

Defensive and Inclusive Masculinity

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This research uses sixty-eight in-depth interviews of collegiate male cheerleaders and ethnographic fieldwork from four selected cheerleading teams to examine the construction of masculinity among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain. Previous studies maintain that a hegemonic process of masculine dominance and submission (Connell, 1995) influences most heterosexual men in feminized arenas to bolster their masculinity through the approximation of defensive masculine requisites, including the expression of homophobic and antifeminine-acting attitudes so that being a man is predicated in not being like a woman or gay man (Davis, 1990; Messner, 1992). This is something often referred to as *hegemonic masculinity*.

Examinations of feminized terrain have consistently shown men to approximate this form of masculinity, and to justify their transgression as consistent with hegemonic expectations (Adams, 1993; Anderson, 2005; Davis, 1990; Klein, 1993). For example, men who occupy feminized space are quick to defend their transgressions, maintaining that they have not transgressed masculine acceptability, rather that the space has been inappropriately gendered. Or, if men do acknowledge the feminine underpinnings of their field, they attempt to select a particular role within that space and define it as masculine (Davis, 1990; McGuffey and Rich, 1999). Accordingly, heterosexual male cheerleaders have been shown to emphasize that certain tasks within cheerleading (such as lifting women above their heads) are masculine, believing women lack the strength to perform these tasks as well as men. Conversely, they designate other tasks (such as erotic dancing) to be exclusively feminine (Davis, 1990; Hanson, 1995).

This research shows, however, that men in collegiate cheerleading today exhibit two contrasting and competing forms of normative masculinity, each supported by organizational and institutional culture and each with near-equal membership. The first category of masculine performance is labeled as *defensive*. The men categorized into this group are shown to perform

masculinity in a manner consistent with previous studies of men in feminized terrain: they attempt to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity, largely by devaluing women and gay men (Adams, 1993; Davis, 1990; Hanson, 1995). The second category of masculine performance is labeled as *inclusive*. The men in this group view defensive masculinity as undesirable and therefore do not aspire to many of its tenets. Particularly important to the study of men in feminized terrain, this research shows that inclusive masculinity is based less on homophobia and antifemininity than defensive masculinity.

Defensive Masculinity

During the first day of cheerleading, Randy (a college senior) instructed the younger men about how to be masculine while still being a cheerleader. “Remember that we do things better; we pick up on things faster than women do, so don’t rub that in by telling them.” He added, “When you are out in the field you have to portray a masculine image. When you are on the field, you must be the king of masculinity. We don’t care what your sexual orientation is...but when you are here you have to be masculine.”

Randy’s talk illustrates the institutional and cultural attitudes of masculinity, homophobia, and sexism among men categorized as belonging to the defensive group. This speech, in some variation, is traditional for veteran male cheerleaders to give to new men in what I am calling “the Defensive Cheerleading Association.” It is something they call “guy talk,” and it best exemplifies defensive masculinity because it maintains that men should strictly avoid activities culturally determined to be feminine and portrays women as less intelligent and less athletic than men. The form of masculinity promoted in Randy’s speech also subjugates homosexuality and sends a message to gay men that to be accepted they must downplay their

sexuality and act in accordance with dominant notions of defensive masculinity (Anderson, 2005; Connell, 1995; Messner, 2002). Thus, similar to previous investigations of men in feminized terrain—and synonymous with the findings of marginalized men in masculinized terrain—this study found that the defensive group of men in collegiate cheerleading attempted to mitigate and justify their transgression into feminized terrain (Anderson, 2005; Davis, 1990; Messner, 1992).

Those who valued defensive masculinity often relied on the same identity management techniques discussed in previous investigations of collegiate cheerleading (Davis, 1990; Hanson, 1995). Namely, they maintained that their role within the sport was consistent with defensive expectations of masculinity and that the feminized nature of their terrain was falsely attributed. Daren said, “I know that people don’t think that this is a masculine sport, but I challenge them to throw a girl up in the air and then catch her as she falls. Besides, the original cheerleaders *were* men.” Daren, like many men in cheerleading, postulates that not only is cheerleading a sport in which men and women are polarized into masculine and feminine roles, but that it is also a sport that requires men to be “really” masculine. “Yeah, most of the guys are *really* masculine. . . . We aren’t a bunch of fairies out here dancing in skirts.”

In addition to the maintenance of sexist attitudes, many of the men categorized as belonging to the defensive group also expressed varying degrees of homophobia. While this was sometimes found in overt expressions, it was most often expressed covertly. Perhaps much of this group’s homophobic and/or heterosexist sentiment was used to challenge cultural assumptions that male cheerleaders are gay. Indeed, it is common for heterosexual men to confront (or displace) accusations of homosexuality with homophobia (Anderson, 2005; McGuffey and Rich, 1999; Messner, 1992; Plummer, 2001), and these men certainly found

themselves inundated with homosexual suspicion. However, the reduction of cultural homophobia (Loftus, 2001) and the increased presence of openly gay men in sport (Anderson, 2005) seems to have made the expression of homophobia somewhat outmoded, even among many members of the defensive group. The expression of homophobia is therefore largely accomplished through covert mechanisms of heterosexism. One such manner comes in the form of *defensive heterosexuality*.

Defensive heterosexuality is characterized by the expressive signaling of heterosexuality through a variety of repeated mechanisms. For example, the most common narrative heterosexual male cheerleaders used to explain their transgression into feminized space was a well crafted and collectively constructed story about men lusting for their female teammates. One male cheerleader said, “Yeah, there are all these hot chicks in cheerleading. That is why I came out for the team.” Another said, “Who wouldn’t want to be out here with all these beautiful women?” The story was common: so compelled to be around hot women, heterosexual male cheerleaders were sexually drawn to the feminized arena of cheerleading. Accordingly, for the defensive men in this study, masculinity is constructed within well-established feminist findings (Chodorow, 1978; David and Brannon, 1976; Frye, 1983; Kimmel, 1994; Lorber, 1994; Plummer, 2001; Pronger, 1990): namely, that to be a “real man,” one must not be like a woman and one must not be gay. Most of the men in the defensive group stressed their athleticism and their masculinity, and they attempted to distance themselves from acting feminine or being perceived as gay. They justified their transgression into feminized terrain by challenging the feminine attributes of the arena and by claiming that their particular tasks (e.g., holding women above their heads) were inappropriately labeled as feminine.

Performing Inclusive Masculinity

With their competition finished, dinner eaten, and the movie over, a group of seven men (five straight and two gay) walked back to their hotel. Howie said, “Time for some drinking games. I’ve invited over the guys from Lincoln.” When asked if he was worried that the cheerleaders from the other team might think him gay since he was not only sharing a room with a gay man, but also sharing a bed, he responded, “No. Why would I?”

After an hour of drinking games, one of the heterosexual men said, “Hey guys, do you want to see if coach will drive us to a club?” Howie responded, “You guys know of any around here?” To which his best friend, Steve, answered, “There is Gold Diggers, the Slush House, and then of course there is the Phoenix; it’s a gay club.” Howie interrupted, “Let’s go there,” and the others agreed. When asked why they would rather go to a gay club than a straight one, Howie answered, “The vibe is better, the music is better, and there are still good-looking women, so why wouldn’t we want to go there?” When asked, “Aren’t you worried about being thought gay?,” the five heterosexual men shook their heads no and Howie asked, “Why would we?”

While there was not a universal position on homosexuality among men in the inclusive group (just as there was not in the defensive group), these men had few inhibitions about homosexuality. Their attitudes ran from tolerant to celebratory. Typical comments included, “I don’t care what people think of me” to “Why is it necessary to have a label?” One male cheerleader even said, “I used to go to gay clubs all the time, and then I actually got a job at a gay club. I got hit on all the time. It was flattering.” Still another said, “Why should I care? Why should people care if I’m straight?”

These attitudes are particularly unusual given that these men previously played high school football. “I used to hate gays,” one inclusive cheerleader told me. “But now I don’t care.

I've gotten over it." His teammate added, "Yeah, most of my teammates used to just hate gays. I mean, what football player doesn't?" Perhaps most telling, another cheerleader said, "To be honest with you, I used to be homophobic. I used to be one of the guys calling the cheerleaders on my high school team fags." He continued, "Now, I'm on the other side. I mean, I'm not gay, but others sometimes think I am because I cheer, and if that's what they want to think, I don't bother to try to tell them different."

Data suggests that this shift in attitude from homophobic to gay-friendly might be made possible for several reasons. First, gay male cheerleaders seem to have strong support from female and older male teammates. For example, Dan said, "Oh yeah, you learn not to be homophobic real quick. I mean, you can't be. The women and coaches in cheer would never stand for that." Another said, "I made some homophobic comment when I first joined, and one of the guys pulled me to the side and schooled me on it." Second, heterosexual men generally befriended at least one gay male teammate. Jeffrey, a fourth-year cheerleader, had never met a gay man before so he used to call guys he suspected gay "fags" but after joining cheerleading and meeting a gay friend, he says, "I'd never call him that."

A third possible reason for the shift in attitude is that institutional support has helped in shaping a new understanding of homosexuality. While overt homophobia was generally replaced with heterosexism in the Defensive Cheerleading Association, homosexuality and femininity among men was institutionally supported in what I am calling the "Inclusive Cheerleading Association." This has led many gay men who cheered in high school to self-select into colleges that compete for the Inclusive Cheerleading Association. Thus, there are more openly gay athletes in this association, and this makes it easier for closeted men to come out.

The heterosexual men classified as belonging to the inclusive group were not only less concerned with mitigating homosexual suspicion through homophobia and heterosexism, but they were also less concerned about associating with femininity. That is to say, men who subscribed to inclusive masculinity were far less concerned with the expression of femininity among other men. In fact, discussions of what behaviors were considered feminine or masculine often suggested a great deal of thought and critical thinking as to the nature of gender performance in the sport. Men in this group were willing, often eager, to participate in role-reversal activities otherwise stigmatized by men in the defensive group. Some men in the inclusive group agreed that certain behaviors were understood to be feminine but displayed irreverence for such essentialist thinking. Other men questioned the usefulness of categorizing things as gendered. Men from one inclusive squad even wore sleeveless shirts that zipped up the back (something associated with women's uniforms in this sport). Many willingly embraced the coded femininity of a number of cheerleading tasks. In this respect, men in this group were shown to be less concerned about performing consistently with some of the tenets of traditional masculinity, challenging the bifurcation of gender.

Structure and Agency in Constructing Masculinity

Individuals are not free to construct simply any version of identity that they desire; identity construction is influenced and constrained by a number of micro and macro social processes (Acker, 1990; Messner, 2002; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Accordingly, it is no surprise that although most cheerleaders join their teams unaware of the masculine ethos that their team subscribes to, the men end up mostly ascribing to that team's gendered perspective.

This highlights the power of the team, or the association in which the team belongs, in influencing individuals' gendered beliefs.

The Defensive Cheerleading Association institutionalizes masculinity along the lines of other masculinized team sports. It values a bifurcation of gender and views homosexuality as a threat to this polarization. In the maintenance of defensive masculinity, this cheerleading association uses covert and overt techniques to police masculine behaviors. For example, cultural norms stigmatize men (or entire teams) that perform in ways contrary to defensive masculine perspectives. Men who dance complicated or erotic choreography (similar to women) find that their showmanship lowers their team's score. Because of this, men move in a rigid fashion, leaving the hip-swinging and erotic choreography exclusively to women.

In the Inclusive Cheerleading Association, however, men are expected to dance as competently and erotically as women. Men often take center stage, thrusting their pelvises and caressing their bodies to the thunderous approval of the audience, while their female teammates wait on the side. In the Inclusive Cheerleading Association, men even throw other men into the air, the strictest taboo in the Defensive Cheerleading Association. One squad concluded their national championship routine in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association by having a man fly over a two-person high pyramid and land safely into the arms of four other men. The institutional variance of gender roles between these two associations is fiercely contested and politically charged. The Defensive Cheerleading Association even bans (for three years) any collegiate team that participates in an Inclusive Cheerleading Association event. In this manner, the Defensive Cheerleading Association relies on traditional tools of marginalization, stigmatization, and institutional punishment for associating with femininity. The Inclusive Cheerleading Association makes no such demands of its participants.

The two leading cheerleading associations also maintain near-opposite perspectives on homosexuality. Highlighting the institutional perspective on homosexuality in the Defensive Cheerleading Association, men who are out or who act in less than masculinized ways are equated with being unprofessional. Accordingly, it was harder to find openly gay cheerleaders in the Defensive Cheerleading Association. Similar to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy found among openly gay athletes in highly masculinized team sports (Anderson, 2005), their status was often privately recognized but not publicly discussed. Conversely, in many cases, gay members of the Inclusive Cheerleading Association talked more freely about their sexuality.

But just because a cheerleading association sanctions a particular version of masculinity does not imply that all the cheerleaders who belong to that governing body agree with this perspective. Some individuals and, in some cases, entire teams publicly protested their association’s gender paradigm.

The best example of organizational contestation in reformulating representations of institutionalized masculinity comes from participant observations of the Troubadours. Unlike the coaches of most teams of the Defensive Cheerleading Association, the Troubadours’ coaches made a decision to challenge the tough-guy image that their governing body esteems. One of the coaches told me, “Oh, I say to hell with all that macho stuff. We are just here to have fun, and if others don’t like us for who we are, to hell with them.” One of his athletes agreed, “Everyone here is like ‘that’s just stupid, acting so macho and stuff.’” His comments were supported by participant observations, which showed a great deal of physical intimacy (hugging and holding) between men on the Troubadours team

The gender rebellion the Troubadours exhibited in the Defensive Cheerleading Association made them highly ostracized by other Defensive Cheerleading Association teams,

despite the fact that the Troubadours hold five consecutive national championship titles in their division. Furthermore, the Defensive Cheerleading Association has recently responded to the Troubadours' embracement of femininity and homosexuality by removing points for the dance portion of cheerleading routines. One coach told me that this was a direct response to the fact that *some* judges had ceased to demerit the Troubadours for dancing in other-than-masculinized ways, suggesting that the institutional creed of this organization is contested by individuals as well as whole teams.

Likewise, not all teams that belonged to the Inclusive Cheerleading Association reflected an inclusive form of masculinity. Several teams competed in the style of the Defensive Cheerleading Association, even interrupting their high-energy and dynamic performances to yell cheers such as "go! fight! win!" to the crowd (something considered taboo in this association). Upon finishing an defensive-styled performance at the Inclusive Cheerleading Association's National Championship meet, one team even handed out Bibles to other teams. When asked why, one of the male cheerleaders said, "So others can see God's word." When asked, "See God's word on what?," he answered, "Well, like on homosexuality."

DISCUSSION

Previous investigations of masculine construction among men in feminized terrain have shown that hegemonic processes serve to stigmatize the expression of masculinity in ways that do not meet defensive perspectives (Davis, 1990). This is attributable to the hegemonic understandings of masculine construction that requires cultural and institutional punishment for those who fail to meet the mandates of the dominant form, in whichever form it currently exists. The hegemonic privileging of one form of masculine expression and the subordination of all others are

particularly salient among men in feminized terrain because these arenas have been shown to be more permissive of marginalized men than masculinized arenas (Connell, 1995).

The presence of feminized, gay, or otherwise marginalized men in feminized terrain has not, however, been shown to influence a significant number of men to challenge the dominant form of masculinity. In fact, just the opposite has been shown to occur. However, in this research, those who subscribed to inclusive masculinity were shown to behave in effeminate ways without experiencing social stigma. This group largely chose not to value whether people perceived them as gay or straight, masculine or feminine. In this respect, they were less (or not at all) defensive about their heterosexuality, and they regularly stated support for homosexuality. Because these men had a culturally positive association with homosexuality, homophobia ceased to be a tool of masculine marginalization. Conversely, homophobic expression was stigmatized among men in this group. In fact, the inclusive form of masculinity proposed by this group was the near-antithesis of defensive masculinity.

Men in the inclusive group also participated in tasks traditionally defined as feminine and supported women who performed tasks traditionally defined as masculine. This included allowing themselves to be tossed into the air (flying), standing atop the shoulders of others, wearing clothing defined as feminine, and dancing in the same erotic fashion as their female teammates. With the performance of these tasks, these men challenge the utility of binary thinking. Thus, about half the men in the world of collegiate cheerleading contested the masculine/feminine binary that previous studies have shown to be intensely policed.

What is significant with these findings is that about half the heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading were found to align themselves politically away from the defensive form of masculinity. They responded differently to their transgression than previous investigations of

men in feminized terrain. In fact, they resisted many of the tenets of defensive masculinity and constructed a normative form of masculinity based on inclusiveness. What is also new is that their inclusive definition of masculinity was institutionally supported by one of the two dominating cheerleading associations, as there was found to be a variance in the institutionalization of masculinity between the two dominating cheerleading associations that govern the sport.

The Defensive Cheerleading Association was shown to codify defensive masculine behaviors by penalizing those who perform in ways it deems feminine, while the Inclusive Cheerleading Association merited behaviors that break the traditional mode. Foucault (1976/1984) suggests that power must be understood as a multiplicity of factors emanating from individuals, organizations, and institutions. In this manner, men are not merely subject to institutional modeling on masculinity, they are simultaneously active in shaping institutional perspectives through their complacency or protest. Foucault's analysis of power seems fitting in describing gender construction in these cheerleading associations because, despite attempts toward universal solidarity, both associations experienced internal dissension from both individuals and organizations (teams).

I suggest that the emergence of inclusive masculinity characterizing a group with an institutionalized power and membership equal to those of defensive masculinity is the product of a number of influences. First, the increasing structural demands for originality and innovation in cheerleading routines has compelled the Inclusive Cheerleading Association to replace the "go, fight, win" mantra of yesteryear's cheerleading (Hanson, 1995) with a choreographic philosophy of "higher, faster, and more complicated." But this is not the sole or even the primary impetus for the creation of an inclusive form of masculinity. If this were the case, one might expect to see

men dance in feminized ways and then, when away from competition, return to defensive prescriptions of masculinity. This did not occur. [Observations confirm that men who exhibited inclusive masculinity during competition also expressed it while socializing away from competition. These men also self-reported a reconstructed understanding of homophobia and sexism in other social spaces (family, school, work), although these self-reports were not confirmed with observations.

Second, the research design provides evidence of a strong institutional influence on the construction of gender within collegiate cheerleading. While virtually all informants mentioned that as football players they displayed defensive notions of masculinity, those who attended a university with membership in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association substantially reformulated their masculine perspectives compared to men who attended a university belonging to the Defensive Cheerleading Association. Men who ended up at universities belonging to the Inclusive Cheerleading Association also exhibited a greater openness to homosexuality and feminine-acting men than men from teams belonging to the Defensive Cheerleading Association.

Because defensive masculinity is largely predicated on homophobia, this study also suggests the emergence of inclusive masculinity to be a product of the rapidly decreasing levels of cultural homophobia in American society (Laumann *et al*, 2004; Loftus, 2001). It is reasonable to suspect that if masculinity is based largely on homophobia, then as homophobia declines there might also be a change in the way masculinity is constructed and valued. Accordingly, even men in the defensive group reported they were *less* homophobic than they had been as football players.

Finally, the emergence of inclusive masculinity in this feminized arena might also be influenced by the athletes' introduction to the narratives and experiences of women and gay men

as teammates. Men in cheerleading, from both associations, reported that their relationships with women and gay men had helped them reconstruct their views on homosexuality and femininity among men, a finding that has implications for the sex-segregated manner in which competitive, institutionalized team sports are currently structured in North American society.

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