

**“It Used To Be Called an Old Man’s Game”:
Masculinity, Aging Embodiment, and Senior Curling Participation**

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Abstract

The sport of curling, popular amongst older populations in Canada and conventionally imagined as a sport for older people, offers an important window into what it means to be an older man participating in sport. While researchers have extensively studied expressions of youthful masculinity in sport culture, scholarship about the confluence of gender expression and old age in sport is much rarer. Using Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity, and drawing on 19 interviews with older men who curl in mid-sized Canadian towns, we argue that later-life men negotiate complex models of appropriate masculinity that borrow from hegemonic exemplars available in earlier life, deploying certain forms of intellectual, class, and gender privilege in order to do so. At the same time, they disrupt these hegemonies through an emphasis on interdependence, caring relationships, and the acceptance of bodily limitations.

Keywords: ageing, Canada, caring, curling, embodiment, hegemony, masculinity, men, sport

Given men's potential struggles to meet hegemonic models of masculinity in late(r) life, how do men in mid-life and beyond understand and represent themselves as men, particularly in the charged and often hyper-masculinized spaces of sport culture? In this paper, we consider expressions of masculinity in the sport of curling as a case study of late(r)-life masculinity, exploring the ways that these old(er) men express themselves as men (Hearn 2004; Matthews 2016) through their participation in the sport and its culture. We argue that although some hegemonic standards of masculine expression may be more achievable in earlier life, particularly those linked to the body, late(r)-life men negotiate complex models of appropriate masculinity that both draw from those hegemonic exemplars available in earlier life as well as disrupt them.

Beginning in the 1970s, critical gender scholars began to explicitly study men and expressions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Most significantly, scholars were keen to illuminate the ways that gender, and expressions of masculinity conveyed by men, worked to secure and reproduce men's social power (Whitehead 2002). In this regard, gender scholars have extensively researched expressions of masculinity in youth and early adulthood, examining the intersections of masculinity within the education system, legal system, family, and labour force (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), while often focusing on so-called problematic expressions of masculinity (Hearn, 2019). In spite of this robust field of scholarship, researchers have sometimes overlooked expressions of masculinity throughout the life course (Calasanti 2004; Drummond 2008; King & Calasanti 2013; Spector-Mersel 2006; Hearn 2019), especially expressions of aging

masculinity in cultures of sport and physical activity (Drummond 2008). Academics readily accept that dominant modes of masculinity in the West today are tied to the bodies of younger men, physical competency, and one's success in the labour force (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This connection between youth and masculinity is particularly evident in the sociology of sport scholarship.

Critical sports scholarship (e.g., Messner 1992; Gee & Jackson 2017; Atkinson 2011), in particular, has explored sport as a site where normative expressions of masculinity are developed, sustained, and celebrated through young men's athletic participation. In spite of the fact that men in late(r)-life still engage in sport and athletics in large numbers (for example, for 2016 and 2017 Statistics Canada [n.d.] reports that approximately 45% of men aged 65 and over are physically active for at least 150 minutes a week)³ scholarship addressing issues associated with aging, masculinities and sport, are rare (Drummond 2008). For example, a search of two of the most prominent sociology of sport journals over the past decade finds extremely limited scholarship in the field, with the *Sociology of Sport Journal* publishing only three articles and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* publishing only 6. While scholars in aging studies more frequently take up the experiences of men and physical activity (for example, Clarke, Currie & Bennett 2018; Phoenix & Smith 2011), it is often from the perspective of health, exercise physiology, and psychology, leaving issues associated with late(r)-life masculinities under developed and under theorized. As Murray Drummond (2008) asserts, "Too often sports and

³ Notably, these numbers are much lower for women, where only 37% are active for 150 hours a week (Statistics Canada n.d.).

physical activity are championed as being the domain of only the young, and the fit—with virility and increased masculinity often associated with those qualities” (p. 34). Given the significance of sport to young men’s understanding of themselves, their masculinity, and the gender expressions of others, it is important that we consider both the ways that the construction of hegemonic masculinity stands up in later life and the ways that men understand themselves as men at this stage of the life course. In this regard, the sport of curling provides an interesting venue for investigation.

Curling is a sport that is growing in popularity worldwide. Reuters reporter Alan Baldwin (2018) even declared it the “world’s fastest growing winter sport” (para. 1). This sport, one that requires teams of players to slide heavy stones down a sheet of ice towards a target at the other end, is an important site of scholarly analysis for a number of reasons. First, sport in general is a significant social space for expressing gender and producing exemplars of masculinity (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 2002). Second, curling in particular is one of only a few sports that popular culture links to the bodies of older people. The press lauds curling as an activity for those in later life (e.g., “Best age-friendly sports” 2016; Blevings 2014), perhaps in part because curling is a sport where older men (and women) can compete at elite levels. Russ Howard, for example, competed at the Olympic Games at 50 years of age, marking him as the all-time oldest Canadian Olympic gold medalist (“Russ Howard” n.d.). The oldest gold medalist in Olympic history (1924) was Scotsman Robin Welsh, also a curler (“Russ Howard” n.d.). Furthermore, as our participants confirm, senior men have a significant role to play in the administrative

and physical care of their clubs and their members. We experienced this first hand as it was senior men who managed the clubs, facilitated our research, provided contacts with club members, organized community events, and, on more than one occasion, were seen conducting physical maintenance in the curling clubs. In one of our research sites, curlers from the senior men's program took on a mentorship role with adolescent boys from a local high school, teaching them to curl as part of their physical education curriculum. The act of mid- and late(r)-life men being physically more competent than their youthful protégées is yet another unique feature of the curling club and further makes it an important space for this kind of investigation.

Curling's significance as a site for study goes beyond its association with old(er) adults; historically, it has also celebrated a unique form of sports masculinity (see Allain & Marshall 2018). Beginning in the early-modern period, curling and its expressions of masculinity were often tied to the bodies of late(r)-life curling men and their wise, thoughtful, and moral expressions of masculinity. The media and public noted that curling men could have stout bodies, instead of the fit, hard bodies of other athletes, but importantly required them to demonstrate a commitment to high moral character (see Mott 1983). One 19th century press reported, "It is among the older players . . . that the present strength of the club lies" (cited by Tate 2011, p. 54).

Today, curling's somewhat unique gendered standards continue in other forms. For example, men and women curl in both gender-segregated and gender-mixed competitions, with mixed doubles curling joining the Olympic roster in 2018, one of only a handful of mixed-gender Olympic sports. Finally, curling offers an important

case study because it uniquely welcomes a wide range of physical abilities. In this regard, the popularity of modified curling is evident in the abundance of stick and wheelchair curling leagues present in curling clubs. Stick curling is a modified version of the sport, designed to allow those who cannot get into and out of a lunge position to continue curling.⁴ Many stick curlers (and some wheelchair curlers) compete with, and alongside, those able-bodied curlers who get down in the hack to throw the curling stone.⁵ Because of its accessibility to those of different ages, abilities, and gender expressions, curling offers scholars a unique place to investigate expressions of sports masculinity in late(r) life.

In this study, we show how men who curl assert a unique form of late(r)-life sports masculinity, one that both aligns with the hegemonic ideals of youthful masculinity while also sometimes articulating alternative expressions of maleness. We argue that curling culture offers our participants institutional spaces that celebrate deep care in social relationships amongst men, where men can spend time discussing their life, their health, and, importantly, their aging bodies. The curling club also provides space for the celebration of diverse physical and cognitive capacities, including those linked to physical and cognitive disabilities. However, given the nature of hegemony, these counter-hegemonic tendencies are unsurprisingly not total (Demetriou 2001; Donaldson 1993). The curlers we

⁴ Stick and wheelchair curling leagues operate with a few different rules than those of non-modified leagues.

⁵ The hack is an object, similar to a starting block in running, that curlers playing the unmodified game push off of in order to slide forward and throw the curling stone (“Glossary of Curling” n.d.).

interviewed also use curling as a way to assert a privileged form of masculine expression. This expression, tied less to their aging bodies and instead linked to their intellectual pursuits, is also variously linked to heteronormativity, the privileging of men's sport practices over women's, the disavowal of certain limits for their aging bodies, and the privileging of particular class positions.

Masculinities and Sport

For the past several decades, the sociological examination of masculinities has owed much to the efforts of Raewyn Connell. Connell's development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity produced an analytical tool that attends to the ways gender, specifically masculinity, is "practiced," or the ways it becomes ascendant and maintains power at a given cultural location and time, working to marginalize women and subordinate other expressions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, p. 832). Much like the gender analysis conducted by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) and Judith Butler (1990), Connell (1987) asks that researchers consider how people "do gender," stating that gender should be viewed as a "verb" (p. 140).

Gender scholars have widely accepted hegemonic masculinity as a conceptual framework for understanding the gendered lives of individuals, cultural representations of gender, and ways that various institutional structures reproduce a dominant gender order (see Messner 2002). However, these scholars have also subjected hegemonic masculinity to discussion, reformulation, and critique (see Anderson 2008; Schippers 2007; Messerschmidt, Martin, Messner & Connell 2018). Demetrakis Demetriou (2001) and Mike Donaldson (1993), for example, identify

potential flaws in the ways scholars have taken up hegemonic masculinity, arguing that the concept requires counter-hegemonic gender expressions, and that hegemony needs to account for these expressions in order to build consensus. Demetriou (2001) asks scholars to be attentive to the ways counter-hegemonic movements originating from men and women, producing internal and external challenges, may impact what becomes hegemonic. In this regard, it is important that examinations of hegemonic masculinity address hegemony directly, looking for the ways that hegemonic gender expressions subsume changing social ideas and norms. Spector-Mersel (2006) argues that research conceptualized through the lens of hegemonic masculinities has ignored the various ways that gender changes throughout the life course. She contends that scholars discussing gender hegemony fail to consider what is hegemonic about masculinities in later life. She proposes that scholars take into account the “existence of various hegemonic masculinities *across time*” (p. 71). Despite these critiques, examining masculinities through the lens provided by Connell, while staying alert to counter-hegemonic tendencies, is fruitful for analytic discussions about the ways men, and in this case old(er) men, understand themselves and their bodies through their participation in sport.

Sport is an important site for expressing and producing hegemonic exemplars of masculinity, particularly in terms of celebrating the bodies of young, middle-class boys and men (Burstyn 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 1992). Although not all sports secure celebrated masculine expressions equally in the bodies of their participants, popular Western representations of most male athletes (especially those who participate in aggressive or violent team sports, like hockey,

football, rugby, etc.) include traits linked to dominant expressions of masculinity. In Canada, cultural exemplars of appropriate masculinity circulate in a number of ways, but men's elite-level ice hockey⁶ is an especially important symbol of hegemonic masculinity, especially amongst middle- and working-class white men (Gruneau & Whitson 1994) — or men frequently occupying the same social positions as Canadian curlers. As will become clear in the analysis below, our participants frequently invoke comparisons between hockey and curling as expressions of sporting masculinity.

Mike Donaldson (1993) reminds us that even the securest positions of masculine expression are fraught and contradictory. Predicting the challenges associated with hegemonic masculinity in old age, he uses the example of an athlete, asking if compromising one's body in service to one's sport is hegemonic if it leaves the athlete disabled in later life (p. 647). In spite of the numerous examinations of men's sports participation and their alignment with dominant masculine gender expression, scholars have often overlooked the gender expressions of old(er) men who participate in sports.

⁶ Within Canadian sports culture, elite-level men's hockey is most frequently associated with the nation and its national character (Adams 2006). However, Canada has a long history with the sport of curling. Scottish settlers brought curling to Canada in the 18th century (Wieting & Lamoureux 2001). And although many different nations play the sport, with the World Curling Federation currently ranking the men's curling programs of 60 different countries ("World Ranking" n.d.), its popularity in Canada is unmatched. Within Canada, the state, culture makers, and the public often position the sport, like hockey, as a natural outgrowth of the country's status as a northern nation.

In Murray Drummond's (2008) examination of sport, masculinity, and aging, he argues that although sport is socially produced as a space where young men develop normative expressions of masculinity (especially those gender expression that privilege toughness, physical aggression, and force), later life physical activity also proves to be an important social space for old(er) men. Lamenting that popular culture views physical activity as solely belonging to the young he asserts: "... physical activity and sport offer older men the opportunity to affirm their masculinity in addition to making them feel empowered about engaging in health-related behaviors" (p. 34). Given this, our analysis picks up this neglected field of inquiry, examining the experiences of older men who participate in curling, and exploring the ways this sport informs their (sometimes contradictory) expressions of late(r) life masculinity.

Methods

The research for this paper comes from a larger project on age and gender representation in Canadian winter sports, part of which is focused on men's curling. In Canada, it is winter sports that are most widely associated with the nation and national imaginaries. This larger project seeks to understand the place of old(er) Canadians within Canadian national identity formation and therefore focuses on sports like curling, hockey, skiing and ice skating. Given that curling is the only national sport that openly celebrates the contributions of old(er) athletes, we focused specifically on this sport in the early phases of the project, beginning with media and institutional analysis of the representations of masculinity in curling. During this analysis, we found that both the North American media and curling

institutions, such as Curling Canada, appeared to shift towards an emphasis on more youthful and athletic forms of curling masculinity. The most striking example of this was the institutional, public, and media celebration of Canada's Olympic championship men's curling team, Team Brad Jacobs, in 2014 (see Allain 2018; Allain & Marshall 2018). Their rigorous training regime and athleticism had them dubbed the 'buff boys' of curling, and the media and many in the curling community celebrated the team for shifting images of curling masculinity to those more closely aligned with other popular expressions of sporting masculinity. In order to further our understanding of this shift and its implications for old(er) men who curl, we obtained institutional research ethics board approval (St. Thomas University Research Ethics Board #2016-08) to conduct 19 semi-structured interviews with men who participated in senior men's curling, attending to the ways this changing curling culture impacted their gender expressions and understandings of themselves as old(er) men who curl. Our work specifically attempts to engage with old(er) men's expressions of gender and masculinity through their participation in the sport, and the ways these gender expressions inform understandings of, and are informed by, their experience of aging embodiment.

The research participants in this study were men enrolled in senior men's curling programs at curling clubs in one of two Canadian mid-sized cities, one in Ontario and one in Eastern Canada. The authors chose these communities because of their notably large populations of old(er) people. The participants ranged from 57 to 86 years of age, with a mean age of approximately 68 years. Participants' experiences with curling varied. One participant was relatively new to the sport, taking it up in

later life, while most (12) had actively participated for decades, learning to play in elementary or high school. The time participants devoted to curling also varied. Most participants curled multiple times per week, on several teams, both in mixed and single-gender leagues. A few were involved in competitive curling at some point in their life, four of the curlers had competed at provincial and national curling tournaments, and many travelled for various recreational weekend curling tournaments, better known as bonspiels.

The first author obtained informed consent from all participants before conducting the interviews. The interviews, conducted at times and in locations selected by the participants, took between 45 minutes and 2 hours to complete. Research assistants transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. The transcripts were then loaded into the qualitative data analysis program *Nvivo*. Drawing on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) work, we conducted a conventional content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon note that this type of content analysis is especially appropriate "when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (p. 1279). To do this, we read the transcripts multiple times, noting our initial impressions, and then selecting thematic content to code into "meaningful clusters" (p. 1279). The clusters were as follows: personal involvement with the sport over the life course; institutional and cultural structure of the game; media representations of curling; gender expressions; and aging and the body. In line with Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) description of conventional content analysis, we moved from these clusters to identify the relationships between the clusters, focusing our analysis here on the ways late(r)-life curlers express masculinity through their

participation in the sport. We changed the names of the participants to fictive names in order to protect their anonymity.

“It’s a Lot Harder Than It Looks” (John): Maintaining an Active Body

The majority of the participants in this study positioned aging curling masculinity in contrast with a more youthful hockey masculinity, which, as noted above, is one of the most widely celebrated forms of masculine expression in Canada (see Adams 2006). Specifically, many of the men actively rejected dominant Canadian national tropes that linked appropriate expressions of masculinity to the rough, tough, and aggressive sport of ice hockey (see Allain 2008; Robidoux 2002). Instead, they celebrated alternative forms of masculine expression and embodiment, legitimating these as a superior form of aging masculine identity. For example, Arthur stated, “It is just a different mindset. Hockey is very aggressive. The nice thing about curling is it’s aggressive in a different way. It is not physically aggressive. It is mentally aggressive.” Sam enjoyed the capacity for curlers to reach an elite level in an extremely short time, saying, “It is the only sport I know where I can draw you a diagram, and you could become a world champion next year. Because . . . [with] men’s hockey . . . you have to go through the barriers.” The parity that Sam saw in the sport of curling allowed him to imagine (and potentially enact) a competitive sport environment where 80-year-old curlers had the capacity to beat much younger competitors.⁷

⁷ Brooks, Barnes, and Stevens (2017) have argued that the social distance between community and national level curlers is increasing, with community-level curlers having little or no knowledge of national-level athletes and national-level programs. This study did not support Brooks et al’s (2006)

Drummond's (2008) argument that "older men do not appear to be as concerned with aesthetic issues associated with the body . . . [but] are more concerned with the way in which the body functions" (p. 33) rings true in our curlers' critique of old-timers hockey. Although many participants had played hockey earlier in their lives, they did not continue with the sport beyond mid-life. Many of these men saw sports like hockey as misaligned with both successful aging and dominant forms of masculine expression. Participants frequently associated hockey with serious injury, disability and even death. Harry bluntly stated, "Well, I don't want to go . . . to hockey heaven." These curlers felt it necessary to avoid playing hockey, due to the risk it posed to the functionality of the body, potentially leading to head and spinal injuries, heart attacks, backaches, and other impairments that would obstruct their ability to engage meaningfully in other active aging activities. Charlie claimed that those who curl do so because they "don't want to get involved in . . . hockey . . . a sport where they're going to get hurt." In this regard, curling, unlike the other more aggressive and physically demanding sports, was a significant place for curlers to assert a unique form of late(r) life masculine expression. However, one retired medical doctor pointed out that falls in curling could also be deadly, suggesting that there were "a lot safer things to do" (Wayne).

As Cheryl Laz (2003) points out, the ways that one 'does' aging are closely linked to the ways that they understand their corporeal bodies: "As we accomplish age, we

finding, likely as a result of the age, gender, and experiences of our participants. Almost all curlers had knowledge of the national program and had competed as, with, or against elite-level curlers in their home clubs.

draw on the physical resources of the body, but our actions and choices simultaneously shape the corporeal resources available” (p. 508). Laz’s work demonstrates that age embodiment draws directly on notions of “activity, fitness, and health” (p. 510), where participants are drawn to engage in activities that are “not-too-young [and] not-too-old” (p. 512). While participants in this study generally viewed hockey as an activity for the young, their discussion of modified curling practices such as stick curling, discussed below, suggested a more complex understanding of embodied aging.

“A Kick to the Ego” (Wayne): Staying in the Game

Within the sport of curling, men in middle- and late(r) life asserted a normative style of masculinity in various ways. As discussed above, they maintained their sense of normative and often hegemonic masculinity through their critique of sports like hockey. However, they also embraced the functionality of their bodies through both their celebration and rejection of modified curling techniques, specifically stick curling.⁸ Some curlers celebrated stick curling as an appropriate modification of the game that allowed either themselves or others to maintain functional fitness and

⁸ Stick curling is a modification in the game that allows curlers to release the curling stone from a standing position. This allows curlers with mobility issues, specifically those who cannot get down into a deep lunge, to throw the stone from a standing position. In regular club play, stick curlers sometimes curl alongside non-stick curlers. However, stick curlers can play their own version of the sport, participating in their own leagues and tournaments. Similarly, wheelchair curlers also use a stick, and throw the stone from a seated position. Again, participants can curl with able-bodied curlers, or with other wheelchair curlers in their own leagues and tournaments.

practice active aging strategies. Many commented that curlers simply needed to “drop their pride” (John) and pick up the stick. As Wayne and others pointed out, the celebration (and destigmatization) of stick curling allowed old(er) men to embrace a style of play that they may one day need to adopt themselves. Wayne stated that he would never disparage a stick curler “because it may happen to me one day. Oh no, no, no [I] can’t go along with that.”

Alternately, some curlers used curling to practice boundary work, distinguishing themselves as members of the young-old, or as able-bodied participants who could continue playing the game as they had done in their earlier lives. These men felt that stick curling was not an appropriate or “true” version of the sport. They likened modified curling to shuffleboard, a game they associated with old-old age. However, they did recognize that curlers who played with a stick could be both aggressive and highly competitive. One stick curler even bragged, “I think I can go out there with my stick and make shots that you see on television” (Jim).

Although none of the participants disparaged stick curlers directly, and many explicitly praised this modified version of the game, it was often those who were actually participating in modified curling, or felt that they would have to do so in the near future, who spoke most positively about it. John remarked, “For me, [playing with the stick] is an A-plus factor that allows [older curlers] to keep going. . . . If you . . . use a stick you can go forever.” However, others felt that they should delay moving to stick curling for as long as possible. Larry stated, “You know what? I’m not ready for the stick yet and I don’t want to be ready for the stick. . . . For me, I’d prefer not to go there until I absolutely have to.” Wayne, who spoke with detail

about the importance of his appearance and maintaining a youthful look, commented, “If I have to go to a stick, I won’t keep curling. Well, everyone has to cross that bridge when you get to it and see what your ego allows you do.” An almost equal number of men celebrated and/or participated in stick curling as those who criticized/or refused to consider moving to this modified game. Interestingly, it was those in the best physical health who seemed to struggle the most when imagining themselves participating in modified curling. Don explained the intersection between a refusal to use the stick and normative expressions of masculinity:

This was probably a male reaction. . . . [Some men claim,] “If I have to use one of them I am going to quit the fucking game.” And I heard that from probably five or six senior male curlers who are quite competitive. So [the curling sticks] sat there for maybe a year, maybe even two. . . . The ladies started using them the odd day. Then a couple of men started using them on a regular basis. There wasn’t the same stigma attached to them [for the women]. . . . It took a bit of tugging . . . to get the senior men to buy into it.

In their unique ways, many old(er) men who curled failed to fully let go of hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Many still conceptualized their sporting practice as hegemonically masculine, even when it was in opposition to other, more widely conceptualized, hypermasculine sport practices. As aging men frequently struggle to maintain the corporeal markers of hegemonic masculinity that might have been more achievable in earlier life, the participants in this study found different ways of asserting hegemonic masculinity, some conditionally accepting diverse or modified

expressions of the sport, like stick curling. As Dionigi (2015) explains stereotypes about what aging bodies can and should do impact both how those in late(r) life view themselves and how they view others.

“I Like the Cat and Mouse Game” (Arthur): Thinking It Through

In spite of their differing and sometimes contradictory ways of conceptualizing adaptive curling and its position as a legitimate form of the game, many of the men considered curling to require important mental and physical skills. These curlers asserted that the sport demanded a complex physicality that made it different from other kinds of men’s team sports. Arthur explained that it was difficult “to slide on one leg and keep your balance and throw the rock, or release with either the inturn or the outturn.” Gary stressed the elite-level physicality necessary in curling, saying, “Regular Joes don’t have the flexibility needed, and balance is number one in curling really. If you don’t have the balance, you can’t progress.” Some curlers even emphasized how curling strained the muscles, leaving inexperienced curlers sore after a match, in much the same ways as other athletic activities. Larry described curling as “more physically demanding than perhaps it appears.” Sam even proudly declared that “Sidney Crosby,⁹ or some of those other people who do sports on the ice, they would fall down too.” While popular culture suggests that curling is a game for “the rest of us” (Applebome 2010, para. 2), old(er) male curlers were eager to

⁹ Sidney Crosby is an elite-level Canadian hockey player, widely conceptualized by the press and public as an exemplar, albeit a contested one, of hegemonic masculinity.

assert its status as a physically challenging activity, requiring corporeal skills, including balance and muscle work.

Likewise, participants differentiated curling from other hyper-masculine sports due to the intense mental work it demanded. This was one of the most widely supported and robust themes in this study, with curlers consistently speaking about the importance of curling's mental game. As Wayne stated, "It is kind of like a chess game on ice with physical activity." Curlers frequently told lengthy stories about game strategy and complications, including the ice conditions, environmental factors, and the play of their teammates. One curler even noted that at a provincial curling club located near the ocean, the rink closest to the outside wall was unplayable due to the influence of the salt water and ocean tide. These stories helped position the participants, and curlers in general, as intellectual elites. Sam explained:

I came to [curling] in high school, left handed with an engineer's brain. . . . And there is that spatial arrangement of stones, and how you hit that stone and how it rolls into there. . . . You draw a rock through a port, you know between two other rocks, and it buries and you see it disappear. . . . If you ask . . . "What is your background?" you'll find a lot of accountants, engineers, technical people — they love the sport. There is something that appeals to them.

Although there is little doubt that all sport requires a blend of physical proficiency and mental strategy, curlers worked to position themselves as intellectually superior to other athletes who participated in sports widely considered to be more strenuous. Don clarified, "Hockey is a little more physical than curling. Curling is a

little more mental.” Many participants were also concerned that their intellectual prowess was not fully appreciated by casual fans of the game, especially given new celebrations of curlers and their buff bodies. Wayne explained, “They see the ripped muscles, and you know . . . athletic-looking shapes and sizes and all that good stuff. I’m not sure that they see the brain power that is really behind it all.”

Although hegemonic masculinity is often located in the body (see Bordo 1999; Gill, Henwood & McLean 2005), within white middle-class cultural practice, old(er) men can work to diminish the importance of bodily expressions of masculinity (i.e., muscularity, strength, athletic prowess, etc.) by privileging the mind over the body. In our work here, curling men, who were often white and middle- or working-class, attempted to maintain their socially hegemonic positions by negotiating embodied gender norms in ways that privileged the mind. Jeff Hearn (2003) has explained that due to shifts in Western labour markets towards service work and away from manufacturing, “Aging does not necessarily reduce the value of labour, and may indeed in some cases increase it until death or close to death” (p. 100). Curling is not part of the labour market, but the ways these men worked to position it against sports involving physicality focused on violence and aggression demonstrates their deployment of a kind of intellectual privilege common among aging (white) men, in order to maintain (aging) hegemonic masculinity.

**“It Is Easier for the Guys To Show off Their Physical Strength” (Max):
Heteronormativity and Gender Difference**

Curlers also sometimes worked to align expressions of aging hegemonic masculinities with other, more youthful, hegemonically masculine gender expressions. They did this by often emphasizing heteronormativity, dating life, and

gender differences between men and women. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued, heterosexuality is deeply connected to normative expressions of masculinity. Likewise, social actors often produce notions of masculinity and male gender identities of men by putting them in conversation with various expressions of femininity, or by disavowing the embodied gender expressions of women (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Importantly, gender segregation in sport structurally maintains normative gender expressions that are physically embodied and culturally produced (Messner 2002). However, many of these curlers participated in mixed curling, a form of the game that pairs two men with two women on each team. Given that this form of gender integration is rare in the sporting world, it is clear that the physical structure of the game of curling can shape gender expressions in unique ways.

Many of these participants began mixed curling as young men, playing with their wives or intimate partners. Notably, all of the men interviewed for this research were currently married or had been married to women. A few thought curling was an important way of maintaining romantic relationships, especially when parents had young children at home. Jim, for example, stated, "It became a date night. . . . My wife was working. I was working. We were both very busy. We joined curling. . . . So you'd go for dinner, maybe a drink afterward." Frank mentioned that he met his wife curling, while Sam opined that curling was a great place for men and women to meet, given that curling norms prevent aggressive body contact and even extraneous touching. He explained, "To me it would be a great environment, if you are a shy young woman or young man, to meet other people. . . . Because again the

etiquette is very important, and so with that etiquette there is a certain distance. . . . It's not like you're making a bold advance by asking to shake my hand." One participant even argued that curling was more conducive to forming heterosexual relationships than hockey, emphatically claiming, "I couldn't have a date night playing hockey" (Larry). Sam noted that the curling club's culture of communal eating meant that women partners took on an increased burden of labour, stating, "It is [a] blue collar [sport] and the age of the men curlers [means that they] are used to the traditional ways of doing things. So if it's a potluck, you're asking your partner to make a casserole."

Interestingly, discussions of heteronormative dating were not the only times interview participants produced hegemonic understandings of gender difference. When asked about their perceptions of mixed curling (when two women curl on the same team as two men), several curlers explained that men were more competitive and more aggressive than women. For example, Don commented that the women were "not near as intense," while Wayne remarked that the women brought "more finesse to the game than some of the men." One curler even chalked this up to biological difference, stating, "Women don't like [yelling on the ice] generally, because men yell more. It's the testosterone [that] is a bit higher" (Sam). Another participant, drawing on both differences in the style of play favored by men and women, and emotional differences between the competitors, commented, "When men and women curl together, it is the messiest form of curling out there" (John). While Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) has noted a tendency among scholars to see those in later life as somehow less gendered, the men in this study draw on gender

difference as an important part of their understanding of themselves and others with the field of sport.

Some of the old(er) men perceived differences between men and women as emanating from muscular differences in the bodies of men and women, resulting in strategic differences in game play. Some curlers believed that women were incapable of throwing the curling stones and sweeping in the same aggressive style as the men, imagining that men could throw heavier weights, resulting in more dramatic takeout shots and harder sweeping than female competitors could produce. John argued that in regard to sweeping, "There are physical limitations to what women can do." He concluded, "Those big guys, they have fifty percent more body mass." Charlie stated, "The women will very seldom throw a take-out." Some curlers also drew on normative understandings of masculinity and femininity, claiming that women's curling was more organized (John; Sam), less committed (Larry), less intelligent (Gary), and more emotional (Gary) than the game played by men.

Although most of the curlers believed in normative gender differences, after they listed off many dissimilarities between men and women, they often came around to a more egalitarian and nuanced understanding of these differences. For example, Arthur suggested that those who believed that men were better sweepers than women were being deceived, noting, "It is easier for the guys to show off their physical strength in sweeping, not that female curlers don't have good sweepers because they do. I think it's just the men look more muscular. It's perception." John recounted a story about a mixed provincial curling tournament that saw his team in

the semifinals. In the locker room between matches, he had confided in his male curling partner and friend that he was concerned about the ability of his female teammates. In the end, he laughingly recalled, "I [had] to eat my words. Not any of the four women ever missed a shot in the whole game. . . . I missed the one shot and that lost the game." Larry hinted at some gender discrimination, claiming, "Frankly, some of the women curlers ought to be skips. . . . I think it's pretty much fifty-fifty. So you see some rinks that are led by women and some rinks that are led by men. . . . Nobody really cares one way or the other about that."¹⁰ Unlike most team sports, curling's unique structure, that sometimes has men and women playing together, may work to cultivate this kind of understanding, although it clearly does not eradicate normative masculine privilege entirely. Contrasted with other team sports, where appropriate gender identities are negotiated in isolation from those of different genders, curling allows for men to come to understand their sports gender identities in conversation with gender difference. We argue that this unsurprisingly does not result in a fully counter-hegemonic masculine identity for old(er) curlers; it does, however, work to challenge the curler's own perceptions of appropriate gendered sports identities, leading to a more equitable understanding of gender difference.

**"This Is What's Keeping This Club Going . . . the Senior People" (Charlie):
Interdependence and the Curling Club**

¹⁰ The skip is the leader of a curling team, the person responsible for calling the shots and devising the game strategy.

As social and institutional environments shape gender expression, so too does the curling club itself prove to be an important place for facilitating unique expressions of aging masculinity. For our participants, the curling club was a space that reaffirmed a normative sense of masculinity through the celebration of heteronormativity, intellectual prowess, and functional fitness. However, it also was a space that explicitly facilitated alternatives to dominant sports masculinity, allowing men to celebrate modified sports practices (like stick and wheelchair curling), the achievements of women, and a kind of nurturing not often reported in other men's team sports. Curling's unique culture, cultivated in the spaces of local curling clubs, proved to be an important place for doing masculinity in unique ways. Importantly, we believe that it is the actual space and culture of the curling club — one encouraging members to spend time with both their teammates and competitors before and after matches, privileging the work of aging men through their prominent positions in the club, and creating networks of masculinity built on caring and closeness — that really allows for the development of this unique expression of masculinity. Curling etiquette, which emphasizes friendliness and good conduct, also reflects this kind of distinctive sports contact. As one research participant remarked, "Etiquette is huge in our sport. Etiquette, sportsmanship, fair play . . . It's a gentleman's sport" (Gary)¹¹. This comradery is embedded in the

¹¹ Etiquette is an important part of many sport practices such as golf and tennis. Even sports that are characterized by their toughness and aggression, including sports like men's ice hockey and rugby, align themselves with a particularly gentlemanly etiquette. In the case of ice hockey, Robidoux (2002) argues hockey's gentlemanly masculinity helped the sport align with colonial understandings

culture of the game and the structure of its rules and is reflected in a physical space that allows friendship and care to develop. Another participant asserted:

The men don't usually curl here until 11:00 [a.m.]. The earliest men will probably be here at 9:30[a.m.]. And from 9:30 through 11:30 you have a steady stream of people, and there are usually two or three tables that you can't get a chair around. There is a big intense conversation about nothing . . . it could be about curling, it could be about politics, it could be about grandchildren. (Don)

Clubs are frequently constructed with large kitchens and bars and contain ample communal seating at round tables overlooking the playing surface. As pointed out by Brooks et al. (2017), the curling club, particularly in Western Canada, was constructed as not only a sporting space but also as a community centre. This structure, one that encourages curlers to linger before and after matches, to enjoy coffee or beer (depending on the hour), appears to generate a different kind of sporting culture than other sports spaces. Charlie explained how the availability of an onsite meal was particularly important for him and his wife:

[My wife and I] curl Friday afternoons. It's called Friday Afternoon League and there's a Friday Evening League too. . . . We curl and have dinner after here. So the

of First Nations culture (e.g., rough and aggressive), while distinguishing the sport from other British pastimes such as cricket. What makes curling expressions of etiquette unique in the Canadian context is that: (1) They are aligned to an expression of appropriate masculinity that sanctions aggressiveness and physicality, where touching opponents in any way that competitors might understand as hostile is strictly sanctioned; (2) These expressions of etiquette are connected to a culture of conviviality and friendship that is forged in curling clubs.

ladies don't have to go home and make dinner. And what they do . . . they'll put on a special for us. Or we can go down and order from the kitchen. . . . So the ladies enjoy that, they don't have to go home and cook supper.

Although Charlie's comments evidence a heteronormative division of labour in the family home that sees wives cooking for their husbands, curling's culture embodies some distinctive celebrations and expressions of masculinity that also appear transgressive.

In this regard, many of the men valued the social time that came with curling culture as a time to reflect, discuss their aging bodies, and to celebrate diverse ways of being older men. Similar to Aske Lassen's (2014) findings about billiards in Denmark, curling allowed these Canadian men to conceptualize new ways of being active community members in later life. Several participants remarked on the oldest members of the curling club, celebrating with awe the achievements of late-life curlers, coming to the club in their eighties and nineties. Many sociologists have troubled celebrations of active aging, or a commitment to avoiding the physical markers of aging (such as ill health, cognitive decline and other age-related health issues) by engaging constant activity (see Katz 2005; Lamb 2017). Dionigi, Horton and Baker (2013) found that although some masters-level athletes tended to support active aging strategies not all did and those who did often did so in unique ways – such as supporting adaptive sport strategies. They state, “Through sport, participants were seen to avoid, resist, redefine, adapt and/or accept the ageing process” (p. 381). Likewise, the sort of active aging expressed by curlers did not always disavow old-old age. Instead, it often found room to celebrate diverse ways

of being active and *actually* aging. For example, members from both clubs celebrated teammates who continued to come to the club and curl with cognitive impairments. William discussed a teammate who had been diagnosed with dementia. He explained that the man's wife had trained a few curlers to curl with her husband. He commented, "If you curl with him, you know, [you] remind him what colour his rock is." George celebrated curling with men of differing abilities and health concerns. He commented, "The first year doing it, they paired me up with someone with Alzheimer's, which was interesting. Now, I am with another guy who's got some health issues. I knew him and we went away to a couple of stick bonspiels, and it was the first time he'd ever done something like that, so he thought it was great!" Don, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease several years before our interview, spoke with great pride about the relationship he had with another member of his curling club, one where they could meet in the morning and talk about their health, their medications, and how they were doing that day. Echoing the findings in Linda Heuser's (2005) work on old(er) women's experiences in lawn bowling, Don liked the idea that he might be able to continue curling in a wheelchair as his Parkinson's progressed, and came to the curling club for coffee and conversation even on days when his sciatica made curling impossible.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have used curlers as a case study to explore the gender expressions associated with late(r)-life masculinity and the various ways that these men enacted particular forms of late(r)-life sports masculinity. Although our case study is marked by a small sample size (19 participants) and its very specific sports

context (i.e., Canadian curling), it nonetheless provides important insights about the potential for masculine expressions by men beyond mid-life within the context of sport. In this regard, curling is a worthy analytical site for scholars interested in examining the embodied experiences of those in late(r) life, given its immense popularity amongst old(er) adults and its reputation as a sport for those in late(r) life. Furthermore, an examination of late(r)-life curlers enhances scholarly understanding of how sport can both produce and disrupt dominant expressions of masculinity. Finally, it provides insights into the ways that hegemonic sporting masculinities may change when men move beyond mid-life. As Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) argues that the absence of examinations of masculinity in late(r) life is likely the result of scholars problematically viewing those in late(r) life as lacking gender, or as being “ungendered” (p. 74), this work explicitly challenges that assumption, demonstrating that late(r)-life men express masculinity in ways that are both aligned and misaligned with hegemonic models, that are frequently associated with youthful masculinity.

As Spector-Mersel (2011) has reminded us, “While in relation to early and middle adulthood, we find clear models of dignified masculinity, these become vague, and even non-existent, when referring to later life” (p. 73). As a result, ways of being an appropriately masculine old(er) man are culturally open, potentially allowing for diverse, contradictory and different ways of expressing masculinity. In this regard, cultural spaces that celebrate the experiences of late(r) life men, such as the local curling club, have the potential to be important sites of healthier, less aggressive and more supportive sporting masculinity — a notion that the curlers in this project

repeatedly expressed. Although these curlers' aging expressions of masculinity were sometimes tied to the functionality of their bodies, their disavowal of modified curling practices, their difference from women, and their intellectual superiority, curlers also expressed expanded notions of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, many of these curlers expressed counter-hegemonic masculine identities, built on caring, close relationships with other men, the celebration of diverse abilities, and interdependence.

Importantly, late(r)-life curlers also began to challenge culturally pervasive active aging discourses that reject old-old age, embrace independence and rigorous exercise, and suggest that to age well one must emulate the body styles associated with youthful activity (see Lamb 2017; Timonen 2016). In curling's focus on inclusive physical activity, in its celebration of diverse bodies, and, importantly, in the structure of the curling club, which encourages interdependence instead of independence, we might see diverse ways to celebrate both later-life masculinity and aging.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research assistants Stephanie Dotto, Victoria Kyle, and Cristi Flood for their important work on this project. This research was made possible by the support of a Social Science and Humanities Research Council, Canada, Insight Development Grant (430-2015-00135).

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