuff. But, I'm not" (Interview one). While it is true that he assumes a different on-ice personality (I have known him for about seven years) the fact that he does not feel the need to perpetuate such an image off the ice is consistent with the behaviour of other players.

Alex, and the other players I interviewed, display an artificial process of emasculation. I use the term "artificial" here because this emasculating process is essentially a paradox: it is a means of maintaining a definitive masculine identity within the group. I asked Alex if he received special status being a hockey player, and he responded, "Yeah a little bit, but nah — I don't know — if you're a star, yeah, but if you're a slug no" (Interview one). Because this individual has throughout his career played a defensive style of game that is highly valued on the team, but often overlooked by the public, he comfortably acknowledges his "lunch-bucket" status. The metaphor "slug" connotes both mindlessness and insignificance, yet simultaneously signifies perseverance and durability. What is taking place here is similar to what

6. A formal reference is withheld here in order to maintain my informant's anonymity.
7. The term "enforcer" is used here to signify a player whose primary role is to intimidate the opposite team while simultaneously protecting the more finesse players on his team.

anthropologist Thomas Dunk observes in his study of male working-class culture in Thunder Bay, Ontario. During an annual lob-ball tournament (a modified softball game), Dunk recognizes that the men express their masculinity in paradoxical fashion:

> In the context of the lob-ball game, professional baseball players serve as a model; perhaps more than other professional athletes, they exude a casual air which is echoed in the Boys' [the men from Thunder Bay] style of movement. A great deal of effort is put into appearing casual. One does not want to give the impression of being too eager or of trying too hard (75).

Like Alex's, this artificial complacency expressed by the "Boys'" behaviour actually resonates with subtle expressions of esoteric masculine validation. He later states that "popularity is partly based on being good at a wide range of practical skills and physical activities without *seeming* to work at them" (75, emphasis added). As a result, these men successfully confirm their identities through artificial self-deprecation.

In the same interview with Alex, he says that professional hockey has stunted his development as an adult. It is interesting to learn later, however, that avoiding adulthood does not seem to pose a problem for him:

> You're playing a game for a living: you're never serious and you're with a bunch of guys who think exactly the same as you do. You never really have to grow up. So I think it makes you regress instead of progress. (Interview one)

Personal regression does not appear to be of great concern to him, since when I asked what he disliked most about hockey, he was unable to come up with an answer: "What do I dislike most? Uhm, [*pause and then laughs*] That's a tough one. Actually, I like everything about it" (Interview one). This particular individual was able to assert a level of self-confidence and security by openly directing me to weaknesses that are in fact deemed positive qualities (at least by hockey players). This is a paradoxical pattern that also unfolds through more physical actions.

For example, Carl began describing different forms of physical interaction done quite deliberately in the public eye. This exchange of dialogue began when I asked if and how the players behaved differently outside of their occupational environment:

> **Carl:** Let's see, how would I put this? This is kind of weird. You kind of will think like you're gay sometimes.
>
> **Robidoux:** [*I laugh and try to put him at ease*] Don't worry about that.

Carl: You kind of grab the guy's ass or something like that in public — you didn't really care kinda thing eh. But we didn't really care what people thought of us anyway. So I don't really think it changed too much, no.

Robidoux: Actually that would be something that I didn't touch on. When you grab a guy's ass or whatever —

Carl: Or grab a guy's nuts or something like that. You'd always have fun doing shit like that.

Robidoux: And why could behaviour like that happen? I mean, like why could you do that?

Carl: Because you knew the guy so well. Like uh, [*pause*] I don't think I ever — you talked about this before — but I don't think I have any schoolboy friends that I could do that with I don't think. I got a couple of very close friends that I never went to school with, as like my brothers or cousins or whatever, but you know, that we used to fool around like that with, but the only other guys I could ever do that with would be guys on the hockey team that you knew so well, and intimately, and uh — intimately like I don't mean like uh —

Robidoux: Yeah, yeah. No that's okay.

Carl: You know, inside-and-out kind of thing (Interview 3).

All of the players either alluded to or outright discussed the intimacy that was present in their inner group relationships. Don relates the high level of intimacy to the players' ability to open up to one another:

> But, I think the main thing is just, is just opening up. You know, saying — just speaking about stuff you wouldn't normally speak about to anyone. And as soon as you open yourself up by saying that, you automatically become closer to that person (Interview four).

And while this explains how grabbing another man's testicles is allowed, it does not necessarily explain *why* grabbing another individual's genitalia is an accepted form of expression. All the players indicated that they could say and do anything around the "boys", which was what made their relationships as tight as they are. Why, then, is this specific outlet of expressing intimacy employed as consistently as it is?

It must be stated here that grabbing another male's genitals is a multivalent gesture, capable of withstanding a multiplicity of interpretations. As in reading all cultural texts, we are forced to interpret meaning through our own perceptions:

> perception itself is an act of ideation, if by ideation we mean the inferring of a world from a set of assumptions (antecedently held) about what it must be like. To put it another way, mediated access to the world is the only access we ever have (Fish 1981:10).

In this example of mock sexual interaction, a perspective that is growing more popular is to read this behaviour as expressions of latent homosexuality and/or homophobia.[8] While I do not want to contest that the professional hockey environment is undoubtedly homophobic, I feel it is important to resist reading this behaviour as sexual desire. I concur that this text lends itself well to such a reading, and is likely true in individual cases, but, this reading refuses to acknowledge the voices of the actual individuals involved. If we believe the majority of these players, who claim to be heterosexual, are in fact heterosexual, the behaviour being expressed may be (and I would argue is) signifying something other than sexual attraction.

It is here that I believe a more useful interpretation can be supplied if we consider this behaviour in terms of the existing paradoxical pattern suggested thus far. It is safe to assume that the act of grabbing another male's testicles or buttocks indicates either mock or serious homosexual activity. In addition to intimacy being expressed, I feel the players are similarly expressing their desire to fulfil the macho image that is expected of them as hockey players. By employing this tactic, however, the players are once again performing in a manner that undermines the strictly heterosexual notion of masculinity, yet their masculinity remains in check by complying with this behaviour. It is only logical that in order for a player to grab another male's genitalia, a trust must have already been established regarding, not only his status within the group, but his "victim's" as well. The fact they "grab a guy's ass" in public further establishes this idyllic level of security in themselves as men, thus falling into the paradox of maintaining masculinity by superficially assuming a role that subverts the tough, macho exterior that is in reality being expressed. As opposed to the men Brandes studies in Monteros, professional hockey players are able to assert a masculine image that is maintained through the very nature of their occupation. The need, then, to maintain a hyper-masculine exterior does not *appear* to be critical to them as men, yet the desire to express "in what ways [they are] different from or similar to women" is still very real (Brandes 1980:6). Therefore, the pattern basically consists of the players *artificially* removing their masculine exteriors to downplay any need to validate their status as men.

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8. See such works as Alan Dundes's article "Into the Endzone" and Peggy Reeves Sanday's more recent exploration of fraternity hazing rituals in *Fraternity Gang Rape*.

An Evaluation of the Homosocial Environment

According to Ray Raphael, a well-defined structure that definitely reaffirms a male identity will produce highly functional men who escape the fate of other modern males who are "consumed by childish narcissism and troubled by sex-role conflict . . . condemn[ing] themselves to the Never-Never Land of perpetual adolescence" (16). While Raphael's own "masculine-intact wonderland" sounds disturbingly idealistic, when listening to the players describe their existence within their exclusively male environment, a similarly Utopian tone resonates:

> **Bob**: Oh yeah! I mean, I was by far the closest to _ when I played for the _ simply because, I also lived with the guy. So I mean he was almost, you know, he was two years older, and I know I am sort of straying off your questioning here, Mike, but I mean he was almost a brotherly figure so to speak. So I mean, it was almost, you know, it almost transcended the fact that we played hockey together. He was almost, you know, a brother (Interview two).

and:

> **Don**: There certainly is. You know I've played with guys in the past, that for two or three years, and sure, you know, I might be lucky to see them for two or three days a year on a good year. But they'll always, you know, for that one or two years, they were someone that you just hang out with constantly. That you could speak, you know about anything, and freely. And you know, not worry about it going any farther than that. And it was just like a place where you could release. And, vice-versa for, you know, other guys. You know, it seems like, it seems like every player — or pretty well every player — has someone on a team that they're a little bit more tighter to than the other guys. And you know, maybe there's two or three guys, but there's always a little bit tighter of a group that would do anything, whether it was on the ice or off the ice (Interview four).

All the players clearly indicated that through hockey they experienced personal relationships that exceeded mere friendship to more of a brotherly kind of relationship. And while these relationships appear to be both genuine and appealing, an inherent problematic exists that potentially poses a serious danger to a player's personal development.

The inherent problem within this community is also what provides the illusion of contentment for the players. What it means to be a man in professional hockey is devoid of any confusion: the tougher you are, the more you drink, the more women you pick up, the better man you are. The player who is successful in all three of these categories, yet appears not to care about any of them, is the ultimate model of masculinity. The obvious problem,

however, is that while the players know what is expected of them, anything that is not part of this rigid definition is simply not tolerated. One player may take pleasure in fulfilling these traditional expectations, while another who does not fit into this mould may suffer terribly, either forcing himself to assume this macho behaviour, or, rejecting it and facing the scrutiny of an intolerant group. Jackson Katz explains:

> there is evidence that many men are uncomfortable with other men's bragging about sexual exploits, dislike men's preoccupation with commenting on women's bodies, and misperceive the extent of other men's sexual activity. These men may belong to a "silent majority" who keep their discomfort to themselves rather than express disagreement or intervene in an environment which they perceive as unsympathetic (166).

As has been stressed, professional hockey players receive validation for their physical efforts not only from within, but also from an adoring public. They often receive great recognition for their roles as athletes and celebrities, and from an early age are privileged in North American culture. Those that do not fulfil these "standards of excellence" are generally perceived negatively by the players, as they undermine the intensely heterosexual image propagated in professional hockey. This would explain Don Cherry's attempt to ridicule an individual because of a name that for some reason he interpreted as signifying homosexuality. Hence, this homosocial environment can properly be perceived as the inherently discriminatory group that it is.[9]

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have tried to provide insight into the manner in which gender identities are constructed in the gender-specific realm of professional hockey. Unlike Ray Raphael, who looks to a single, absolute image of masculinity to alleviate much of the difficulty men go through in this era of gender ambiguity, it becomes apparent that *absolute* gender construction limits human interaction and subsequent experience. As a result, the security a particular group receives from perceiving itself as homogeneous makes outside involvement not only unnecessary, but potentially threatening. Alex succinctly articulates his experience within this exclusively male group when he states: "Guys are guys, no matter where they are" and, "I find it's always easier to deal with guys than with women [*quietly chuckles*]" (Interview one). His statement captures the comfort the players receive existing within these rigid

9. Here, I use the term "discriminatory," which has taken on much greater significance since reading Pauline Greenhill's book *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario.*

boundaries, while simultaneously illustrating the severe limitations the players face immersed in their own closed environment.

The process of gender construction is delineated here through the players' behaviour that reinforces a traditional patriarchal model. In an occupation such as professional hockey, where its very nature embodies the spirit of what is believed to be male, the players are immediately recognized as men. What is left for these males is to perpetuate this masculine identity through the more informal processes of their work (which includes the time they stay together as a team). Unfortunately, the closed environment of professional hockey maintains a male image that is completely intolerant to anyone who does not fit within these boundaries. Their perceptions of those outside of their distinctive male model are essentially not male, and deemed as "other." Group cohesion is threatened by the influence of the "other"; thus, interaction remains limited to group members. The players are ensconced in a discriminatory environment that guarantees the breeding of a pre-existing system of values and beliefs. As a result, these players thrive on a continual process of reinforcement and validation, yet it is precisely this comfort zone that prohibits the men from sufficiently evolving into a more insecure contemporary era.

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Interviews

Alex. Male: Professional hockey player. 28 years old. Interview conducted April 28, 1996.

Bob. Male: Former Ontario major junior and university hockey player. 26 years old. Interview conducted April 28, 1996.

Carl. Male: Former professional hockey player. 29 years old. Interview conducted April 30, 1996.

Don. Male: Professional hockey player. 26 years old. Interview conducted May 1, 1996.

Eugene. Male: Professional hockey player. 23 years old. Interview conducted November 11, 1996.

Frank. Male: Professional hockey player. 37 years old. Interview conducted December 13, 1996.

George. Male: Professional hockey player. 25 years old. Interview conducted February 12, 1997.