



Varieties of Masculinity in Male Cheerleading

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A stratification hierarchy exists among men, with some forms of masculinity holding greater status than others. At the top is hypermasculinity, characterized by highly traditional gendered behavior, sexual conquest, competition and dominance, strength and athleticism, drinking and partying, and devaluing of all things feminine. Below this are various types of mid-range masculinity, where men acknowledge and incorporate some positive aspects of femininity, including fashion sense (metrosexuals), feelings (sensitive men), and equalitarianism (feminist men). At the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy are homosexuals; below them are women of all kinds. Masculinity is fragile and ephemeral for men, as they find themselves constantly called upon to prove themselves in the face of masculinity challenges. This is particularly the case when they cross over into a feminized terrain such as cheerleading. Anderson uses this setting to contrast two different masculinity styles: hypermasculinity, which he calls orthodox masculinity, and a mid-range masculinity that he calls inclusive. His descriptions of the culture of these two arenas showcase some of the differences among these strata of manliness. To what extent and in what locations do you tend to see these different types of masculinity displayed? What are the benefits of one versus the other? What are the forces shaping men into these different varieties? Do you think these distinctions are changing or are they merely replacing themselves?

This research uses sixty-eight in-depth interviews of collegiate male cheerleaders and participant observation from four selected cheerleading teams to examine the construction of masculinity among heterosexual men in a feminized

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terrain. Previous studies maintain that a hegemonic process of masculine dominance and submission influences most heterosexual men in feminized arenas to bolster their masculinity through the approximation of orthodox masculine requisites, including the expression of homophobic and antifeminine-acting attitudes. 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 *orthodox*. 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. The performance of masculinity among men in this group is influenced by a number of factors, including the institutional culture of one of the two major cheerleading governing bodies, the "Orthodox Cheerleading Association."

The second category of masculine performance is labeled as *inclusive*. The men in this group view orthodox masculinity as undesirable and 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 orthodox masculinity. Men in this group willingly embrace the feminized underpinnings of their sport and largely value their gay teammates. Notably, the construction of inclusive masculinity is influenced by the institutional culture of the other major governing cheerleading body, the "Inclusive Cheerleading Association."

Whereas previous studies of heterosexual men in feminized terrain found that men almost unanimously attempt to align themselves with orthodox masculinity, this research finds that heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading are nearly evenly split between these two normative forms of masculine expression. The emergence of a more inclusive form of masculinity is attributed to many factors, including the structure of the sport; the reduction of cultural, institutional, and organizational homophobia; and the resocialization of men into a gender-integrated sport.

BACKGROUND

David and Brannon (1976:12) have categorized four basic tenets that "seem to comprise the core requirements" of American masculinity. These include: (1) no sissy stuff, (2) be a big wheel, (3) be a sturdy oak, and (4) give 'em hell. Although all four rules are important in understanding the construction and stratification of masculine power and privilege, this research is mostly concerned with the "no sissy stuff" principle because of a durable sociological understanding that contemporary masculinity largely exists in opposition to femininity. Kimmel (2004:97) says, "While different groups of men may disagree about other traits and their significance in gender definitions, the antifemininity component of masculinity is perhaps the single dominant and universal characteristic."

The marginalization of men in feminine fields has been shown effective in deterring heterosexual men from engaging in these settings, perhaps because men who enter these fields find their sexuality publicly scrutinized. Accordingly, it has also been shown that North American masculinity is based in a disassociation from homosexuality, something particularly true to athletic settings. When one adds homophobia to David and Brannon's (1976) tenets, it produces an orthodox form of masculinity. Orthodox masculinity is reflected in and reproduced through an institutionalized, gender-segregated, and highly competitive sporting culture in North America.

Previous investigations into the social construction of masculinities have shown a relationship between the dominant form of masculine expression and subordinate forms. Connell (1995:77) has described hegemonic masculinity as a social process in which one form of institutionalized masculinity is "culturally exalted" above all others. Key to understanding the operation of hegemony in relationship to masculinity, Connell (1987, 1995) maintains that most men exhibiting a subordinate form of masculinity actually desire to obtain the hegemonic form. Essentially, the process of hegemony influences the oppressed to maintain the rightfulness or naturalization of their oppression. Indeed, it is this aspiration that makes the process hegemonic. Thus, if hegemony applies to masculinity, one would expect most who transgress masculine-defined boundaries to preserve, if not inflate, their position by adopting as many tenets of orthodox masculinity as possible. These identity management techniques might include: (1) being homophobic, (2) devaluing femininity, (3) increasing masculine bravado, and (4) claiming masculine space within the larger feminized arena.

Examinations of feminized terrain have consistently shown men to approximate orthodox masculinity and to justify their transgression as consistent with hegemonic expectations of masculinity. For example, men who occupy feminized space are quick to defend their transgressions as consistent within normative boundaries of orthodox masculinity, 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. 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. . . .

METHODS

This research uses in-depth interviews and participant observations to examine how heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading construct masculinity through micro and macro social processes. . . .

The informants are sixty-eight self-identified heterosexual men who used to play high school football but became collegiate cheerleaders because they were

unable to make their university football teams. Although a self-selection process cannot be ruled out (i.e., it is possible that men most affected by the masculinization process of football do not become cheerleaders), most of the informants reported that upon entering cheerleading, they held orthodox notions of masculinity, including sexist views and overt homophobia. The men, between eighteen and twenty-three years of age, come from diverse regions from throughout the United States, but 80 percent of the informants were white, middle-class men, so generalizations can only be made for this group....

While having lunch with a group of male cheerleaders, I asked, "How many of you would rather be on the football team?" All six resoundingly answered, "I would." After indicating a fondness for the cultural power that came to him as a football player, Richie said, "Yeah, I wish I could have made the football team; I really miss football." He added, "But I wasn't going to make any other team, so cheerleading was a way of getting back into the game. Well, as close as I could anyhow." This was the leitmotif among men who were recruited into cheerleading after playing football. To these men, cheerleading became an acceptable last effort to return to sport. For them, being in a feminized athletic arena was judged to be better than being outside it altogether....

PERFORMING ORTHODOX MASCULINITY

During the first day of cheerleading, Randy (a college senior) instructed the younger men:

It is really important for you guys to give these women a lot of respect.... You are going to be putting your hands in certain places, and catching them when they fall, so be sure to be respectful.... Remember that we do things better; we pick up on things faster than women do, so don't rub that in by telling them, "We are better than you." Be respectful of the fact that guys are better. Just as important, 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; that is none of our business. What you are at home is none of our business. But when you are here you have to be masculine. And if anyone gives you shit, and says you are gay or whatever, remind them that while they are out there playing with guys, you are out here with all these beautiful women.

Randy's talk illustrates the institutional and cultural attitudes of masculinity, homophobia, and sexism among men categorized as belonging to the orthodox group. This speech, in some variation, is traditional for veteran male cheerleaders to give to new men in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. It is something they call "guy talk," and it best exemplifies orthodox 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 orthodox masculinity....

Those who valued orthodox masculinity often relied on the same identity management techniques discussed in previous investigations of collegiate cheerleading. Namely, they maintained that their role within the sport was consistent with orthodox 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."

There was variance about attitudes toward women among those belonging to the orthodox group. Although some held misogynistic attitudes, viewing women as purely sex objects, most maintained that they respected women as athletes but usually considered them to be inferior to men in their athleticism. Patrick agreed:

I was asked to be on the team because the women needed me to help them do their routines better. They just can't throw girls as high as guys can. I'm not saying that they can't throw girls, but I am saying that the best cheerleading comes from the coed squads, and that's because we give them a better show. We can do what women can't.

In addition to the maintenance of sexist attitudes, many of the men categorized as belonging to the orthodox group also expressed varying degrees of homophobia. Although 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... and these men certainly found themselves inundated with homosexual suspicion. In fact, the suspicion of homosexuality may be even more prominent among male cheerleaders today than among male cheerleaders of yesteryear....

However, the reduction of cultural homophobia and the increased presence of openly gay men seems to have made the expression of homophobia somewhat outmoded, even among many members of the orthodox 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.

These heterosexist and objectifying remarks even dominated the Orthodox Cheerleading Association's Web site. In one discussion forum, the question was asked, "How do I get more guys to cheer in high school?" Fifteen of nineteen responses included the "tell them about the girls" pitch. It was also common for men classified in the orthodox group to make heterosexualized and/or objectifying comments about women, often talking about whom they slept with or would like to sleep with. One night, five heterosexual male cheerleaders were sitting in a hotel room when one said, "Let's order a prostitute." The men then talked about this for the better part of an hour. It was doubtful this would happen, however, for they had had the same conversation the previous night. . . .

In contrast to previous studies of masculine construction in cheerleading, however, only about half of these men in collegiate cheerleading were categorized as subscribing to the orthodox form of masculinity. The other half were shown to perform masculinity in a surprising, fascinating, and theoretically important manner.

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 because 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?" They rounded up more teammates, piled into two vans, and headed for the club. Once there, heterosexual men danced with both women *and* gay men, two heterosexual men even "freaked" each other (a term used by these men to describe two people dancing with their groins together).

Although there was not a universal position on homosexuality among men in the inclusive group (just as there was not in the orthodox 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, said,

I grew up in a town of 2,000. I never met a gay person. In my town, you were just taught to hate them, even though we didn't know who it was we were supposed to hate. So I did ... until I met Jaime [who was the only openly gay member on his team]. I mean, I used to call guys fags all the time, but I'd never call him that. He was a real cool guy, and now I think that gay people are just really cool people.

A third possible reason for the shift in attitude is that institutional support has helped in shaping a new understanding of homosexuality. Whereas overt homophobia was generally replaced with heterosexism in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, homosexuality and femininity among men was institutionally supported in 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. For example, Jeff, a heterosexual cheerleader, practiced with another male teammate for nearly half an hour, trying to put a female into the air with perfect form. But after growing bored he said, "My turn." The athletes switched positions, and Jeff stood atop the hands of a male and a female.

According to those with an orthodox understanding of masculinity, this position is one of the most feminine things a man can do in cheerleading. Jeff, however, was unconcerned. He willingly embraced the coded femininity of such 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.

When men in this group were asked about their masculine identities, many indicated that they considered themselves to be "metrosexual," a recent popculture term they understand to describe a gay-friendly heterosexual male who presents himself with the style-conscious behaviors otherwise attributed to gay men. Thus, just as "guy talk" was a useful defining construct for men in the orthodox group, the term "metrosexual" was useful for men in the inclusive group....

DISCUSSION

The Orthodox 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 orthodox 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 orthodox 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 Orthodox Cheerleading Association. Although this does not happen with regular frequency (largely because it is more difficult to throw and catch a 180-pound man than a 100-pound woman), 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. This finale brought cheers of deafening approval that carried on longer than is customary. Because of this kind of activity, the Inclusive Cheerleading Association's competitions are widely recognized as being more dynamic and daring than those of the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, whose members, in turn, feel that they uphold the traditional form of cheerleading.

The institutional variance of gender roles between these two associations is fiercely contested and politically charged. The Orthodox Cheerleading Association even bans (for three years) any collegiate team that participates in an Inclusive

Cheerleading Association event. In this manner, the Orthodox 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 Orthodox 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 Orthodox Cheerleading Association. Similar to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy found among openly gay athletes in highly masculinized team sports, 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....

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 orthodox perspectives. 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. Thus, there is a greater variance of masculinities exhibited among men in feminized terrain than among men in highly masculinized fields....

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