

Beating the Buzzer: The Construction of Aging Hockey Masculinity

Kristi A. Allain

St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB

Abstract

In spite of the fact that the media and the public often revere elite male hockey players as exemplars of masculinity, these same groups largely ignore these men when they become old. Moreover, there is very little scholarly research on old(er) hockey players. In contrast, this paper examines the gender expressions of the men who played for the Silver Skaters, an old-timers hockey league in a mid-sized central Canadian city. Although sometimes players met the standard of youthful hegemonic masculinity, they more often broke with it, expressing their own unique forms of ageing hockey masculinity focused on a censure of violence and aggression and an emphasis on an ethic of care and inclusion. In the wake of calls to change the culture of young men's elite-level hockey, the gender performances of these late(r)-life men, shaped by the structure of their hockey league, demonstrates that alternative hockey masculinities are possible.

Keywords: hockey, ageing/aging, masculinity, sport, gender

It was the 9:00 am game. Team Black was facing off against Team Orange. When I arrived at the arena, the sound of men talking and laughing emanated from the cramped locker room. The players finally took to the ice, their jerseys faded and marked, showing signs of wear from repeated washing over the nearly complete season. When the players took to the ice, the game was surprisingly fast, starting at a fair tempo and speeding up over its allotted 90 minutes. In this culture of youthful sports, where so-called old-timers hockey begins at 35 years, The Real Oldtimers, the hockey league housing the Silver Skaters, is *truly* designed for the old. Players enter the league at 55 years, or a bit younger if they are injured. To make the league equitable, The Real Oldtimers offers divisions for over-55s, over-63s and over-70s. The Silver Skaters, with whom I spent six weeks in the winter of 2020, are the league's oldest (and most revered) players, a dedicated bunch of men 70 years and older.

Scholars of sport have all but forgotten the hockey played by those late(r)-life men, as well as their participation in team sports more widely. Although the youthful hockey of boys and younger men warrants some scholarly examinations (Allain, 2008; Alsarve and Angelin, 2020; MacDonald, 2018), once that hockey is played by the old, scholarship drops off significantly. A search of the terms “hockey” and “ageing/aging” in EBSCOhost's SocINDEX produced no meaningful results. A search of abstracts from seven sessions (2005–2018) of The Hockey Conference — a biennial interdisciplinary conference of hockey scholars — shows no obvious discussions of late(r)-life hockey. Likewise, my examination of the local sports pages found that, aside from the odd public interest story frequently located outside the sports sections of prominent Canadian newspapers, accounts of ageing hockey players are rare. So in spite of the fact that, as Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) attest, male sports stars who

participate in collision sports like hockey are often revered by the media and the public as exemplars of masculinity, these same men are largely ignored when they become old.

In this paper, I examine the gender expressions of late(r)-life hockey-playing men. While attending to these men's understandings of themselves and other players, I explore how playing hockey in late(r) life both meets the standard of Canadian hegemonic hockey masculinity cited by gender scholars as well as departs from it (see Allain, 2008). Following the work of Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe (2014, 2018), I argue that this gender expression is a unique form of hybrid masculinity, breaking with and at times conforming to hegemonic masculinity. What makes this form of ageing sports masculinity different from other hybrid expressions is the men's marginal position in the gender order, as old age is associated with subordination and marginalization (Calasanti, 2020; Pietilä et al., 2013). As a result, the league's marginal position facilitates the expressions of masculinity produced within, as it is strictly old men who police the gender expressions in the league. Although ageing hockey masculinity may present a more equitable and more inclusive way to play the game, given the subordinate position of the old, and their exclusion from popular representations and youthful versions of the game, the potential of this league to provide lessons to elite-level boys' and men's hockey is currently (sadly) limited.

To begin, I briefly examine the extant literature on masculinities, including hegemonic, hybrid, and late(r)-life masculinities. I then outline the methods that ground this work and discuss the performances of masculinity by these old(er) hockey-playing men. This work aligns with Michael Messner's (2002) study of the structure, performance and representation of Little League soccer. I argue that based on the structure of the game and a lack of popular representation of old players, the hockey played by these old(er) men did not strictly conform to the gender ideals associated with elite-level men's and boys' hockey or hegemonic hockey

masculinity. Although sometimes players met these standards, they often broke with them, expressing their own form of ageing hockey masculinity, one that was in some ways more inclusive than the competitive form publicly celebrated in Canada.

This work strengthens our limited understandings of how old men do gender, highlighting how gender expressions are tied to the life course. Further, in the wake of increasing calls to change the culture of young men's elite-level hockey (Larkin, 2019), the gender performances of these late(r)-life men, shaped by the structure of their hockey league and the dearth of representations of ageing athletes, help to show that alternative hockey masculinities are possible.

No place for the old?: Hegemonic masculinity and cultures of men's sport

Hegemonic masculinity, conceptualized by Connell, asserts the importance of viewing gender as relational, in conversation with other gender expressions (specifically those expressed by women); as changeable over time and by place; as normative, but significantly not normal. Hegemonic masculinities are structured hierarchically, working to secure men's positions of privilege over women and men who express subordinate masculine expressions. Connell points out that most men fail to meet hegemonic standards, although because of their position in the gender order, they often benefit from them (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Expressions of hegemonic masculinity change over time and in response to social challenges both internal (from other men) and external (from those who are not men) (Demetriou, 2001). As masculinity is hegemonic, there is considerable flexibility in the ways that social actors express and celebrate dominant expressions of masculinity. For these reasons, the concept has proven important amongst gender scholars, including those who have studied gender and sport.

Extant literature on men's and boys' sports has drawn from Connell's work. Prominent scholars in the field such as Messner (2002) have demonstrated the multifaceted ways that the gender order — one that frequently privileges men and dominant expressions of masculinity while marginalizing women and gender expressions tied to femininities — is maintained and developed not only through the performative aspects of how one “does gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987), but also through the support that social institutions (like elite-level men's and boy's hockey leagues) and popular media lend to it. These literatures have also drawn attention to the ways that sporting environments marginalize certain people and groups and how external challenges routinely reconceptualize these hegemonic models (Demetriou, 2001).

Since the inception of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, scholars in the field have reassessed and challenged it (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005). For example, Mike Donaldson (1993) has pointed out that gender scholars need to be more attentive to the actual ways that exemplars express (or do not express) hegemonic masculinity, citing (among others) those widely celebrated men who participate in elite-level sports. When judged against the lived realities of men these so-called exemplars of hegemonic masculinity seem less than hegemonic in their real lives. Citing self-discipline, carework, and disability as some of the challenges they face, these gender expressions appear to contradict masculine hegemony, raising important concerns for understanding the experiences of men in late(r) life.

Likewise, Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018) have examined how hybrid masculine expressions, particularly those presented by privileged men (e.g., white, young, able-bodied, and straight) paradoxically secure the gender order, even when they might appear to be challenging it. They argue that these hybrid forms of gender expression create distance between well-educated and financially stable white men and their working-class and racialized counterparts —

shoring up the privileged positions of certain men while further marginalizing others. This work highlights how these breaks can appear progressive while actually offering very little substantive challenge of the privileged positions of some men:

By framing an extraordinarily privileged group of men as both the embodiment and harbinger of feminist change, social scientists participate in further marginalizing poor men, working-class men, religious men, undereducated men, rural men, and men of color (among others).

(Bridges and Pascoe, 2018: p. 266)

The caution raised by Bridges and Pascoe (2018) is important when examining the gender expressions of old(er) men. As I will argue below, although these men appear to take up a hybrid expression of masculinity, given their marginalized positions as old and the accompanying disregard of their gender expression, their challenge to hegemonic hockey masculinity is significant, although it goes almost entirely unnoticed by scholars, the broader hockey community, and the public.

In spite of this, the literature addressing late(r)-life masculinities has grown in recent years, from completely ignoring the gender of late(r)-life actors to growing the focus on how gender structures the experiences of the old (Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016). As Bartholomaeus and Tarrant (2015) argue, the lives of the old (as well as the very young) have important lessons for gender scholars. They assert that it is important to explore the experiences and understandings of those at the margins of hegemonic masculinity. In spite of this, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the work on hybrid gender expressions (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), have largely ignored the old (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2015; King and Calasanti, 2013).

Common sense positions hockey-playing men as conforming to leading notions of masculinity (i.e., putting their bodies at risk, valuing competition, staying active in late[r] life, etc.). However, their positions as hegemonic exemplars is undermined by their advanced age. Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) identifies this limitation in the literature on hegemonic masculinity, arguing that current temporal conceptualizations of masculinities are either too broad (i.e., examining gender over vast historical epochs) or too narrow (i.e., examining how gender expression changes for an individual, based on the environment), contending that scholars have largely ignored the lived experiences of masculinities over the lifespan. This gap also exists in media representations of older men. As Edward Thompson Jr. (2006) points out, the representation of old men calls into question whether advertisers even perceive them as men. However, late(r)-life men engage in activities that are tied to hegemonic expressions of masculinity within popular culture, including sport (Drummond, 2008). It is important to understand how these activities both contribute to and challenge hegemonic expressions of masculinity.

Methods

I spent six weeks in the winter of 2019–2020 with the Silver Skaters hockey division, watching morning hockey games, chatting with family members, and observing the players interact on and off the ice. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight players from the division and participated in informal conversations with players, administrators, and league stakeholders. Aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry, and specifically their concept of credibility, I spent time with this hockey community in an effort to understand its structures and how the players' hockey activities influenced their understandings of themselves.

The Silver Skaters played hockey twice a week at a twin pad hockey arena in a medium-sized central Canadian city. The hockey league housing the Silver Skaters, called The Real Oldtimers, was created by men who had decided, for a number of reasons (including age, skill, time of games, fear of injury, etc.), to discontinue their participation in old-timers hockey (which generally accommodates men over 35 years of age). These men recognized that many players still wished to continue playing in late(r) life, but wanted to do so in a league that was better suited to their life stage. The Real Oldtimers accommodates approximately 300 players amongst its three divisions. All the players in the league were men, although it did not appear to be a formal rule of play and many players commented that they would welcome women to the league.

The participants had a mean age of 75.4 years, ranging in age from 71 to 82 years. All the players identified as straight. Six of the men were married, one was divorced and another widowed. The public would have read these men's bodies as white. All but one appeared financially comfortable. Three of the eight men were working-class, having no postsecondary education and occupying employment that focused on their bodies. The others occupied middle-class positions, with postsecondary training at university or college. All of the players played hockey as children, and only one player was a goaltender. Barring a few breaks when their families were young, most had played hockey somewhat consistently since their youth, with two players playing steadily from the time they learned the game. Two of the players had sustained breaks from the game for more than thirty years. The formal interviews lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. In one instance, a player's wife participated.

To obtain trustworthiness, I used the criteria outlined by Lorelli Nowell, Jill Norris, Deborah White, and Nancy Moules (2017). They explain that thematic analysis requires the researcher to first “familiarize [themselves] with [the] data” (p. 4); “generate initial codes” (p. 5); “search for

themes” (p. 8); “define and name themes” (p. 10); and write up the findings. My research assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim. Both the research assistant and I read these interviews multiple times and recorded our initial thoughts. I then assigned codes, marking material that recurred during the interviews. Moving from codes to themes, I reflected on what was important about this work and grouped the coded material into meaningful clusters that addressed this. The themes captured here align with theories of masculinities, particularly the ways that the ageing men supported and broke from youthful hockey-style masculinity (Allain, 2008).

In order to compare dominant masculine expression in young and older men’s hockey, I triangulated the data. This added complexity allowed me to speak about the broader social context in which these men “do gender.” I drew on both my previous work on hockey masculinity (see Allain, 2008) and contemporary media accounts of elite-level hockey in North America. These elite leagues are where some Canadian hockey players make their living, and where Canadian fans learn, through media representations of the players and the game, what it means to be an appropriately masculine hockey-playing man.

“It is a very special league”: The structure of the ageing hockey masculinity

Stakeholders designed modern sport institutions in order to secure the masculinity of particular men. Historian Bruce Kidd (2013: p. 553) argues that “men have created sports to celebrate and buttress patriarchal (and class) power,” leading to the exclusion of women and the proliferation of patriarchy. Messner (2002) uses the example of children’s soccer to illustrate that the structure of the sport separates girls/women and boys/men into two different leagues in a way that perpetuates social understandings about a supposedly quintessential difference between girls/women and boys/men.

With only a few exceptions, men and women play ice hockey separately, often using different rules of play, particularly at the elite levels. While body checking forms an important part of the men's game, it is sanctioned in the women's. Within the gender order, hockey stakeholders, players and fans have used body checking as a way of (problematically) generating differences between men and women, aligning hard physicality as demonstrated by body checking with "masculinity." The version of the game that includes body checking has become the standard form (Theberge, 1997). Consequently, popular culture connects punishing physicality to the bodies of men and boys and positions this version as the "real" game (Theberge, 1997: p. 82). It is not only hitting in the men's game that produces a hockey style aligned with hegemonic masculinity (see Allain, 2008, 2019). Within popular culture, hockey stakeholders and the media denigrate hockey that does not meet the North American standard of punishing physicality, exemplified by hitting hard, fighting willingly, ignoring injuries, and playing with pain (see Hughes and Coakley, 1991). Public celebrations of hegemonic sports masculinity and the denigration of traits associated with femininity partly structure this kind of masculinity. This exalted masculine expression, documented on television and within the structure of the game (Allain, 2008), has marginalized women, administrators and fans (Crawford and Gosling, 2004), racialized people (Lorenz and Murray, 2014; Pitter, 2006;), sexual minorities (MacDonald, 2018), and non-North Americans players (Allain, 2008).

From youth to competitive levels, men's and boys' hockey embeds this structure of the game, and the press, the public, and hockey stakeholders celebrate the players who align with this form of masculine expression (Allain, 2008). Although competitive men's hockey informs most other types of hockey, the hockey played by the Silver Skaters, excluded from mainstream hockey, frequently broke with some of these more dominant forms of masculinity. This game's rules of

play, method of team selection, and even its “culture” appeared to allow players to express a unique form of ageing hockey masculinity.

Team Selection:

In many different ways, the structure of the league undermined the style of masculinity frequently revered in elite-level men’s and boy’s hockey. The league had a complex team selection process that aimed for parity rather than producing the best team possible. This process rated each player by position, with the goal of creating what Elmer (80 years old) called “good balance.” Although the teams were not equal at all positions, those responsible for putting players on teams attempted to balance inequities as best they could. Elmer explained, for example, that “the [manager] with the poorest goaltender gets the best defense.” Although not perfect, the result was a league that valued fairness over competition.¹

Players lauded this system, claiming that it made hockey safer for players at their age. Players disagreed on who or if they kept score. Amos (71) commented, “Everybody knows the score,” but Roy (82) claimed, “winning at our age is not in . . . my . . . lexicon.” Walter (76) remarked, “There are no more trophies.” His wife reminded Walter that “the scouts are gone!” Walter laughed, “The Leafs aren’t coming to pick you up!”²

Rules of Play:

¹ Anecdotal evidence from youth coaches and Opie and Opie (1969) found that non-competitive children’s sports and games, when divorced from adult supervision, also valued fairness by providing flexible rules to accommodate the varying abilities of the children playing.

² The “Leafs” refers to the Toronto Maple Leafs, a professional hockey team in the National Hockey League (NHL).

The rules of the game, explicit and implicit, also differed from competitive hockey. The explicit rules protected players from obvious injury, prohibiting body checking and slapshots — a method of shooting the puck marked by a pronounced wind-up. Some players saw this as an opportunity to develop other skills, including the wrist shot, where the power for the shot is generated through the wrist. Walter remarked that “a good wrist shot will get the puck through.” Unlike competitive hockey, which is played for 60 minutes, the Silver Skaters played for a lengthy 90 minutes without stoppages (i.e., whistles), and the league was self-regulated with no on-ice officials. Jerome (71) explained:

If you go over the blue line before the puck, the team yells “offside,” and nobody bitches, everybody slows. You don’t need refs. We play an hour and a half too . . . so . . . nobody’s complaining about ice time.

The league structure enabled the men to play in a way that was suited to the needs of old(er) bodies.

The implicit rules of hockey, together with its explicit rules, form what the popular press once called “the code” but have more recently dubbed “hockey culture” (Larkin, 2019). Within youthful men’s hockey in North America, hockey culture dictates how the game is played, how grievances are addressed, and how relationships occur amongst players. Although formerly celebrated by hockey insiders and outsiders, this culture has also led to problematic behaviour on and off the ice. Most recently, players from the NHL and its premier feeder league, the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), have documented bullying and abuse by players, coaches, and others in the league (Feschuk, 2019). Although the public, the press, and even some players have called for a change in hockey culture, that change is belied by systemic issues that just don’t seem to go away (Oland, 2020).

In contrast stands the hockey played by the Silver Skaters. Here, most players replace this problematic hockey culture with a culture that values respect, safety, and comradery. Although the players frequently used the language of a hockey “code,” this code was premised on actual respect for one another and player safety. This was very different than the hockey “code” for young men, which involves settling scores with physical violence, standing up for teammates through physical aggression, playing the game without fear, and creating a closed community where the secrets of the locker room stay in the locker room (Allain, 2014). For the Silver Skaters, the “code” meant sanctioning aggressive play, protecting players from injury, and valuing fun over competition.

Several players explained that the league policed on-ice violence and aggression that might lead to injury for the players. Elmer described the informal mechanisms for addressing this, explaining, “If there’s a player out there that’s a little bit aggressive, then it’s up to that team manager to speak with him.” He clarified that if the situation did not resolve, the case would be escalated to league officials, and finally the player would be dismissed from the league. He stated, “There’s no place for it!”

Bernard (79) explained:

Some boys used to be quite competitive, and we had to let them know that . . . you are playing in just a recreational fun league. . . . We had warned one guy who was too aggressive, and we had given him two warnings, sent him a letter, and we eventually had to ask him to leave.

League officials were thoughtful in applying these sanctions, recognizing that sometimes it took players a while to learn this new style of play and that some might be dealing with cognitive disabilities. Elmer, a retired social worker, told the story of a player who had been asked to leave because of on-ice aggression. After sitting out for a short time, the player was welcomed back:

He was pretty well a changed man as far as aggressiveness was concerned, and . . . everyone got to know him . . . They started to like him and got to know the qualities he did have.

Elmer described the significance of giving that player a second chance, recounting his leadership when helping a player with dementia dress for games. He commented, “We made damn sure that [the player with dementia] sat next to [him].”

The league also offered leniency for players adjusting to cognitive issues. During my field work, I met Sally, the wife of Chester, a player recently diagnosed with dementia. Sally mentioned that Chester could be a bit aggressive on the ice. I witnessed her watching him closely when he played. She would stiffen and sigh when he whacked at a player with his stick or pushed someone. The participants commented that they were excited to have Chester in the league and spoke about the strategies that they used to keep him playing and keep other players safe, including distracting him if he became agitated.

The Silver Skaters’ hockey culture also addressed on-ice safety in less formal ways. As skill differences between the players could also pose a problem, participants often pointed out players whose speed created hazardous conditions for both themselves and others. A player would gesture to a man, new to the league, and comment that he still hadn’t learned to slow down. As Walter stated, “We’ve got a couple . . . I don’t think they’re aggressive, but they’re fast, eh? And as you get older, you can’t stop as quick either. . . . Some do come in quite hard on the goalies.” More than one player described an incident where a player who came in too fast on a goalie had himself fallen into the boards and sustained a serious injury, explaining that this sort of aggressive behaviour could be catastrophic.

Despite league attempts to make the game as safe as possible, there were moments when players accidentally collided or fell on the ice. Bernard explained the league’s “basic underlying

rule,” stating, “If anybody falls, the play stops . . . automatically. If anybody falls on the ice, we . . . make sure they’re okay. You know, help them up.” This concern for players arose from seeing players get injured and understanding that serious injuries were a real possibility when playing hockey in one’s 70s and 80s. Clyde (73) pointed out:

[Players] know that injuries aren’t fun. And it could be the last hurrah . . . if a guy falls wrong. We’ve had people break their necks and people take a stroke on the ice, so we know how fragile we are — that it’s not fun getting hurt. . . . I try to be careful.

The structure of the league facilitated a kind of hockey play premised on a somewhat hybrid style of masculine expression that at times distinguished itself from the hegemonic hockey masculinity. Although players sometimes acted aggressively on the ice, the league actively curtailed aggression, privileged player safety, valued fun over competition, and allowed flexibility in the rules to accommodate players as they adjusted to this new hockey culture. The results of this structure created a league that *actually* accommodated the needs of old players. Elmer (80) said, “It’s a very special league.” In the following section, I discuss how the players themselves facilitated the performance of ageing hockey masculinity, which both aligned with and broke from iterations of the sport publicly associated with elite-level play and younger players.

“Guys care . . . a bit different”: The performance of ageing hockey masculinity

Aligning with hegemonic hockey masculinity:

We know very little about how sporting masculinities structure the experiences of the old (Drummond, 2008). The participants’ performance of ageing hockey masculinity both met the standards of youthful hegemonic hockey masculinity and deviated from it. Following Drummond (2008), the men enjoyed the bodily competence associated with being physically active in later

life, the comradery of other men, and the bonding that occurred in the locker room. These performances of masculinity paralleled in many ways the expressions of masculinity celebrated by younger elite-level hockey-playing men and boys — including the disavowal of fear and the emphasis on playing through pain.

The men in this study accepted injury and pain as a part of the game, especially in late(r) life. Jerome (71), a former service worker, suffered through debilitating hip pain without the aid of anti-inflammatories or painkillers. Living by the credo “if you don’t use it, you lose it,” he commented that he wanted to “tough it out.” He cheekily added, “don’t be a wimp.” Elmer, who had rushed his return to play after a back injury, explained the he too did not like to take medication, but felt compelled to if he was going to continue playing hockey and cycling:

I had been on anti-inflammatories for quite a while, and [some guy] said to me, “Oh my back hurts.” And I’d say, “Why don’t you take an Advil?” [He replied,] “Oh I don’t want to take an Advil.” I said, “You know, I don’t want to either, but I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

Jerome explained that old(er) men frequently played with pain and described a lack of sympathy amongst some of his teammates, recounting an incident where he had been complaining about his pain to a teammate. The teammate, who himself had broken his hip in an accident, told him to “quit bitching!” Likewise, Clyde (73) embodied a no-holds-barred approach to ageing. After describing a myriad of injuries sustained over his lifetime, including gunshot wounds, stabbings, and broken bones, he reasoned, “Life is what you make it. . . . You put in a day — a good day — and you’ll be gratified by feeling good about yourself.”

Players downplayed the risk of hockey to their bodies, arguing that while some players had died on the ice of heart attacks and strokes, they themselves were in good health and such health emergencies were unlikely to happen to them. Jerome and Walter contended that they had no

issues with their hearts. Amos (71), who had sustained a heart attack in his 60s, shrugged off the risk of hockey in later life. Despite his wife's worries, he felt confident that by "listening to [his] body," preparing to quit when he felt it was time, and having regular doctor's appointments, he would mitigate the risk.

For some participants, part of later-life hockey masculinity appeared to be the denial of old age. As Walter explained, "You get out there and you think you're still young, but you're not." This attitude in some ways increased the risk of injury to those players, as they ignored the needs of their ageing bodies, with one player resorting to the use of narcotics in order to maintain his on-ice performances.

As Drummond (2008: p. 33) has argued, sport may prove to be an important place for securing masculine expressions in late(r) life, where men focus on bodily competence and use "their bodies [as] tools" (see Liechty et al., 2014). Likewise, he found that late(r)-life sport provided an outlet for men to engage socially with other men. Laura Hurd Clarke, Lauren Currie and Erica Bennett (2018) found that older men engaged in physical activity for pleasure, but also in order to perform boundary work around the fourth age, a time participants associated with dependence and decline. Likewise, work by Allain (2020b) and Phoenix and Orr (2014) also stressed the importance of pleasure in late(r)-life physical activity. These participants seemed most focused on the pleasure hockey brought them, largely through their comradery with other men and the freedom to, in the words of Wilson (71), "say lewdly, loudly, whenever!" Wilson described the relationships fostered in the locker room as "adult adolescence." For Wilson and others, hockey friendships lacked the depth associated with long-time intimate friendships, but provided a particular space for expressing a form of masculinity that might not be available elsewhere. Roy (82) explained, "You have to have a thick hide [or] you'll never survive in the

dressing room.” Wilson, a psychotherapist, used the language of yin (normatively feminine) and yang (normatively masculine) to describe the benefits he gained from the sport:

In some ways, my yin energies have been well developed, perhaps more than in most men. And in some ways, my yang energies were underdeveloped. From a healthier balance perspective, hockey had really helped me develop my yang expressivity. To be more assertive. To be more directly physical.

The participants’ comments mirror Messner’s (1990) findings about the experiences of younger athletes. He comments, “[Sport] provides clear-cut boundaries around men’s affiliations with each other. Here men can develop a certain kind of closeness with each other while not having to deal with the kinds of (intimate) attachments they are predisposed to feel fearful of” (p. 209). To quote Bernard (79), “Guys care . . . a bit different[ly].”

Allain (2014) and MacDonald (2018) have pointed out that locker room banter and the culture of youthful hockey degrade all that is considered feminine. However, in spite of some troubling locker room talk associated with their bodies and pain, the participants did not appear to denigrate women and queer folk — an important behaviour of hegemonic masculinity — or to privilege their own expressions of masculinity as superior to marginalized others. They resisted this form of hegemonic differentiation and did not use the dressing room to objectify women.

Bernard explained that they ribbed each other about the game and checked in on their teammates’ wives, especially if they were dealing with health issues: “After the game, we always talk about the game . . . if you got a decent goal, the guys would congratulate you.” He continued, “There’s about 45 minutes before game time. . . . We all take our time getting dressed. . . . We know each other so well that it extends to [*pause*] if your wife’s not feeling well, they ask about that.” Wilson attributed this shifting locker room culture to being older. He stated,

“It’s a maturation process, respecting perhaps the different goals, purposes of playing and so forth.”

Given that hegemony operates in discussion with subordinated masculinities (Connell and Messerschmitt, 2005), it is important to address how old(er) men “go about managing their subordinate status in ageist societies, and what strategies of resistance and reformulation to ageless guidelines are adopted” (Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2016: p. 137; see Liechty et al., 2014). Josefin Eman (2013: p. 37) has found that there are “conflicting norms regarding how an old man should relate to his body and health.” So while these men reproduced hegemonic gender expressions through their disavowal of risk, bawdy locker room banter, and tough-it-out attitudes, their position as old men meant that they struggled to fully imitate these gender ideals. As a result, in an environment that privileged the old, they also found room to celebrate their own ageing masculinities in ways that challenged this hegemonic model.

Breaking from hegemonic hockey masculinity:

As these men in some ways conformed to hegemonic hockey masculinity, they also deviated from it in important ways. First, they used hockey to express real care and concern for others, using their own physical competence to build up other men. They celebrated ageing hockey players and those with physical and cognitive disabilities. Hockey was a space to accept bodily limitations and ageing, value inclusion, and privilege care. Notably, they expressed a unique form of ageing hockey masculinity through their celebration of the old and the compassion they demonstrated towards players dealing with age-related health concerns and disabilities.

Within sport circles, the ageing body is often ignored, with late(r)-life athletes quickly dismissed from elite-level sport, often even before mid-life. Scholarly work on older athletes marks them as remarkably young, defining as “old” retired elite-level athletes (Stan, 2017) and

elite-level athletes competing at 40 or near the end of their careers (Atkinson & Herro, 2010; Trujillo, 1991). Popular culture rarely celebrates ageing bodies, especially the bodies of the truly old, and as evidenced by the lack of fans at Silver Skaters' games, the public does not consider their activities important. In spite of this, the Silver Skaters appeared to celebrate ageing. Players routinely retold the stories of friends in the league who came to play hockey late in life or continued playing in their eighties. Walter explained, "It's amazing that the fellas that are in this league that are over eighty! . . . As a kid, you never thought you'd be playing at that age!" Players listed the names of men who played in their 80s, regarding them with great reverence, regardless of their skill level. Jerome described how younger players accommodated older players: "These guys that are in their eighties . . . when they handle the puck and stuff, guys don't push them . . . they kind of give them a little space." He described one player in particular: "Gerald, he played defense, but he got the puck. . . . Nobody would push him. . . . I always said to Gerald, 'The more power to you man!' . . . I probably won't make it [to] eighty."

This respect for ageing players translated into new forms of hockey that privileged fun and allowed players of all skill levels to participate. Many players commented that as they aged, their enjoyment came from creating space for others' successes. Amos explained:

It's respect that they have for their skillset at this age. And it's a respect they should have for each other. Like Saul's down there in goal. . . . He hadn't played in 25–26 years. If I'm playing against Saul, I'll shoot wide even though I might have an option for an open net. Amos and others used their skills to help their teammates. He explained, "I would always rather set up a goal than score a goal. . . . that's rewarding to me."

This ethics of building up other players were tied to the physical realities of ageing and the body. As Susan Bordo (2000) points out, masculinities are deeply embedded in the body. For

these old(er) men, playing hockey in this environment allowed them to recognize, accept, and in some instances celebrate the realities of their bodies and age-related changes. As Bernard asserted, “[Playing old-timers hockey] is part of accepting that you can’t do what you used to be able to do.” He continued, “It’s not a down[er]. It’s just facing reality.” Wilson demonstrated that this understanding of the ageing body allowed players to show a level of admiration for older players that they didn’t in in earlier life: “The hockey I’ve played in this league, compared to previous leagues, there always seems to be more . . . respect.”

Respect and knowledge about the unique issues associated with ageing led to expanded notions of care and facilitated forms of carework not associated with hegemonic hockey-style masculinity. While the construction of hegemonic Canadian hockey-style masculinity is premised on a uniformity, where difference is strictly sanctioned (Allain, 2008, 2014), ageing hockey masculinity recognizes differences in physical and cognitive ability as an essential component of late(r) life. Players spoke about how disability and disease impacted their own hockey play and the play of others, finding the Silver Skaters to respect difference over competition and skill. Bernard stated, “Guys . . . who have issues, we all know, and we all respect it.” Amos echoed this:

We’re all at the same point pretty much in life, and there is no happy ending moving forward . . . There’s guys that have been around for a while and have been dealing with cancer and other situations, so that’s caring.

The result of this attitude, formulated through a self-awareness directly tied to ageing, meant that players in the Silver Skaters could express care for others that they had been unable or unwilling to express when they were younger. Amos commented that the free time that came with his retirement allowed him express care in ways that were unavailable in his early life:

“When you’re working . . . your focus is home and driving yourself forward.” The result of this was a league that both welcomed and celebrated difference, and oftentimes facilitated the participation of players with disabilities. Elmer relayed the story of a player with a neurological disorder. The team provided the necessary care for him to participate: “We took care of him. We made sure he got home alright. When he was on the ice, nobody went near him because he was very unsteady on his skates. But he loved the game.” When this player could no longer play, the team encouraged him to coach and manage from the bench, allowing him access to the comradery of the dressing room. Numerous players recounted stories of other players who needed help dressing or special direction on the ice because of physical and/or cognitive issues. Teammates respected these players’ love of the game and facilitated their access, recognizing that they too might one day need that accommodation. Remarkably, they understood this carework as not only enabling the enjoyment of others, but also as adding to their own fun. They were proud of their own contributions to this environment — an environment that appears alien to the elite-level hockey associated with younger players.

Lessons for the Old

Sport can shape normative understandings about gender and its everyday expressions (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and often contains exemplars of masculinity. The institutional structure of sport, its representation in the press, and the performances of sport by everyday actors secure particular expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 2002). In North American boys’ and men’s hockey, these expressions are often linked to violence, aggression, and, increasingly, abuse (Allain, 2008). Academics studying sport and masculinity have largely focused on the gender expressions of young men and boys. As a result, we know little about how old(er) men both take up and reject these normative models of masculine

expression (Spector-Mersel, 2006), and how they might offer us models of masculinity that celebrate difference, disavow violence, and offer more equity.

In this work, I found men in late(r) life who had developed their own league and ways of playing that privileged their own needs. In the absence of models of late(r)-life sporting masculinity, the men in this study both took up and rejected some of the younger models of hegemonic hockey masculinity, creating their own seemingly hybrid model. Although they accepted pain and sacrifice for their sport, they also privileged fun and fair play over competition. They circumvented the misogyny and homophobia often associated with men's locker-room spaces, and despite teasing one another about game play, found time to inquire about the health and well-being of their teammates. They valued certain differences, creating space for those with different skills, celebrating the old (including the very old), and including those with both physical and cognitive disabilities.

Given the subordinate position of the old, these men did not embody the privileged forms of hybrid masculinity described by scholars like Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018). Hybrid masculinity, when embodied by the privileged (white, able-bodied, straight, financially secure men), often secures the gender expressions of those in power, while appearing to adjust to social criticisms and critiques (Demetriou, 2001). In this case, as the public, state actors, the media, some scholars, and sport officials frequently ignore how those in late(r) life participate in sports and “do gender,” their late(r)-life sporting gender expression develops without the same sorts of discipline as those in elite-level men's and boys' sports. This may mean a broadening of the allowable forms of sporting masculinity, forms that may not be easily expressed by younger, competitive players. However, although the freedom resulting from a lack of public interest may facilitate late(r)-life hockey masculinity, these gender expressions are not produced in direct

conversation with more visible hegemonic hockey masculinity. Therefore, because neither Canada nor its dominant hockey culture celebrate ageing hockey masculinity as an exemplary gender expression, I cannot describe it as hegemonic or even a current challenge to the hegemonic model.

However, this model of ageing hockey masculinity does provide lessons for men's hockey more broadly. As hockey culture in North America increasingly comes under fire for its inability to celebrate actual difference — including differences of class, race, age, sexuality, gender, and ability — the Silver Skaters point to an expression of ageing masculinity that is in some ways inclusive. Much of this comes from a focus on fun, a lack of competition, and the inclusion of players with very different skills. Our job now, as sport sociologists, is to find ways to amplify these marginal but important versions of the game, both within men's hockey and in sports broadly.

Acknowledgments: This work was generously funded by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant (435-2018-0260) and the Canada Research Chair Program. I would like recognize my research participants and their families for generously sharing their experiences, my research assistants, Madison Bird and Stephanie Dotto, for their help with this project and my peer reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

References

- Allain KA (2008) “Real fast and tough”: The construction of Canadian hockey masculinity. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(4): 462–481.
- Allain KA (2014) “What happens in the room stays in the room”: Conducting research with young men in elite-level ice hockey. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 6(2): 205–219.
- Allain KA (2020) Winter of Our Contentment: Examining Risk, Pleasure, and Emplacement in Later-Life Physical Activity. *Journal of Aging Studies*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100895>.
- Alsarve D and Angelin M (2020) “It’s freer and easier in a changing room, because the barriers disappear. . .”: A Swedish case study of masculinity ideals, language and social status amongst Swedish ice hockey players. *European Journal for Sport & Society* 17(1): 26–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1706239>.
- Atkinson JL and Herro SK (2010) From the chartreuse kid to the wise old gnome of tennis: Age stereotypes as frames describing Andre Agassi at the U.S. Open. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 34(1): 86–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723509358966>.
- Bartholomaeus C and Tarrant A (2015) Masculinities at the margins of “middle adulthood”: What a consideration of young age and old age offers masculinities theorizing. *Men and Masculinities* 19(4): 351–369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x15588592>.
- Bordo S (2000) *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bridges T and Pascoe CJ (2014) Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass* 8(3): 246–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134>.

- Bridges T and Pascoe CJ (2018) On the elasticity of gender hegemony: Why hybrid masculinities fail to undermine gender and sexual inequality. In: Messerschmidt JW, Martin PY, Messner MA and Connell R (eds) *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 254–274.
- Calasanti T (2020) Brown slime, the silver tsunami, and apocalyptic demography: The importance of ageism and age relations. *Social Currents* 7(3): 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496520912736>.
- Clarke LH, Currie L and Bennett EV (2018) “I don’t want to be, feel old”: Older Canadian men’s perceptions and experiences of physical activity. *Ageing & Society* 40(1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0144686x18000788>.
- Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
- Crawford G and Gosling VK (2004) The myth of the ‘puck bunny’: Female fans and men’s ice hockey. *Sociology* 38(3): 477–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038504043214>.
- Demetriou D (2001) Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique. *Theory and Society* 30: 337–361.
- Donaldson M (1993) What is hegemonic masculinity? *Theory & Society* 22(5): 643–657.
- Drummond M (2008) Sport, ageing men and constructions of masculinity. *Generations* 32(1): 32–35.
- Eman, J (2013) The complexity of physical capital: How old male athletes relate to body and health. *International Journal of Men’s Health* 12(1): 29–41.
- Feschuk D (2019) Wayward coaches and bully players can no longer hide behind hockey’s unwritten code of dressing room silence. *The Toronto Star*, 29 November. Available at:

www.thestar.com/sports/hockey/opinion/2019/11/29/wayward-coaches-and-bully-players-can-no-longer-hide-behind-hockeys-unwritten-code-of-dressing-room-silence.html.

Hughes R and Coakley J (1991) Positive deviance among athletes: The implications of overconformity to the sport ethic. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8: 307–325.

Kidd B (2013) Sport and masculinity. *Sport in Society* 16(4): 553–564.

King N and Calasanti T (2013) Men’s aging amidst intersecting relations of inequality. *Sociology Compass* 7(9): 699–710. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12064>.

Larkin M (2019) Culture in hockey: Progressive minds argue need for complete overhaul. *The Hockey News*, 27 November.

Liechty T, Ribeiro NF, Sveinson K and Dahlstrom L (2014) “It’s about what I can do with my body”: Body image and embodied experiences of aging among older Canadian men. *International Journal of Men’s Health* 13(1): 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.3149/jmh.1301.3>.

Lincoln Y and Guba EG (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lorenz SL and Murray R. (2014) “Goodbye to the gangstas”: The NBA dress code, Ray Emery, and the policing of Blackness in basketball and hockey. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 38(1): 23–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723513491750>.

MacDonald CA (2018) Insert name of openly gay hockey player here: Attitudes towards homosexuality among Canadian male major midget AAA ice hockey players. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 35: 347–357. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2017-0133>.

Messner MA (1990) When bodies are weapons: Masculinity and violence in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 25: 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269029002500303>.

- Messner MA (2002) *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sport*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nowell LS, Norris J, White DE and Moules NJ (2017) Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.
- Oland, I. (2020) Two of the finalists for the NHL’s ‘gentlemanly conduct’ award have either been arrested or charged with a crime. *Russian Machine Never Breaks*, 16 July. Available at: <https://russianmachineneverbreaks.com/2020/07/16/two-of-the-finalists-for-the-nhls-gentlemanly-conduct-award-have-either-been-arrested-or-charged-with-a-crime/>
- Opie I and Opie P (1969) *Children’s Games in the Street and Playground: Chasing, Catching, Seeking, Hunting, Racing, Duelling, Exerting, Daring, Guessing, Acting, Pretending*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pietilä I, Ojala H, King N and Calasanti T (2013) Aging male bodies, health and the reproduction of age relations. *Journal of Aging Studies* 27: 243–251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.04.001>
- Pitter R (2006) Racialization and hockey in Canada: From personal troubles to a Canadian challenge. In: Whitson D and Gruneau RS (eds) *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, pp.123–139.
- Phoenix C and Orr N (2014) Pleasure: A forgotten dimension of physical activity in older age. *Social Science & Medicine* 115: 94–102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.06.013>
- Spector-Mersel G (2006) Never-aging stories: Western hegemonic masculinity scripts. *Journal of Gender Studies* 15(1): 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230500486934>.

- Stan M (2017) Unique or double standard to aging in sport? Case of retired gymnasts. *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 8(2): 85–102.
- Theberge N (1997) “It’s part of the game”: Physicality and the production of gender in women’s hockey. *Gender & Society* 11(1): 69–87.
- Thompson EH (2006) Images of old men’s masculinity: Still a man? *Sex Roles* 55: 633–648.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9119-7>.
- Thompson EH and Langendoerfer KB (2016) Older men’s blueprint for “being a man.” *Men and Masculinities* 19(2): 119–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x15606949>.
- Trujillo N (1991) Hegemonic masculinity on the mound: Media representations of Nolan Ryan and American sports culture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 290–308.
- West C and Zimmerman DH (1987) Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1(2): 125–151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>.