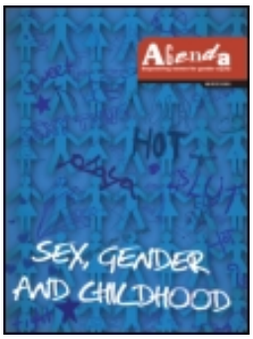


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# Soft boys, tough boys and the making of young sporty masculinities at a private boys' school

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# Soft boys, tough boys and the making of young sporty masculinities at a private boys' school

Barbara Bowley

## abstract

This *Briefing* looks at the ways in which sport plays an influential role in the social construction of hegemonic masculinity among a group of 13- and 14-year-old boys at an elite private boys' school. Because sport forms such a vital segment of school life for many boys and is riddled with masculinising associations, this study argues that sport serves as a means through which many boys can construct, negotiate and perform their masculinity in a process of identity formation in which sexuality is embedded. This data is collected from an ethnographic study and exploration into the construction of masculinities in a single sexed boys' school. The boys use participation in sport as part of their masculinising process by drawing on their bodies' sexualised and gendered power, and by subordinating femininity that they associate with boys who do not play sport or who lack sporting competencies. Boys' investment in sport is, therefore, highly sexualised and in the heteronormative school environment they confront the inequalities of the gender hierarchy which marks soft boys from tough boys. It is argued that in choosing which sports to play there is already pressure on boys to distance themselves from homosexuality. Whilst much of the focus in South Africa is about encouraging sports, this *Briefing* argues that boys' meaning of sport is both gendered and sexualised contributing to the making of unequal gender relations among boys as well as the uncritical acceptance of homophobia as normal in a private boys' school.

## keywords

Boys; sport; schools; masculinity; power; bodies and sexuality

## Introduction

> "Even at school and stuff…, the nerdy boys play hockey… they can play it because it really doesn't require much skill… also their bodies are soft… so they must play hockey… they can't play rugby… they're too soft" (John[1], Connaught High School, Interview, Durban, August 2012).

Sport plays a significant role in the lives of the majority of boys in South Africa and in particular of boys in well-resourced South African schools. Sport is not simply a past time, something recreational and fun, but is often the place where dominant masculinities are produced and relations of domination and subordination are constructed (Swain, 2006; Bhana, 2008). More importantly, South African boys only private schools regard sport as a major dimension of schooling (Morrell, 2001b). Emphasis is placed on boys participating in sport and being successful. While sport can be a place for bringing people together and making them feel part of a team, it is also a place where many are excluded due to lack of

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competence or skill. Sport thus becomes a place for reinforcing a gender hierarchy. Because many boys in South African schools and at Connaught High[2] (the school under study) in particular, take sport so seriously, there is a notable link between dominant masculinity, heterosexuality and sporty South African boys in schools. In the context of South Africa, which is condemned as the rape capital of the world, gender and gender inequalities need widespread exposure. Whilst some schools in South Africa, particularly township schools, have been given this exposure, the gendered lives in private schools are often missing (Morrell's [2001b] account of colonial masculinity is an exception). This study begins to address the ways in which gender and sexuality feature in and through boys' sport at private schools.

## Masculinities, schools and bodies

Research has recognised schools as a significant site where masculinities are formed, negotiated and constructed (Swain, 2004; Connell, 1995; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). Sport in schools has a traditional profile as being an important area for the "channelling and shaping of male attributes and desires" (Hickey, 2008: 147) and has at times been celebratorily hailed as an arena to foster productive and constructive opportunities for boys to interpret and construct their identity. Accordingly, because sport is considered to provide boys with "the quintessential manifestation of the masculine ethos" (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998: 60), by playing sport boys make choices about which sport to play, becoming socially visible and susceptible to the pressures to being cool, macho and a 'real boy'. Unfortunately, this also results in the exclusion of other boys as identities are constructed in relation to subordinate masculinities and femininities through the structuring of gender relations (Connell, 1995).

Boys, by playing sport, are both the objects and agents in performances and practices in which their bodies/identities become defined by others.

Hegemonic masculinity, the dominant masculinity, has been extensively theorised (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992) and many researchers draw on the concept of a dominant masculinity in understanding the gender hierarchy in the sexualisation of sport (Pringle, 2005). The hierarchical framework of Connell's hegemonic masculinity (1995) forms the backbone of this research. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as what it means to be a 'real' man, while all other masculinities are seen in relation to the dominant masculinity and are classified as inferior and not fully heterosexual (Skelton, 2000a). Masculinity and sexuality, and more specifically, heterosexuality are "embedded in the ways in which boys define, negotiate and consolidate their gendered selves" (Renold, 2007: 275). Since hegemonic masculinity is recognised as the dominant masculinity (Connell, 1995), the performances of gender are "inextricably tied to dominant notions of heterosexuality" (Renold, 2007: 276). The dominant and heterosexual masculinity is constructed in relation to women and hierarchically over femininities as well as other forms of masculinity (Swain, 2006) and reference by boys to other boys as girls or gay is a symbolic means of reinforcing this gender hierarchy. Sexual orientation has been identified as the "mainstay of male identity" (Person, 1989: 605) and boys use heterosexuality in defining their masculinity in order to distance themselves from any form of femininity. It is important to note that male sexuality is symbolic, meaningful and extensively linked to power (Plummer, 2005). The body, both in terms of making reference to the body and what the body can do, is central to this construction of gender and masculinity. As Connell (1995: 56) notes, "the body is inescapable in the construction of masculinity". Boys, by playing sport, are both the objects and agents in performances and practices in which their bodies/identities become defined by others (Swain, 2006). This is the chance for the boys to demonstrate their heterosexuality and also to belittle others who are not as competent at sport.

Unfortunately, in the hierarchy of competitive sports there are more "places for the unsuccessful than for the champions" (Connell, 1992: 741) and this is also the case of hierarchies of masculinities (Swain, 2006). Boys learn from an early age that if they do not fit in, nor are athletic enough to be accepted into this dominant group, they can be relegated to the group associated and linked to femininity (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). Thus, arguably when doing sport, boys purposefully and willingly negotiate their masculinity and their heterosexuality. The

boys therefore "are inscribed within discourses of heterosexuality as they 'do boy' through their sport" (Renold, 2007: 278).

Connell (1995) argued that participation in contact sports was an integral part of masculinity in groups in Australia and the same is applicable here in South Africa. This research goes further in that it states that playing contact sport at a top level does not guarantee hegemonic masculinity, power or acceptance. Just because you are a 'sporty boy', does not automatically define you as hegemonic and fuel heterosexuality, but rather that there are specific sports that divide and classify these young men: there exists a contest for hegemony (Connell, 1998). While the school, according to Connell (1989: 301) may not be the "key influence in the formation of most men", it is certainly a starting point in their lives. Because sport plays such a powerful role in the wider social definition of gender, by being good at sport at school, it starts boys on a journey of defining who is a real man and who is not manly enough (Hickey, 2008). Through this lens 'doing' sport is doing masculinity and contributes to understanding many boys' obsession with sport. This *Briefing* examines attitudes to sport in a private school to better understand the boys' sporting engagement in relation to masculinities and thus broader gender inequalities.

Research has been conducted that identifies sport as an integral part of the lives of 8- and 9-year-old black and white primary South African school boys and that by doing sport, the boys were claiming to be 'real boys' (Bhana, 2008). My research seeks to expand this body of research by focussing on year 8 when boys enter high school and argues that negotiating an identity and sexuality is critical to these boys' sense of self. Moreover, it is not simply about doing any sport but doing the 'right' sport in order to be seen by self and others, as a 'real man', powerful or as a 'genuine' heterosexual man. This is shown by the hierarchical ordering of sport (and thus masculinities) through which girls and other boys (subordinated as gay) are put down. Boys who show attributes of being fast, fit, strong and with the most skill, maintain the highest status amongst their peers (Swain, 2006). It is simply not good enough to be just a fine athlete in your sport: it must be the right sport.

## Background and methodology

The findings and analysis of this *Briefing* are based on qualitative, ethnographic research which examines sport and the construction of masculinities among young sporty boys. As noted above, there is a scarcity of research relating to private schools in South Africa in particular. The focus of this study is specific to private schools and the understanding of the construction of masculinity. Morrell's (2001b; 1998) research on the history of masculinity in private boys' schools highlighted the background and history of private schools in South Africa. This research considers the current day experiences of a small sample of boys in a private school and how they give meaning to sport, and in what ways this is gendered. The eight boys interviewed for this research were a group of successful, sports-playing year 8 boys at a single sex boys' private school in Durban. The sample crossed racial categorisation and most boys came from middle- to upper-class social and economic backgrounds. The boys themselves, their parents and the school gave consent for the interviews, as the boys were under age and needed parental consent. The boys also had the right to remove themselves from the study at any time. The boys were interviewed over the course of the year, as they participated in different sporting seasons and as they found their way in a new school during the year. My research with the boys required deep immersion in the life of the school and therefore enabled me to understand and critique the gender regime. The *Briefing* offers some insights into the thoughts and ideas the boys hold about sport, bodies, power and acceptance (Ricciardelli, Mc Cabe and Ridge, 2006) and the discursive techniques they used to negotiate issues of sexuality and heterosexuality (Renold, 2007) It argues that meaning attributed to sport is gendered and is achieved through interaction with the school and with other boys.

negotiating an identity and sexuality is critical to these boys' sense of self

## Injuries, bodies and hegemonic masculinity

The season is winter and the sports on offer at Connaught High are field hockey and rugby union. The boys are encouraged and expected to participate in at least one of these sports.

While Connaught High is an all-boys private school, unlike many others it is not steeped in tradition having only opened in 2002. Despite the school being relatively new, it is marketed for its sporting excellence. As the school has very distinct links to British tradition, the traditional sport for winter is considered to be rugby by most of the boys. This is demonstrated amongst the masters by visibly persuading boys to play rugby and this hierarchy of 'macho' heterosexuality appears to influence the boys and certainly the selection of sports among the year 8 boys interviewed. Because boys want to be accepted amongst the other boys and do not want show signs of weakness or be threatened (Plummer, 2005), making the right choice in sport is vitally important for their sense of security and approval from the other boys. Both field hockey and rugby are classified as good contact sports to play and as such it might be anticipated that their selection would enable acceptance within hegemonically masculine groups. Yet the boys hold clear ideas about which sport is more important and, in their words, "more manly". Hegemonic masculinity involves "hardness, sporting prowess and coolness" (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002: 77), and along with the hardness comes a risk of injuries and tough bodies. These masculine attributes such as physical strength, control and discipline are generally associated with high profile contact sports (Messner and Sabo, 1994). Lack of sporting prowess, strength or skill in sport tends to be equated to subordinate forms of masculinity and to be linked derogatorily to femininities. In the following excerpt from one of the interviews between two boys, one a field hockey player (Sean) and the other a rugby player (Pravesh) they weigh up which sport is tougher.

> Sean: "There are more injuries in hockey, so that makes it a real mans' sport… it's a tougher sport."
>
> Pravesh: "The only reason hockey gets more injuries is the sticks and balls and stuff… rugby has the real injuries as you risk your body. Rugby is all about body and physicality… it takes real men to play this game. Ja, every time you tackle someone, there is a possibility that you may injury yourself… that's what makes it far more manly… that's why it's the tougher sport" (Interview, Connaught High School, Durban, August 2012).

While Pravesh realises that every time he goes on to the rugby field, he runs the risk of injury, this seems to appeal to him for its association with being the sport of a 'real man'. Similarly, the rest of the boys interviewed, viewed the risk of injuries as an acceptable one and a sign of being tough. With the greater likelihood of injury comes a form of status that the rugby boys enjoy and exert over the hockey boys. It endorses them as hegemonically masculine. For Pravesh, injury makes the sport appealing and manly. Pravesh's bravado in front of his friends and fellow rugby players earns him approval indicated by many nodding heads and thumbs up. His response is consistent with other research findings (Messner, 1992; Philips, 1996) that being hurt during sporting contests is simply part of playing the sport. Messner (1992) points out that if boys accept the pain and injuries that come with sport, there are social rewards for doing this. By accepting the injury, they attain acceptance as manly in comparison to others. The nodding and approval from his peers is evidence of this. Boys' identities in terms of masculinity and sexual orientation are largely defined by what they do with their bodies (Swain, 2004). Masculinities are inextricably linked to their bodies and are brought into "existence through performance" (Swain, 2005: 337) and what the body does and can do, plays a significant role. As Sean is unwilling to expose his body to harsh tackles, he is positioned as less manly by his peers. The visible disdain for Sean from the other members of the interview group was manifest in the group in the shaking of their heads and looking sadly at Sean. As argued above, sports, and contact sports in particular, are key areas where bodies are experienced as weak or powerful (Gard and Meyenn, 2000). Body contact in sport was important to the boys being interviewed – the more body contact, the 'tougher' the sport was considered.

The one overriding characteristic of hegemonic masculinity revolves around "the physical prowess of the body" (Swain, 2005: 343) which is considered the "major bearer of masculine value and symbolism" (Morrell, 2001a: 8) and therefore the root of heterosexuality. The boys in the interviews

discussed the difference between field hockey and rugby. The hockey boys did not put their bodies on the line, but rather had sticks to defend themselves. The rugby boys had to throw their bodies on the line in the game. In the interview below, the boys consider their bodies, in connection with their sport:

> John: "Even at school and stuff the nerdy boys play hockey… they can play it because it really doesn't require much skill… also their bodies are soft… so they must play hockey… they can't play rugby… they're too soft."
>
> Simon: "At break we talk about the game and what happened – it lasts a few minutes, then we talk about other stuff."
>
> Researcher: "So what do you talk about?"
>
> Simon: "We talk about the tackles."
>
> Researcher: "Who made the big ones?"
>
> Simon: "Jono – he is little… but made massive tackles and David… he's the biggest of all of us… but never really made big tackles – he bounced boys" (Interview, Connaught High School, Durban, August 2012).

In the interview above, bodies play a crucial role in their masculinity and position in the hierarchy of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is maintained through certain bodily practices (Wellard, 2006) and here it is performed when making tackles on the field. "Making big tackles" and "bouncing boys", serve to make them seem more acceptable and powerful in the eyes of their peers. Even though Jono is seen as small on the field, in the eyes of his peers he deserves respect for putting his body on the line. He is powerful in the boys' eyes, despite his size. Unlike David, who is obviously big and strong and should have made big tackles, the boys seem disappointed in his contribution to the game, reflecting the huge value placed on displays of strength and aggression (Wellard, 2006).

## Prominent heterosexuality

While schools are seen as key social sites for the production of masculinity, they are also one of the more significant institutions where the formation of gendered selves takes place (Renold, 2006). Displays of heterosexuality are important to boys in the bolstering of masculine identity. When this heteronormative identity is threatened, it is seen as a weakness and they are vulnerable and open to ridicule.

> Paul: "Rugby boys jump on each other… its gay… you don't really want boys on top of you!"
>
> Sandiso: "Oh really, well, you have to be a real man to play rugby… most woman play hockey… so it's a girls sport… I think your hockey is gay… you play with the sticks and balls… you don't really put your bodies on the line."
>
> Researcher: "Why do you say gay, Paul? Do you mean gay as in homosexual?"
>
> Paul: "No, sis, not like that, mam… but like girly… you know… not manly."
>
> Researcher: "Then why not say like a girl? Why use gay?"
>
> Paul: "It is an easy word to use… it's what we all use" (Interview, Connaught High School, Durban, August 2012).

The conversation above has been often referred to as the 'fag discourse' (Pascoe, 2007). The boys use the terminology 'gay' in order to put the other sport (rugby) down. As the conversation continued, it became evident that the boys struggled to articulate why they used the term gay. The boys were vehemently opposed to the fact that it was used in a way of genuinely articulating their own form of homophobia, but suggested it was used in order for the sport to look less manly. When prompted and asked on their definition and usage of the word gay, the boys referred to gay as being the most like females (the worst form of being male) or, in other words, to femininity. Hence, the use of girls and girls' sport in the comparison of hockey and rugby players. The boys needed to prove that they are 'real boys' in ways that make them appear to be masculine, tough and therefore heterosexual (Epstein *et al*, 2001). In the process of masculine identity formation their construction of masculine requires disassociating or distancing themselves from association with the feminine to avoid the possibility of being perceived as weak or not 'a real boy'. This is indeed a form of homophobia that the boys found difficult to explain.

## Conclusion

> Pravesh: "I guarantee… if you go to any school in South Africa and ask for a vote

> they will choose rugby… not hockey… that's how you know it is a real sport… for real men."

The boys experience a variety of pressures as they enter high school and are expected to make a mark as heterosexual males, subscribing to values of the hegemonic masculinity. Gender power relations are involved in how they behave, what sport they participate in and how and whether they are accepted by other boys (Renold, 2007). Sport is far from being 'just a game' in the school situation (Skelton, 2000b). Playing sport does not mean boys are automatically accepted into the dominant or hegemonic group. They need to choose the right sport at their school in order to be fully accepted as a dominant heterosexual male. While both field hockey and rugby union are considered contact sports, hockey is seen by the boys to not involve as many injuries and is not 'contact enough'. Boys regularly have to draw on masculine sporting "discourses to distinguish between what is tough and manly and feminine and weak" (Hickey, 2008: 156). Contact boys' sports have excluded many boys' free participation in sport and as a result they forego "future understanding of their own bodies in relation to gender, their role in sport and indirectly their own physical and social bodily identities" (Wellard, 2006: 106). Being powerful, aggressive and competitive on the sports field is seen as synonymous with being masculine, while those who do not match up are associated with femininity in the heteronormative binary. Being unsporty or not boy enough are signs of weakness and vulnerability in the boys' male sexuality discourse.

It has been shown that the boys in the study, in order to show their masculinity, use words like gay to make the other boys feel less manly and reinforce a hegemonic heterosexuality that also works in the subordination of girls and women. Less manly masculinities are used by the boys to elevate themselves and make them feel more powerful. While the boys do not recognise their dissociation from the feminine directly as a form of homophobia, such narratives need to be flagged as they are used to "police and control the general behaviour of boys and their sexuality" (Swain, 2006: 17) and keep an oppressive gender hierarchy in place.

This *Briefing* endeavours to add to the current scholarly and popular debates relating to boys' masculinity, sport and power by looking at it within the context of elite private schools. There is a definite 'rite of passage' in the attempt to prove their identity with dominant masculinity in sport, and boys experience immense pressure in negotiating this path. In this process they engage with the dominant gender order where hegemonic masculinity is privileged over femininities and subordinate masculinities. Doing sport is doing masculinity. Doing masculinity at Connaught High is inextricably linked to doing sport. Scrutinising these both serves as a productive way of understanding the obsession that boys have with sport and how physical ability on the playing field is entwined with the construction of bodies as sexual and gendered.

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**Notes**

1. Pseudonyms have been used for all names.
2. Connaught High is a pseudonym for the boys' only elite private school situated in Durban, South Africa.

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**Interviews**

John, Connaught High School, Group Interview, Durban, August 2012.
Sean, Connaught High School, Group Interview, Durban, August 2012.
Pravesh, Connaught High School, Group Interview, Durban, August 2012.
Simon, Connaught High School, Group Interview, Durban, August 2012.
Paul, Connaught High School, Group Interview, Durban, August 2012.

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