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MEN’S TALK
A (Pro)feminist Analysis of Male University Football Players’ Discourse

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Abstract Building on previous discourse analytic studies in the context of male athletic cultures and subcultures, this article uses pro-feminist perspectives to analyse the talk of male university football (soccer) players in the UK. The (re)production of hegemonic masculinity in men’s football has largely been taken for granted in sociology of sport, with very little literature producing actual empirical research to support the claim. The study presents extracts of players’ conversations from the changing room and student bar, and examines the ways in which the men negotiate masculine positional identity and (re)affirm separation from the ‘other’, such as women and gay men. The three most predominant topics of conversation (excluding omnipresent talk about football itself) were identified as academic studies, alcohol consumption, and women. Each extract of the men’s talk was subjected to critical discourse analysis and is discussed in this article in relation to (pro)feminist debates about hegemony and constructions of masculine self.

Key words • academia • discourse analysis • football • masculinity • soccer

Introduction

Over the last two decades, male athletic and non-athletic cultures and subcultures have received some attention in, especially, pro-feminist academia (Curry, 1991, 1998; De Garis, 2000; Gough and Edwards, 1998; Hughson, 1998, 2000; Klein, 1990; Schacht, 1996). However, despite the global popularity of the game, the culture and subculture of association football (soccer) and the reproduction of dominant masculinities has largely been taken for granted. Giulianotti (1999), for example, describes football — aesthetically, structurally and culturally — as a prime site for the legitimation of men’s power over women. The nuances of these gendered processes, however, remain predominantly unexamined by way of a deficiency of actual research into the football milieu. A notable exception is Parker’s (1996, 2001) case study of the life-world of professional trainee football players in England, which depicts a strictly gendered and racialized regime established through, and as a part of a reciprocal process with, ‘official’ (organizational) and ‘unofficial’ (cultural, subcultural) norms and values. Such a scene is representative of male sporting cultures and subcultures more generally, which are regularly constructed through and dominated by patriarchal values, attitudes and behaviours (Bryson, 1987; Burstyn, 1999; Curry, 1991, 1998; De Garis,
This article provides extracts of male university football player’s changing room and bar talk. These extracts fall into three categories (talk of academia, talk of alcohol and talk of women), highlighting the complexities of the ways in which men’s discourse in these contexts is used largely as a means of negotiating masculine positional identity and (re)affirming separation from the ‘other’, such as women and gay men.

Background to Study

Conceptualizing Football Masculinities: A Pro-feminist Perspective

Feminist analysis of sport was pioneered, among others, by Hall (1972, 1978) and Greendorfer (1978), and paved the way for the first pro-feminist accounts of men, masculinity and sport (e.g. Sabo and Runfola, 1980). While feminist doctrines vary and have changed with time, the essential idea of feminism is equality. Pro-feminism describes men’s solidarity and support for this cause, and includes men concerned with anti-sexism, men’s studies and anti-patriarchy struggles. Pro-feminism, and feminism, is probably best defined through its consideration of systems of inequity as the root cause of sexist and paternalistic cultures, rather than assigning that responsibility to individual men (see Messner, 1990; Whitehead, 2002). In the period since these first pro-feminist accounts, conceptualizations of men and the ‘male role’ have developed into a more credible sociology of masculinity, largely attributable to the fresh outlook on men provided by Carrigan et al. (1985), which built on social practices rather than rudimentary discussion of rhetoric and attitudes and commonsensical versions of gendered characteristics. Connell’s (1987, 1995) maturation of this theorizing, and particularly his concept of hegemonic masculinity, have become widely utilized in pro-feminist analyses of sport and can help to make sense of men’s experiences of the many facets of western culture, including sport, education and their respective subcultures.

Based initially on Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, Connell (1995: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as:

[T]he configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

Indeed, the constitution of hegemonic masculinity changes historically and contextually, represented by the most time-honoured embodiments and expressions of power in any given context. Therefore, sport may exhibit a ‘brand’ of hegemonic masculinity that differs from that of other social institutions, and football and individual football locales may also exhibit a diverse arrangement of particular contextual idiosyncrasies and nuances. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell (1995: 76) defines it, is:

[N]ot a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.
There are two fundamental aspects to this contestation. First, masculinity is always contextually bound, and different life contexts may frequently cross over. This may be particularly evident in the university football milieu, where the athletic and academic contexts, and their opposing value systems, merge. Second, the interplay between gender, race, class and sexuality inevitably recognizes multiple forms of masculinity within any particular time and space, which are characterized as dynamic and relational to hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, Connell (1995) is moved to stipulate that the vast majority of men (and women) are *complicit* with male hegemony, rather than unconditionally and unproblematically connected to it. As such, hegemonic masculinity can only exist as a benchmark, and all men embody hegemonic and subordinated and marginalized masculinities at any one time.

Holt (1989) conveys that many of the emotions and attitudes expressed within football accord closely to a cluster of characteristics often considered to represent ‘true masculinity’. Football culture celebrates physical strength, loyalty to other men and to a specific territory, as well as more aggressive and often violent actions on the terraces and among hooligan groups (Russell, 1999). Moreover, football epitomizes the notion of sport as a male preserve, and basks in the philosophy of dominant masculinities and male ideology. Sabo and Panepinto (1990: 115), in their study of American Football, could just as easily have been referring to association football with their observation that:

> Football's historical prominence in sports media and folk culture has sustained a hegemonic model of masculinity that prioritizes competitiveness, athleticism, success (winning), aggression, violence, superiority to women, and respect for the compliance with male authority.

Indeed, football manages to project (hegemonic) masculine ideals by way of almost every component within its organizational structure. As Parker (2001: 59) indicates:

> Viewed either in terms of its occupational or social characteristics, English professional football is a strictly gendered affair. Its relational dynamics, its working practices, its commercial ventures, its promotional interests, are replete with images of maleness.

The history of football in Britain may tell us much about contemporary football masculinities. As Russell (1999: 17) suggests, ‘the game has always been a decidedly male preserve and a location for the expression of, and experimentation with, a variety of masculine identities’. Indeed, the violent, masculinized origins of football as a folk game in the Middle Ages, through to its codification in the public schools, is well documented (see Birley, 1993; Elias and Dunning, 1972; Giulianotti, 1999; Mason, 1980). Connell (1987) contends that gendered power relations are configured initially by way of these historical structures, particularly the division of labour, the structure of power and the structure of cathexis (emotional attachment), but are subsequently maintained by the ‘naturalizing’ of gendered practice (ideology) and, importantly, the organization of social resources, particularly the law and the media. The interpretation of masculinity as a natural actuality of the social world is widespread, and this is integral to male hegemony. Moreover, football tends to be viewed as a ‘natural’ pursuit for men, rather than
women. But processes of naturalization by way of mass persuasion, in themselves, imply a second element to the maintenance of this gender order: the cognitive purification of the world of gender (Connell, 1987). That is to say, the reality of gender relations is not as clean and organized as ideological processes assert. Thus within the culture and subculture of football, there are ambiguities and outright contradictions to hegemonic masculinity, which, for the dominant structure of gender to be successful and maintained, need to be ‘sanitized’. The work of Connell (1987, 1995, 2002) emphasizes the role of the media, in particular, in this purification process. While numerous social agents may communicate ideological messages (e.g. the family, education, peers), the media benefits from being more concrete and absolute in the structuring of gender. The media has long been recognized for its power to sustain — and forge new — beliefs and values (De Fleur, 1970), and is responsible for providing only a selective knowledge of the social world (Hall, 1977). The sports media in England proffers a particularly masculinized picture of professional football where images and phraseology communicate and glorify acts of aggression and other traditionally masculine behaviours, fierce national identity, conspicuous consumption, and (hetero)sexual exploits (Harris and Clayton, 2002). In this mediated world of football, women are noticeably absent, or are afforded only subordinated or marginalized roles (Clayton and Harris, 2004; Harris, 1999), and men that contest the hegemonic position are treated with derision and castigation (Whannel, 2002).

Individual football locales, then, are informed by a historically constructed pattern of power relations, operating in a reciprocal process with the state of play of sexual politics of other football regimes, and with wider patterns of power relations. While there is inevitable discord in terms of the idiosyncrasies and nuances of the nature of men’s legitimation of power in each football locale, the power of ideology and the organization of social resources, such as the media, but also football’s universal rules and regulations, (re)ensure that football remains a preserve of men and a bastion for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. As such, as Messner (1992) notes, these sporting cultures and subcultures provide a ‘safe’ environment for men to form close relationships with other men. One of the more important findings of contemporary research into men’s same-sex friendships is that the nature of these relationships tends to support male hegemony, rather than provide possibilities for social transformations between women and men (see especially Seidler, 1997). That is to say, men’s friendships with other men can be seen as crucially important in sustaining masculine subjectivities and men’s sense of identity as men (Whitehead, 2002). Central to this notion, many sociologists have claimed, is the conflicting tensions over sexuality and questions about homosexuality, which are inevitably introduced when men demonstrate intimacy with other men (see Messner, 1992; Seidler, 1997; Swain, 1992; Walker, 1994; Whitehead, 2002). Rubin (1983, 1985), for example, has argued that men tend to place a high value on spending time with other men, but distance themselves from any form of intimacy by organizing this time around an activity that is ‘external’ to themselves (see also Brandth and Kvande, 1998), such as football or the subcultural pursuit of drinking alcohol. Further to this, Walker (1994) has argued that men use jokes and (sexist) talk about women as ‘pseudo-instrumental’ reasons to engage in conversation with other men when,
frequently, ‘instrumental’ reasons may be considered too intimate. The deep fear of intimacy itself reflects a fear of being branded as gay and, thus, subordinates gay men as something ‘unnatural’ (Connell, 1995, 2002). Moreover, this fear creates a culture loaded with homophobic and heterosexist discourse, as some kind of defensive mechanism against homosexual labels (Connell, 1995). Fraternal bonding is regularly characterized by the perpetual use of jocularity, where men become targets for, particularly, labels of or allusions to homosexuality, against which they are expected to defend themselves (Lyman, 1987; Parker, 1996; Tolson, 1977), or dismiss any doubt about their heterosexuality with sustained sex-objectified rhetoric (Connell, 1995). In these instances, the real targets of such ‘joking’ abuse are usually the absent ‘other’, notably women and gay men (Gough and Edwards, 1998; Lyman, 1987). The football fraternity, then, may be a spawning ground for hegemonic masculine values, where rituals and behavioural patterns reflect what some sociologists describe as ‘rape culture’ (Beneke, 1982; Herman, 1984; Sanday, 1981). Such cultures are defined by ‘insecure male(s’) sense of masculinity and sexuality, male bonding, and the universal physical and verbal oppression of women’ (Whitehead, 2002: 165), which may also be partially characterized by a masculinized competitive rivalry (Curry, 1991; De Garis, 2000; Messner, 1992). While Messner (1992) has warned of the fine line between derogatory, objectified and abusive talk about women and actual rape, in most instances the notion of ‘rape cultures’ are defined by verbal, rather than physical, aggression toward women. While, arguably, the motives for both rape and the verbal, sexualized oppression of women are a part of a homosocial enactment of gendered power, prompted by insecurity, fear and shame about sexuality, a culture of rape does not necessarily result in actual rape.

Sample, Procedure and Participants

The subcultural discourses evident in this study form part of an ethnography of male university football players, conducted, with the freely given informed consent of the players, at a university in the UK over the course of a football season (September 2002–June 2003). Ethnography has a brief, though increasingly rich, history within the sociology of sport for detailing athletic communities. One of its strengths lies in the specificity of investigation, where sociological knowledge can be expanded as themes are applied, verified or contested and reconstructed in a unique sporting context. An important advantage of the ethnographic method, then, is that broad principles of sociological thought can be experienced and developed as a case in point, expanding the knowledge base of the discipline. The examination of sporting masculinities, for example, has been advantaged by the production of context-specific knowledge of athletic milieu, including such diverse sports as baseball (Klein, 1991), bodybuilding (Klein, 1990), boxing (De Garis, 2000), soccer (Parker, 2001) and windsurfing (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998).

The men in this study are a core group of 13 university football players on the same team and studying for various degrees, though most were engaged in sports-related, vocational degree programmes. The team competes in one of the South of England Student Sport Association (SESSA) leagues, against four other
universities, and play an additional cup tournament. All of the men are aged between 18 and 24 and all identify themselves as heterosexual. All of the men are white with the exception of ‘Andrew’, who is a Black student of Ghanaian origin. All of the men are British, with the exception of ‘Steve’, who moved to the UK from Denmark to study at university. Although a handful of the players knew each other through their academic work or from other social circles, the principal association is football, as team-mates for this particular team.

Participant observation was conducted in four primary contexts (the training ground, the match, the changing room, and the student bar) and intensive semi-structured interviews were undertaken at the end of the season with eight of the players. The head of the Athletics Union (AU) at the university granted access to the field initially, though the principal gatekeeper, and key informant, was team captain, ‘Daniel’, who instigated the process of snowball sampling (see Giulianotti, 1995), which led to the building of field relations with all members of the team. These relations were gradually cemented over a period of about a month of socializing and training with the team, where the main objective was access and integration rather than data collection. This period was of vital importance to establish trust, reciprocated honesty, rapport, and even friendship, enabling unobtrusive observation of the players and more candid behaviours and responses. These relationships minimized the impact of the researcher’s presence, in particular the potential for the men to ‘act out’ roles as a result of mistrust or inadvertent provocation by the researcher.

This article utilizes data in the form of naturally occurring talk obtained during the fieldwork, employing a participant-as-observer field role (Gold, 1958) in two of the primary locations: the changing room and the student bar. These contexts differ markedly from the other field locations of the overall study (the match and the training ground) because talk becomes non-task relevant, offering an insight into the subculture of university football and the non-footballing interests and pursuits of the men. Extracts of naturally occurring talk were recorded (typed) in the first instance, in both the changing rooms and the student bar, onto a mobile phone (a particularly unobtrusive tool for studies in contemporary youth culture), and later recorded into a field diary. Talk that was recorded was selected because it revealed something about the valued masculinities of the player collective. These conversations were typed in full, including descriptive notes about tone, body language and actions. In the field diary, the extracts were annotated and categorized by way of broad themes and regularities in preparation for final analysis. Broad themes included talk of ‘academia’, ‘football’, ‘club support’, ‘women’, ‘gay men’, ‘carousing’. At this point, data were reduced to include only ‘non-task relevant’ talk (i.e. talk that did not concern football itself) and categories were specified further and considered under the three broad themes evident in this article.

Analyzing Naturally Occurring Talk

Naturally occurring talk may be defined, as it is broadly by Silverman (2001), as data in the form of spoken words that are derived from situations that exist independently of the researcher’s intervention. While the analysis of naturally
occurring talk has, arguably, been an aspect of human existence since the con-
ception of a common language, it was in the early 1960s that it gained sustained
(social-) scientific attention as a means for understanding actual experiences of
social processes, and for understanding just how people act socially on a day-to-
day basis (ten Have, 1999). Within the social sciences, the analysis of naturally
occurring talk has developed into a multitude of different approaches, each of
which vary in their focus, in the type of knowledge they aim to produce and,
importantly, in the technique they deploy. Many accounts of naturally occurring
talk, particularly within sociology and cultural studies, have adopted a critical
approach, concerned with rhetoric and ideology and directed towards drawing
conclusions about social or societal processes, rather than about the discourse
itself (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999; Hammersley, 1997; Potter, 2004; Wetherell

Because here too, there is a great deal of divergence in the philosophy and
method of the critical analysis of naturally occurring talk (see Potter, 2004), some
statements need to be made about the specific analytic approach adopted in this
article. In particular, we follow an interpretive approach to the deconstruction of
talk extracts and their meaning, following the hermeneutic tradition and the
epistemological assertion that knowledge is mind-dependent. As such, our analy-
sis is characterized by the assumption that one can only interpret the meaning of
something from some perspective or standpoint (Patton, 1990). We follow a
pro-feminist perspective (as outlined above) in the design and undertaking of the
analysis. The analysis is theoretically, rather than empirically, grounded, follow-
ing other pro-feminist literature such as Curry (1991) and Gough and Edwards
(1998), which analyse discursive patterns and employ ideological assumptions to
interpret the meaning behind the discourse, considering the way in which
gendered practices are constructed, made factual, justified and, therefore,
sustained. Our pro-feminist analysis pays special attention to remarks that may
reveal assertions about masculinity in the university football environment.

A number of assumptions associated with our analytic approach and, par-
ticularly, our conceptual frame, need to be stated here. First, the study of the
development, and subsequent defence, of dominant positions of social groups, as
Gramsci (1971: 53) suggests, can only be undertaken as a study of hegemony,
specifically the identification of ‘the phases through which they acquired auton-
omy […] and support from the groups which actively or passively assisted them’.
The expression and reproduction of dominant masculinities, as will be shown in
the specific discourses evident in this article, are significant ‘phases’ in this
process. Hegemony emphasizes that power relations must be sustained by more
than domination (economic, political and/or physical) alone. Rather, there must
be some form of ‘common consent’ among the social groupings, which, in itself,
legitimates the authority of a particular group. Second, the nature of authority is
in constant reform ‘through a process of (admittedly uneven) negotiation that
always holds out the possibility of limited but nonetheless significant tactical
victories for subordinate and subaltern groups’ (Rowe, 2004: 103). Instances of
complicity, rather than total and unproblematic conformity, and instances of
resistance, either by overt defiance or disengagement, to authority are all a part
of what is meant by hegemony. Rarely do men faultlessly conform to the ide-
ology of hegemonic masculinity, or women to exaggerated femininity. Rather, as Kaufman (1994) tells us, men (and women) develop harmonious and non-harmonious relationships with other masculinities, fabricating hierarchies of power and identity not only between the two spheres of gender, but also within those spheres. The third assumption of our analysis, related to the previous point, is that hegemonic masculinity nonetheless remains the dynamic ideology around which patriarchal relations are constructed, legitimized and defended (Brod and Kaufman, 1994; Brown, 2002; Connell, 1987, 1995; Kimmel and Messner, 1998). Male athletic subcultures, in particular, have served to reinforce a flagging ideology of male superiority by way of projecting hegemonic ideals (Messner, 1987). Sport has therefore helped to reconstitute male hegemony in the post-Enlightenment period. Another related point refers to the relational position of hegemonic masculinity to the ‘other’ by way of the discursive subordination of non-hegemonic groups, especially women and gay men (Connell, 1995). Finally, for this analysis, we assume masculinity to be a collective and contextualized practice (Connell, 1995), the embodiment of norms and values of groups of men rather than individuals, and specifically associated with the present environment. In this sense, ‘what it is to be a man’ is not always and everywhere the same, which can create conflict where the academic and athletic milieus cross over.

The extracts of the men’s conversations selected for this analysis provided further understanding of the way(s) in which university football contributes to male hegemony. The extracts were arranged according to particular themes and regularities and correlated with pro-feminist and, particularly, critical feminist literature, and interpreted from this perspective. From this analysis, three broad topics of men’s conversation emerged: talk about academia, talk about alcohol, and talk about women. Following Curry (1991) and Gough and Edwards (1998), the extracts of these conversations are presented throughout this article in a dramaturgical format (see Goffman, 1959), as lines in a script that fully inform the reader of the main actors involved, precisely what was said, and concomitant interaction. Each line of the script is given a numerical code, beginning at number one and ascending. The numerical code is then given in square brackets at the point at which it is deconstructed and discussed from a pro-feminist perspective. The numerical code begins again for each new extract. Predominantly for reasons of word restriction, some of the extracts are left undeconstructed by line and are instead treated as a whole, where the entire ‘scene’ becomes interpreted from a pro-feminist perspective.

**Talk of Academia**

The men’s talk was predominantly concerned with collective pursuits and interests, stemming from the shared experience of male university football, and academic demands were a large part of this. Collegiate sport in the UK differs markedly, in terms of structure and organization, from the ‘big-time’ college sports of North America. For the most part, university sport in the UK is non-elite and organized as inter-university competition by the British Universities Sport Association (BUSA) and its subsidiaries for the betterment of the student experi-
ence. It would be reasonable to suggest that in the UK university sport is more manifestly presented as subsidiary to students’ academic work, and talk of learning and assessment is perhaps more present in the athletic arena than it would be for ‘big-time’ college athletes of North America. The meaning and implications of male football students’ academic work for their masculine identity is therefore an issue to be addressed.

**Academic ‘Denial’ and the Masculine Self**

Walker (1988) has suggested that education, rather than sport, can be a means to break away from subordinated or marginalized positions in the gender order by establishing a claim to manhood by way of the mind, rather than the body. However, sport remains the principal bastion of hegemonic masculinity in western culture, where the legitimate differentiation by way of strength, aggression (even violence), competitiveness, and time-honoured rituals of a compulsory heterosexuality (see Connell, 1995; Rich, 1980) present a more palpable separation from the ‘other’. As such, football was paramount in the men’s perceptions of their masculine self. In his North American study of male collegiate athletes’ talk, Curry (1991) noted that academic studies were defined as peripheral to the self, and regularly referred to with contempt in the athletic collective. Similarly, with the men in this study, academia was treated in the football collective in a derogatory fashion, dovetailing academic ability with effeminacy and even homosexuality. It was, however, such a frequent topic of conversation that to dismiss academic studies simply as a marginal component of the men’s identity is not enough. Indeed, academia was a contested issue for the masculine identity of the football players.

**Extract 1**

1. Alistair: I’ve still gotta finish that fucking essay for Nolan [a lecturer].
2. Alex: [Boastingly] I ain’t even fucking started, mate.
3. Alistair: It’s due in tomorrow, ya prick! [laughs].
4. Alex: Yeah, but this [football] is more important. If Nolan thinks otherwise, he can kiss my ass. What the fuck do I need a degree for anyway [laughs].
5. Brad: [Mockingly] Er, a future maybe. You twat, you’re gonna get kicked out soon, mate, I’m telling ya. How many modules you failed so far?
6. Alex: None. I always get assignments in. I just do ’em when I want. Still get a pass grade even if they’re late, don’t ya?

The first line [1] of the above extract demonstrates part of this contestation. Alistair instigates a conversation with a statement of concern over his academic studies, which, in the first instance, suggests that even here in the football milieu, academia is not necessarily peripheral to the male athletic self (Curry, 1991). However, the language Alistair uses to express his anxiety is more disparaging about education, referring to the assignment as ‘that fucking essay’, and to the lecturer concerned by his surname, rather than the first name more traditionally used in Higher Education in the UK. Alex’s response [2] is far less ambiguous, freely announcing his careless attitude toward his academic studies with a degree of pride. In a study of the pedagogical problems involved in teaching gender issues to male university athletes, Clayton and Humberstone (forthcoming) note
that academic ability and conscientiousness, in general, is regularly subordinated in the collective of male students as something less than the status achieved through other activities, such as sport, carousing and ‘pulling’ women. Alex’s next comment [4] would seem to support this view, clearly stating the importance of football to him and simultaneously denying any value in Higher Education, and inferiorizing others (such as the lecturer, ‘Nolan’) who may think otherwise with an explicit reference to subordinating practice. Of course, such an extremity needs to be interpreted in context and cannot be viewed in its denotative form. After all, Alex has had some academic success in the past and has now freely chosen to continue his education. There is a gendered power dynamic here that reflects what Connell (1995) calls ‘protest masculinity’. Here, childhood experiences of social powerlessness result in an exaggerated claim to authority and potency, especially by way of violence, petty crime, school resistance, alcohol and drug abuse and short heterosexual liaisons. These feelings of powerlessness in academia, and the compensating for them with football ability, were communicated by some of the men in interviews:

I’ve never been particularly intelligent or good at anything really. Except sport, and I’ve always loved football. I’ve always done well in football and was always kind of known as a footballer at school and stuff. (Richard)

There’s always like two types of people, isn’t it? Like the brainy ones who always get like A, A, A, A, like, right through school and college and stuff. And then there’s the sporty ones like me who everyone in school knows and likes but do shit at work and are probably seen as a bit thick [. . .]. But fuck it, I know which one I’d rather be . . . and I am [laughs]. (Sean)

In many ways the concept of masculine protest is a forcible critique of hegemonic masculinity, whereby dominant men in fact miss out on the patriarchal dividend by way of being unable to surpass the ‘other’ in a particular context, such as academia. In this sense, protest masculinity is a form of marginalized masculinity and may pressurize male student athletes to deny academic ability and conscientiousness as a response to their perceived powerlessness, and as a claim to a position of gendered power. The realms of the athletic and the academic, and the masculine values they nurture, are clearly conflicting, and the structures and regulations of Higher Education are often used as a foil for a more rebellious masculinity, favoured in the athletic subculture (Connell, 1998). In Extract 1, for example, Alex [6] communicates his resistance to the bureaucracy of Higher Education, and boasts of ‘beating the system’ by still gaining a pass and ultimately a degree qualification, notwithstanding a clear display of apathy. In this way, he conforms to the traditional masculinity evident in the football milieu, but also complies with the minimum requirements of the university’s regulations regarding assignments. The need for qualifications in the competitive professional world creates a situation whereby compliance to wider institutional expectations is necessary and, thus, becomes a dynamic within the hegemonic patterns of the football team. Academic success, however, remains a foil for the men in their acquisition of hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, Alex demonstrates a complicit masculinity, in that he denigrates university policy and Higher Education as a whole and, subsequently, realizes the masculine dividend without
putting himself at the forefront of the masculine protest by resisting or rebelling against academia altogether.

The multiplicity of the men’s masculine identity renders academia a contested issue in the construction of self. That is to say, the collective practice of masculinity compels men to conform to the dominant values of being a man, the nuances of which may change with the context (Connell, 1995) and, while academic ability and conscientiousness may be subordinated in general in the football fraternity, this is not necessarily the beliefs of the individual men. Indeed, away from the fraternity in the confines of the interview, most of the men communicated their commitment to their academic studies, and, as in the extract above, challenges to academic denial were not altogether absent even in the athletic context. Alistair, for example, denounces Alex’s lack of commitment to his academic work [3], subordinating him, albeit in good humour, with a penis analogy (‘prick’). Phallicentric metaphors are a common feature of the men’s talk, though not as a ‘privileged sign of masculinity’ (Gough and Edwards, 1998), but rather as part of a rich vocabulary of subordinating abuse. Brad also inferiorizes Alex’s stand on academia with an inferiorizing label (‘twat’) [5], and a challenge to the dominant culture that is more vigorous than that of Alistair’s, in that it is less jovial and makes a clear statement about the importance of academia for the future self. Thus Brad may be attempting to induce change to the hegemonic patterning of the context with a claim to authority for academic studies and, simultaneously, a claim to authority in the gender order for himself by way of his academic abilities, rather than his football ability (Walker, 1988). Such robust challenges to the dominant culture were rare, particularly when in the collective of the athletic context. Indeed, Brad was well known among the football players, and regularly chastised, for his academic ability and conscientiousness.

Academic Ability and Allusions to Homosexuality

Just prior to the Christmas break, talk in the changing room centred on the coming exams. Brad unwittingly revealed that he had already begun revising (some seven weeks before the first exam). His statement was immediately met with a voluble groan of condemnation. The underlying tone of the muttering also revealed an air of typicality, as though this was not the first time Brad had exposed a certain conscientiousness toward his academic work. The protests continued:

Extract 2
1. Alex: Why don’t ya just bend Ewing [a lecturer] over the desk and make sure of the First? [laughter]
2. Brad: I ain’t done that much. It’s just ‘cus I’m going away for Christmas
3. Steve: Shit, man, I ain’t gonna do nothing ‘til like the week before or something
4. Alex: Yeah, me too. It’s just ’cus Ewing’s got a boner [erect penis] for him [Brad], and he don’t wanna disappoint lover-boy now, does he? [laughter]

Academic denial as part of a masculine protest is again evident here, particularly through Steve’s contention that, although the forthcoming exams are of some importance, only moderate academic exertions are necessary [3]. In this extract,
however, contestation is less fervent than in Extract 1, as even Brad attempts to deny his academic assiduousness [2] by providing an excuse for his early revision. This highlights the inconsistency in the men’s talk and, particularly, the pressure on each of the individual men to conform to the dominant patterns of masculinity. Part of Brad’s denial is as a response to Alex’s taunt [1] in the form of a rhetorical question about a sexual act with a male lecturer. Here, perceived non-masculine behaviour (conscientiousness toward academic studies) is criticized and subordinated through a link to homosexuality. Systematic ‘ribbing’ (joking at the expense of others) of those more academically capable players was commonplace on the training pitch, in the changing rooms and during social occasions. Humour as a method of negotiating peer-group credibility is well documented (Emerson, 1970; Lyman, 1987; Parker, 1996, 2001; Willis, 1977). The humour of these men’s male-bonding relationships may, at first sight, appear to be the antithesis of friendship building, often aggressive and frequently consisting of sexist, racist or homophobic jokes, or rhetoric that indirectly alludes to these sentiments (see also Lyman, 1987). Amongst the men on the football team, the butt of the joke was often academic capacity, but the discourse was implicitly homophobic. The denigration of homosexuality is a well-documented feature of sports cultures and, particularly, ‘jock’ humour (Curry, 1991; Hasbrook and Harris, 2000; Klein, 1990; Messner, 1992; Parker, 1996). Even known heterosexual men who fail to enact the basic masculine expectations of the culture are subject to a barrage of (usually jocular) homophobic insults. The nature of hegemony dictates that there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men, and the most apparent subordinated group in western society is gay men (Connell, 1995, 2002). Gay masculinities are seen as the antithesis of archetypal maleness and, thus, homophobia is the most conspicuous and triumphant form of subordination. As the men’s talk in Extract 2 demonstrates, one does not need to be gay to be subordinated in this way. Academic proficiency and achievement are not components of hegemonic masculinity in this milieu and are, thus, blurred with femininity and subsequently expelled from the circle of legitimacy by way of a rich vocabulary of abuse or jocular taunts. This is shown again in Alex’s final comment [4] where he reinforces his previous implication of a gay sex relationship between Brad and a male lecturer.

**Talk of Alcohol**

The wealth of research, from many disciplines, about the use of alcohol among male athletes is testimony to the significance of alcohol as a social aspect of sport (Curry, 1998; Nelson and Wechsler, 2001; O’Brien, 1993; Peretti-Watel et al., 2002; Stainback, 1997). To a degree, the team defined itself in the social milieu by how much its members could drink, and each individual was expected to ‘keep up’ with the group as a whole. This was particularly apparent when some players had turned up late, and would be constantly reminded throughout the evening that they had had less to drink than those whom arrived earlier. While the overall masculine guise of the team was predominantly concerned with an image of all
members being ‘big drinkers’, within the group itself, individual masculine positional identity was established by way of being a bigger drinker than other players. Each individual was expected to match others drink-for-drink, to finish a drink at approximately the same time and be ready for the next one. To not have finished a drink in time for the next round, however, was not immediately associated as unmasculine. The man concerned, rather, had a second chance to ‘prove’ himself should he still have alcohol left in the glass, by ‘downing’ (drinking at one attempt) the remainder, usually to a chorus of chanting, ‘Down, down, down’. Should he do this, he was met with a loud cheer and no more was said about the matter. Failure to ‘down’ the drink, however, would result in castigation in the form of groans of dissatisfaction, or even subordinating labels such as ‘pussy’, ‘woman’ and ‘gay’.

‘Big Drinking’ and the Masculine Self

In the following extract, Ben is the researcher, but was not entirely excluded from the hegemonic patterns of the football team.

Extract 3

1. Daniel: You alright, mate? You not having a drink?
2. Alex: Fucking ‘ell, Ben. Get yourself a beer. I know you’re like some academic type, but you’ve still gotta keep up with us boys [everyone laughs].
3. Ben: Alright, I’m just gonna get one now.
4. Sean: You can’t come and sit down ’til you’ve got a beer in your hand. It’s like a fucking requirement . . . a password.
5. Alex: A fucking key-card [laughter].

The subordination of academia is again evident here, as Alex proposes that ‘academic types’ are unable to consume the same volume of alcohol as athletes [2]. ‘Big drinking’ was an important feature of male university football identity, partly because it provides an affiliation link with other activities associated with machismo, such as fighting and a general vociferousness. Moreover, where the male bond is based on activities and shared experience, rather than emotion and expressiveness, alcohol consumption provides a safe milieu for male intimacy, which regularly encompasses, and requires, a competitive edge (Curry, 1991; Messner and Sabo, 1994). Both Sean [4] and Alex [5] communicate the importance of alcohol to the male bond, suggesting that one cannot be a part of the fraternity if one is not drinking. Among these male football players, a simplistic dichotomy, associating the ability to drink with masculinity and inability with femininity, was instilled into subcultural practice. The ability to consume large quantities of alcohol was something that separated heterosexual men from gay men and from women, and also separated ‘weak’ men (‘pussies’) from ‘real’ men. Drinking, in this sense, was a power dynamic that legitimated the dominant position of heterosexual men and, thus, was a hegemonic masculine practice (see Connell, 1987, 1995) and was highly valued in the football subculture.
The ‘Big Drinking’ Paradox: Alcohol and the Creation of Effeminacies

While heavy drinking itself was a highly valued trait among the players, and one that the collective guise was keen to connect with, feeling unwell as a result of alcohol intake, vomiting, passing out and retiring home early, were considerably less valued. On one occasion at the Student Union, Gavin became quite ill through alcohol consumption about mid-way through the evening.

Extract 4

1. Steve: Shit, man, check this out [points in Gavin’s direction. All of the players begin pointing and laughing at Gavin]
2. Sean: You alright, Gav [laughs]?
3. Alex: He’s throwing a fucking whitey, man! Fucking ’ell!
4. Steve: How much has he had [to drink]?
5. Alex: Not much. Not enough. ‘Ere, get that down ya [pushes a shot of some spirit towards Gavin].
6. Daniel: Fucking ’ell, I don’t think he needs any more, does he [laughs]?
7. Sean: Fucking knock it back! Come on.

Gavin proceeded to drink the offering. As Gough and Edwards (1998) have implied, feelings of inadequacy about one’s masculine self and desires of belonging and acceptance can often cause men to conform or act in ways that they feel will earn status among other men. In this sense, Gavin continued to drink, despite his awareness that it would make him sick, in an attempt to salvage some masculine pride, which had taken a hit by way of his peers laughing about his alcohol-induced illness. In the short term, this appeared to have worked. After he had consumed the shot, the players reverted back to the previous conversation. But it was not long before Gavin slipped away from the group, predominantly unnoticed until Steve returned from the toilet to reveal to everyone that Gavin was in there, vomiting. In an almost synchronized movement, all of the men jumped from their seats and rushed to the toilets, to laugh at their team-mate. The familiar feminized and homophobic rhetoric formed the basis of much of their mockery, labelling Gavin with words like ‘pussy’ and ‘woman’.

On another occasion, Brad decided to leave the Union and go home at about 11 o’clock (three hours before closing).

Extract 5

1. Richard: Why’s he gone home for?
2. Daniel: I don’t think he felt too good. And he’s gotta get up early tomorrow as well.
3. Sean: Yeah, so have I. I’ve got fucking [lectures] first thing, but I’m still ’ere. I might just stay in bed to be honest.
4. Gary: So how much did he have to drink?
5. Daniel: I dunno, do I? Same as the rest of us, I suppose.
6. Sean: [In a mockingly effeminate voice] Ooh, big fucking drinker, then [everyone laughs].

Like Gavin, Brad displayed subordinated masculinities in that he did not, or could not, conform to the values of heavy drinking among the team. Gavin, as a result, became the centre of a collective joke — the means of temporary entertainment for the other men, which worked to subordinate and distance him from the collective masculinity of the team (and, thus, protecting that masculine repute) and simultaneously celebrate and masculinize the hegemonic ability of the other
players to ‘hold their alcohol’. For the men, this ability was a major feature of their perceived superiority over, and separation from, women and subordinated male groups. In the case of Brad, one of the first questions of the other men was concerned with the quantity of alcohol consumed [1], highlighting the perceived importance of this in establishing masculinity. Brad, unlike Gavin, was subjected to the process of subordination and demasculinization in his absence. Sean was the main precursor in this process, inflating his own masculine identity through a direct comparison between his ability to drink and to stay out late and that of Brad [3]. The fact that Sean also deliberately adopted an effeminate voice in his castigation of Brad [6] suggests a wider agenda of the subordination of women. Indeed, messages about hegemonic masculinity render inferior both femininity in all its forms and all non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (see also Bryson, 1990; Connell, 1995).

**Talk of Women**

*Rape Culture* and *Compulsory Heterosexuality*

Men’s talk in the changing room, especially, was highly sexualized, inferiorizing women as ‘other’, usually by virtue of biological sex-symbolism (sexploitation).

Extract 6

1. Steve: [hums the tune of a Cristina Aguilera song] I’ll tell ya what, that Cristina wants bending over and giving a right seeing to.
2. Brad: Shit, yeah.
3. Steve: Did ya see ‘er in FHM last month?
4. Brad: Nah. Did she get ‘em [her breasts] out, did she?
5. Steve: Oh, man, I’m telling ya! She didn’t show it all. She kind of had her hair coming down and covering up the nips [nipples], but fuck me . . .
6. Brad: [laughs] Prick teasing, was it?

Women celebrities were particularly prominent figures in the men’s sexually explicit fantasies. Steve is immediately aggressive in his talk about musician, Cristina Aguilera, implying actual physical domination as part of a sexual fantasy [1]. Such remarks have a great deal in common with scenes of fraternal bonding that many feminist and pro-feminist writers have described as ‘rape culture’ (Beneke, 1982; Curry, 1991; Herman, 1984; Sanday, 1981). For some, exploitation at a (western) cultural level, such as that evident in pornography, has moved from ‘soft-core’ images of women as disassociated objects, to images of more violent, physical domination (Malamuth and Spinner, 1980; Slade, 1984). In the study of male sport, Messner (1992) has also communicated the power lust evident in men’s (hetero)sexist talk about women, and warns of a fine line between highly sexualized views about women and actual aggression against women. Indeed, much western feminist literature has argued that men’s sexuality and any brand of mainstream (hegemonic) masculinity is pervasively violent toward women (Segal, 1987; Smith, 1989). These allusions to sexual aggressiveness are fed by other related attitudes towards women, and particularly the prevalent cultural ideal of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (see Connell, 1995; Rich, 1980).
As Brad does in Extract 6, the men were regularly compelled to engage in talk about women as objects of desire, cementing their (hetero)sexual persona with other men with phallocentric discourse [6] and detachment from any emotional connection through talk only about the breasts or other sexually valued features of the female body [4, 5]. Celebrity women, however, were not exclusively the topic of this heterosexualized discourse. The following two talk fragments were about women that (some of) the men knew personally, but this did not alter the inferiorizing, biological-sex objectification theme of the conversations:

Extract 7
1. Sean: You know Charlotte, don’t you? Charlotte Bridge?
2. Steve: [Laughs] Charlotte [holds his arms out in front of his chest, mimicking large breasts]?  
3. Sean: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly. Fucking ‘ell! [In a more hushed voice] Imagine the fucking tit-wank you could ‘ave there [laughter].

Extract 8
1. Daniel: I thought you copped-off with ‘er at end of night.  
2. Steve: Nah, I wasn’t much into it. Just went home.  
3. Alex: What, you got ‘er into the light and changed your mind [laughter]?  
4. Daniel: She was alright. I thought so, anyway.  
5. Andrew: [In agreement] Yeah.  
6. Alex: Tits were a bit poodles-ears.  
7. Steve: Poodles-ears?  
8. Alex: Saggy. Cricket ball in a footy sock [laughter]. Ugliest norks [breasts] I’ve ever seen, man [more laughter]!  
9. Andrew: [In disgust] Oh, easy!

In Extract 7, again, the use of such language in male bonding rhetoric reduces women to ‘disassociated objects’ (Rutherford, 1988), devaluing femininities by highlighting only the biological differences between men and women. That is to say, the depiction of women in the men’s friendship building was purely in terms of disembodied features, most notably the breasts. Often women were not referred to by name, or even as ‘she’ or ‘her’, but as ‘it’ or ‘that’. In this way, the players marked strong distinctions between femininity and masculinity, the latter of which was portrayed as being much more than the sum of men’s physical components. Women as a whole, then, were created a ‘role’, as an aesthetic or object of sexual desire. In some cases they were further inferiorized by way of fantasizing about women performing sexual acts, which place them in a lower physical position to the man, such as a ‘tit-wank’ [3]. Individual women whose biological make-up did not meet the men’s standards of exaggerated femininity, as in Extract 8, were inferiorized even further, as ineffective in their ‘role’ and, therefore, of no value to the men in the construction of their individual masculine identities.

Whether considered attractive or unattractive by the players, however, that women were judged almost solely by this criterion legitimates and serves the wider hegemonic project. As Gough and Edwards (1998: 422) write, ‘the construction of devalued femininities [. . .] provides an “other” against which hegemonic masculinities constitute themselves’. The use of this highly (hetero)-sexualized language then, alienates femininity by constructing it purely in the physical, which is taken to guarantee the dominant position of men and the sub-ordination of women (see Connell, 1995).
It should be noted, however, that not all of the men joined in with this (hetero)sexist talk, but would usually remain a part of the process by way of laughing along with everyone else. In this way, these men were complicit to the hegemonic project, benefiting from the discourse in as much as it secured their privileged position as men (see Connell, 1995) and, more immediately, because they were able to be a part of the male bonding process without being the pioneers of the sexist and misogynistic discourse. On (very rare) occasions, as Andrew does in Extract 8, a challenge to the dominant views of the men would be introduced [9]. At a glance, this may be interpreted as a display of marginalized masculinity, a manifestation of distance from hegemonic masculinity, an engagement with resistance (see especially Connell, 1995). But, on closer inspection, Andrew’s objection seemed to be to an insult too far, rather than to the general tone of the men’s jocularity. Andrew, then, remained complicit to the project of patriarchy.

Concluding Remarks

We can learn much about masculinity construction in male university football, and about the western gender order more generally, through the discourse of the players when together in a collective culture. The fraternal bond is readily cemented through competitive rivalries (Curry, 1991; Messner, 1992), not just on the field of play, but competition for masculine positional identity by way of an array of valued actions and behaviours. This article examined the perceived masculine value attached to the three most talked about of these themes, with the exception of football itself, within male university football culture in the UK: academic study, alcohol consumption and the pursuit of women. Each was utilized in the men’s discourse, by way of positive or negative association, as a means of negotiating masculine positional identity and reproducing the collective guise of the team. But the implications of actions and behaviours for the men’s constructions of masculine self were always contested, and tensions, inconsistencies and outright contradictions were always apparent.

While not refuting Curry’s (1991) suggestion that academia is peripheral to the male athletic self, it is clear that academic studies, while marginalized in the collective culture, are a significant provider of masculine identity. For some, the denial of academic worth may be a protest against childhood feelings of inadequacy at school (see Connell, 1995). Here the denigration and, in many cases, effeminization of scholarly ability and meticulousness became a claim to the more revered form of masculinity that permeated the university football subculture. But these collective protests were always offset by the individual construction of masculine self, which looked to the future attainment of an altogether more middle-class masculinity, composed of job status and financial security. The marginalization of academic identities, then, could only go so far in the football milieu before the cultural hegemony diffidently gave authorization to less disparaging talk of academia. Nonetheless, in most instances in the men’s conversations, masculine positional identity by way of talk of academia was more immediately achieved via the protest, rather than complicity to institutionalized scholarly demands.
Alcohol and women provided a far more confirmatory resource for the attainment of hegemonic masculine identities. The ability to consume large quantities of alcohol was something that was seen to separate ‘real men’ from women and gay or effeminate men. But this behaviour came with the risk of overindulgence and its perceived effeminate consequences (tiredness, vomiting), and the subordinating put-downs and jibes that followed. Carousing and drinking also went hand-in-hand with the verbal, and sometimes physical, oppression of women. Similar concerns to those highlighted by Curry (1991) and Fine (1987) are raised with regard to the ubiquitous presence of destructive talk about women and sex among athletic males. Such talk was regularly aggressive and described scenes of the physical subordination of women, by way of a sexual act. While these scenes were usually constructed around a desire, rather than an actual happening, they were nonetheless complicit with elements of ‘rape cultures’ described in feminist and men’s studies literature (Beneke, 1982; Herman, 1984; Sanday, 1981; Whitehead, 2002). Where talk was less aggressive, women remained objects of sexual desire, with emphasis on biological features such as the breasts. Rich (1980) was among the first feminist authors to write of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, naming the cultural and social pressures on women to make themselves available to men, on whatever terms they can get. What needs to be made clear some two decades later is that compulsory heterosexuality is also enforced on men (Connell, 1995). This is, however, like all aspects of hegemonic masculinity, a principle of a ‘collective practice’ of manliness, given more or less importance, or a different criterion of practice altogether, in the university football milieu than in other facets of the men’s lives.

For the university football players in this study, compulsory heterosexuality was, in the main, played out through talk of desire and fantasy, rather than action. Here, the same requirement for exaggerated femininity was evident, as it is in the professional game. When fantasy became a reality, however, these female traits were of less importance, and ‘pulling’ women was aligned more with a philosophy of ‘a fuck is a fuck’. Indeed, sex with ‘ugly birds’, or ‘munters’, was still something to be bragged about and joked about with team-mates:

Extract 9
1. Alistair: You never fucked it, did ya?
2. Tom: Too right. It was a sweet-sweep [an easy thing], all the way [laughter].
3. Alistair: Shit.
4. Daniel: Like we ’aven’t all done worse.
5. Tom: Yeah. At least I was getting some last night. Beats ’aving a kebab and a wank [laughter].

Talk about women, especially, but also talk about alcohol and academia, either by positive or negative association, in the changing rooms and student bar, serves a clear function for ‘safe’ male bonding. But it also serves to reinforce the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, which legitimates heterosexual men’s position of authority and the subordination of women and non-hegemonic groups of men. Clearly, the behaviours and attitudes demonstrated by the men in this study are cause concern for the egalitarian movement and, perhaps, for Higher Education institutions. What must be considered, however, is that these behaviours are situational and are not necessarily the values of the individual participants.
Note

1. The extent to which any researcher can be certain as to their influence on the participants, their behaviours and actions, or the scene in general, can only be partially understood within an ongoing process of reflection and sensitivity. Key to participant observation studies is the researcher’s ‘natural’ integration and the development of personal relationships, effectively to be seen as a ‘native’, in order to minimize their influence on the scene.

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