

# Boys' Bodies in School: Physical Education

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**High school is a time when boys' bodies are under (re)construction; they are developing and changing at different rates and "measure-up" to hegemonic masculinity in different ways. This article explores memories of masculinity and body images in school with a focus on physical education classes. Masculinities are regulated and "sorted" both within the social and psychic realm. The experiences of those interviewed help to illustrate various contradictions, complexities, and possibilities of negotiating masculine identities in institutionalized schooling.**

**Key Words: boys' bodies, masculinities, physical education classes, hegemonic masculinity**

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Over the past twenty years of interdisciplinary research on men and masculinities, few scholars have examined the intersection between boys' bodies and schooling. While Western hegemonic masculinity is defined by a particular ideal body shape, muscularity, and physicality (see Buchbinder, 1998; Pronger, 1990), men's and boys' bodies remain relatively under-theorized (Connell, 1995, 1987), both within the context of schooling and in general. Young men's bodies are only seen as problematic to schools when they are caught in the act of violence against others (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Otherwise, the process of masculinizing the body in school via physical education classes and the relationship of young men to their bodies are taken for granted and rarely discussed (Salisbury & Jackson, 1997). This article will attempt to address the issue of masculinities and bodies in schools to illustrate the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities of masculinities and bodies in institutionalized schooling.

The high school "tweenage" years are particularly ripe for the exploration of gender identity negotiation and construction, for "not only does the body change, but

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*The Journal of Men's Studies*, Volume 8, Number 2, Winter 2000, pp. 255-266.  
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bodysmeanings and the image-repertoire of bodies become, in contradictory ways, 'available'" (Corrigan, 1991, p. 206). Multiple complexities and contradictions of masculine identities and sexualities are learned by the body in school and, in turn, shape the physical body (Butler, 1997; McLaren, 1991). Butler (1990) argues further that gender "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame [schooling?] that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being" (p. 33). Additionally, the "regulation of bodies has historically been a primary focus of the project of education" (Kelly, 1998, p. 31).

This research on masculinities and bodies, in part, comes from my own experiences in high school physical education class. It was not until junior high school that I doubted my own body, questioned how it moved, what it said, and how it felt. It was in physical education class that I felt, for the first time, uncomfortable wearing shorts and a tee shirt. It was in the gym change room that I became conscious that the differences between bodies mattered. I actively engaged in the discourse of physical education, resisted it, and manipulated it as my body changed. In junior high school, where social relationships seemed paramount, others read my body in a particular way. My body and what I did (or did not do) with it was a discursive text defined by greater discourses of masculinities (Corrigan, 1991).

#### METHODOLOGY

The data for this research are based on my interviews with eleven adult people in Western Canada who were asked about their memories of masculinities in school (Davison, 1996). Interview participants were respondents to an advertisement that was posted in libraries, community centers, gay and lesbian centers, and in a local entertainment newspaper in an attempt to reach a broad section of the community.

Of the eleven people, ten self-identified as "men," and one self-identified as "trans-gendered." Ages of the participants varied from 18 to 58 years old. The ethno-cultural make-up of the respondents was of Anglo-European heritage, with the exception of one participant who identified as "half-Mexican." Socio-economic class was not a focus in this research; therefore, the participants were not asked about their class backgrounds or about how they felt class might have played a role. Gender and sexuality were the prime analytical focus of the study.

The methodological implication of interviewing men about masculinity and that of memory work cannot be developed within the scope of this article. Yet, it must be noted that this qualitative research was based in a feminist post-structuralist methodology that included an important element of authorial reflexivity throughout the research process (Lather, 1991). Therefore, my own experiences with physical education and body image are included alongside that of the participants.

This research attempts to open up an area that most men rarely question or discuss with others. Most of the men whom I interviewed had kept silent experiences that included homophobia, shame, humiliation, and violence encountered on a daily basis while attending school. Yet hegemonic masculinity is structured in such a way that it does not allow men to question their masculine identity and the process of masculinization in schools or otherwise (Connell, 1995). As a part of the method-

ological structure of the research, I returned the data to the participants. In doing so I found that participants were very pleased to see their experiences represented in text and enjoyed reading the experiences of the other participants. Some empathized with the other participants while others remarked that they had had very similar experiences. In returning the research to the participants it seemed to resemble the consciousness raising process practiced by early second wave feminists. Many of the participants knew that their experiences with masculinities and bodies in school were not completely unique to them, but, at the same time, they had seldom heard or read the experiences of others with regards to masculinity and schooling.

It must be noted that the research participants were equally silent about their privilege as men within the institution. The complexities of men's lives illustrates that men are not all privileged equally, nor do we experience injustice in the same way (Kaufman, 1994). Men's lives are "entering and withdrawing from assemblies of similarity and difference in overlapping and contradictory manners" (Frank, 1997, p. 20). Furthermore, it is not the goal of this article to generalize or sum up the experience of masculinities and bodies in schools. The participants' stories offer the possibility of viewing the familiar as strange, complicated, and potentially problematic. The differences between the experiences of the men I interviewed will illustrate that everyday masculinities should not be taken for granted or dismissed so quickly as "common-sense" behavior of boys. That is to say, "it is not only a matter of the inclusion of multiple points of view; it is the recognition that any point of view is itself historical, social, and fluid, rather than yet another piece of the 'truth' to be discovered" (Frank, 1997, p. 21). The presentation in this article of these participants' experiences with masculinities and bodies will hopefully offer an outlet for further discussion and understanding of common experiences that are rarely spoken about or problematized.

THE EXPERIENCES:  
PHYSICAL EDUCATION — ESTABLISHING STATUS AMONG MEN

I hated it. I really, really hated it. In fact, I think physical education was the subject I hated most. I think I dreaded it. Jeff<sup>1</sup>

Some of the more obvious lessons of masculinity in schools take place in the physical education class that is mandatory for most students in Canada until the end of grade ten. Of the men and the transgendered participant I interviewed, everyone recalled memories of overt lessons in masculinity that occurred within PE classes. As Matt pointed out, "from kindergarten and onwards, it was in gym class where there seems to be that immediate gender conditioning for boys." Matt stressed that "You could be very intelligent as a male student, you could have all kinds of other attributes, but if you don't excel in gym class then you're not going to have that same status." However, Frye (1983) points out that even "being physically 'normal' for one's assigned sex is not enough. One must *be* female or male actively" (p. 26). That is to say, boys and men must actively engage in hegemonic discourses of masculinities. One needs to both *act* masculine through speech and bodily gestures as well as physically embody masculinity through size, stature, and muscularity. The

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“physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender” (Connell, 1995, p. 52).

The demand to be athletic and to “measure up” to a masculine standard was central to the participants’ experience. When I asked the participants what the masculine ideal was in their school, one of the most frequently used terms to describe the ideal was “jock.” Jeff remembered a particular person from his school that fit the ideal masculine image. “I think of this one guy, and he was definitely the most masculine because he could play hockey, and he could play soccer, he could play baseball. The girls loved him, he was well built, and he was handsome.... I guess that’s the masculine ideal. An all-round jock.” Erica, the transgendered participant,<sup>2</sup> recounted that when she was growing up: “I knew very clearly what it was to be a man, and what it was, was: you got to be a jock, you got to be good looking, you got to be good in sport, a good athlete—much what it is today.” Ken, who attended public school in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in the Southern United States, described a similar ideal of masculinity: “they were called jocks at the time. You were supposed to be big and muscular and hairy. I was none of those three. And you were supposed to like sports, and I didn’t like sports, either.” It is important to note that the category of “jock” is but one hierarchical element of the social structure of gender in school and the greater discursive practice of masculinity.

Most of the participants recalled that they did not measure up to what they described as the ideal of masculinity in their school. Wienke (1998) points out that “most men feel bodily dissatisfaction in comparison to the ideal type, because it is believed that those men closest to the ideal reap certain cultural and social benefits not available to those furthest away” (pp. 258-259). Because they did not meet the privileged ideal, however, some participants spoke of being physically assaulted by other students and dreading every day at school. Often at the same time as not fitting in, other men interviewed found ways to fit in to the ideal or “pass” as the ideal. Matt stated:

Although I didn’t completely live up to the ideal, I found that once I started being able to compete in the PE classes, like I actually started to do better than some of the people in my gym class, you’re looked at differently, and my life literally changed overnight.

Matt’s statement points to how boys may negotiate the discourse of masculinity via physical education to enhance the perception of social and gender abeyance.

Pat Griffin (1995), in her article “Homophobia in Sport,” outlines how sport serves five functions for men in “maintaining traditional gender roles and power inequalities between men and women” (p. 54). According to Griffin, these five functions are:

- a) defining and reinforcing traditional conceptions of masculinity,
- b) providing a context for acceptable and safe male bonding and intimacy,
- c) establishing status among other males,
- d) reinforcing male privilege and perceptions of female inferiority, and
- e) reify-

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ing heterosexuality. (pp. 54-55)

While most participants would agree that PE reinforces “traditional” conceptions of masculinity, few found it a safe place for bonding or intimacy. In some participants it created a fear of both the class and the instructor. Greg recalled:

I was not very strong. I was very sensitive and very dull. This thing about having to match me up in a football game with Joe Schmuck that’s ten feet tall ... well, it was very unfair and very weird when I look back at it.... I can’t say it [PE] gave me strength, but it did instill a lot of fear in me. That’s the curriculum.

In PE boys are quite often thrown together at random to play one sport or another simply to fulfill a PE sport component. From elementary school through high school I do not ever remember being specifically taught to play any sports. It was just assumed that, as a boy, you inherently knew the rules of baseball, hockey, volleyball, rugby, etc. PE was just a place/space to “play” the games. I never once asked the teacher to explain the rules of the games, nor did I ever reveal to any other student that I had no clue what was going on, for fear of humiliation over not knowing the rules that, it seemed, everyone else instinctively knew. The decision not to ask for direction or clarification of the “rules” illustrates another level of negotiating the discourse of masculinity. The choice not to inquire into the “rules of the game” allowed the *perception* of knowing while lacking the defining knowledge.

Some of the participants, including myself, developed coping strategies in order to deal with the contradictions of masculinities played out in PE class. When Ken spoke about his experiences in PE, he stated: “I despised it. I learned quickly, though. We used to have shirts—red on one side and white the other—and you would change your shirt when your team was up. I always managed to change my shirt so that I wasn’t playing.” Frank’s (1993) research illustrates that young men “manipulate their bodies and strategize their social circumstances to achieve stability, protection and privilege that is worked on and paid attention to in all of their social interactions” (p. 52). Boys may also utilize strategies of resistance to hegemonic masculinity while manipulating their privilege at the same time.

Two of the participants were able to “pass” or somewhat conform to the masculine ideal through physical education classes. Brad explained how, while being gay, he did not completely conform to the hegemonic standard of masculinity, he managed to fit into the PE classes that allowed him to pass within the hegemonic standard.

Well, regarding gym, in junior high, gym was where I wanted to be.... All through school I was always the fastest runner in the school. I’ve got first place ribbons and I was going to competitions. It was a place where I was sort of dealing with two things. I was this fast guy, but I was also not one of the muscular guys. I was still sort of a geek, but I was accepted as well. I was like the sidekick, I guess. Everybody liked me, but everybody teased me at

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the same time.

Brad illustrates how his *performance* in running both aided his performance of masculinity and created a contradiction in how his body text was read as a “geek” and gay.

The fifth function of sport outlined by Griffin is the reification of heterosexuality. Griffin (1995) states that the “[f]ear of being perceived as gay is a powerful social control in athletics. It keeps men safely within the bounds of traditionally masculine and heterosexual attitudes and behavior in an emotionally and physically intimate setting” (p. 57). Once again, the statements of some of the participants questioned the “safety” of the traditionally masculine. Paul pointed out quite simply: “You wouldn’t want to be gay.” Aaron stated that “[for] all of the gay men I know, and who I have talked to about this, high school gym class was one of the most horrifying experiences. Again, there was outright brutality that was suffered at the hand of the gym teacher, very often who was punitive, militaristic, [and] psychotic.”

Kearney-Cook and Steichen-Asch (1990) point out that for “the adolescent, the changes in physique, a developing ability to think abstractly, and the subsequent capacity for self reflection mark the beginning of a period of extreme physical and psychological self-consciousness” (p. 63). I used to dread every gym class because it acted to remind me continually that I did not fit into the masculine ideal. I was slim and un-muscular and was not good at sports. Along with the general competitive “spirit” of PE, I remember gym class as an open struggle between boys to, in the words of Griffin (1995), “establish status among other males” (pp. 54-55) Aaron remarked that PE:

... continues to be a breeding ground of aggression and brutality. Not a lot has changed and I thought it would have to because what gym teachers got away with, and what I continue to hear that they’ve gotten away with, is abuse and assault and battery. I mean that’s all physical; that’s not even mentioning the emotional assault and the spiritual assault that’s done to these kids, because they’re kids.

Some of the emotional assault that Aaron refers to is often in the form of public humiliation by the PE teacher. Ed recalled a particular PE experience: “a teacher had told another boy he should be wearing gym shoes instead of ‘dress shoes.’ ‘What about Ed,’ asked the boy. And the PE teacher replied ‘He doesn’t kick hard enough to do any damage.’ And I was just mortified.” Ken recounted: “at one point in Basketball they passed the ball to me, and I ducked. You’re not supposed to duck. It wasn’t dodge ball. And one whole side of the gym just cracked up. The whole class was just my nightmare.”

The history of humiliation and “... being called an injurious name is embodied, ... the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine” (Butler, 1997, p. 159). Name calling that is often dismissed with the phrase “boys will be boys,” is not so simple. “If we understand the force of the name to be an affect of its historicity, then that force is not the mere casual effect of an inflicted blow, but works in part through

an encoded memory or a trauma, one that lives in language and is carried in language" (Butler, 1997, p. 36). The act of naming, sorting, and "otherizing" via binaries may result in the construction of heavy psychological and emotional baggage for young men. Thus, bodies not only perform gender but also are shaped by the punishments of gender-inappropriate behavior. Therefore, a part of the complexity of masculinity involves a relationship between the social and psychological construction of masculine identity.

Mandatory PE classes set and enforce a standard of masculine behavior based on athletic performance. Students are then graded and evaluated on the degree to which they achieve these standards. What, then, does it mean to fail PE, or only get a "C" in PE? What effect does this have on young male students? Jeff stated: "I always saw myself as lesser-than, because I wasn't as athletic.... I think [PE] played a negative part because I never felt good enough. I never felt athletic."

#### CHANGING IN CHANGE ROOMS AND COMING CLEAN IN THE SHOWERS

In addition to being subjected to humiliation by the PE teacher, boys often have to face humiliation by their peers in the change rooms before and after gym class. Unlike most girls' change rooms where there are private shower stalls, boys are made to shower in gang showers. In quite a militaristic tradition, boys are not granted privacy in the change room nor in the showers. At a time when boys and young men are going through puberty and can be quite conscious about their developing bodies, all privacy is removed. It is assumed that this lack of privacy is not problematic for young men. Most importantly, in mandatory PE class, there is no recourse for young men who feel uncomfortable, ashamed, or unsafe in the change rooms or showers. This lack of privacy, according to Allan Bérubé (1990), who writes about gay men and women in the military, often acts to protect the close relationships of men "from suspicion [of being gay] by preventing them from becoming overtly sexual" (p. 38). Within the homosocial environment of the change room and the gang shower, privacy is denied to young men in an attempt to enforce a heteronormality and to deny that anything queer is going on between this group of naked young men.

The locker room also may be a very homo-erotic space where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculinities are negotiated between men within the tension of a homosocial and homophobic space where boys are required to perform hegemonic masculinity and sexuality. For example, Brad recounted his experience and his memory of one boy's frustration regarding showering and changing with other boys.

I remember the biggest guys would shower, and they would go in there totally naked. And I remember not showering. I never did. There was no way. I guess it was sort of a masculine thing. I was probably thinking, well, penis size and that sort of thing and freaking out. And I remember [other boys] bugging someone really bad because he went and took a shower but he took it in his underwear. They were totally bugging the shit out of him. It's like there was a

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desperate need to be with these guys but something else was telling him not to do it.

Brad's passage illustrates that there is a need for boys to bond with one another and yet PE fails to provide a safe forum. In fact, it may do the opposite by creating a very dangerous place for boys. Gang showers are a most vulnerable place for boys to be for many reasons. Boys may fear violence or bullying from other boys, they may fear either being exposed as gay, or thought of as gay, or they may be ashamed of their bodies if they do not "measure up" to the ideal masculine body type. Erica explains her experience (as a boy) showering in school:

The showers. The gang showers. They are the most horrible, disgusting, intimidating, torture pretty much. For a couple of years I had this teacher who raked into you, you'd turn part way round and he'd just turn it cold. I used to get changed last, I was so ashamed of who I was.

Feelings of shame require an internalized understanding "that I *am* [...] what I am *seen to be*" (Bartky, 1996, p. 227). Thus, shame works to uphold the dominant gender regime. It lends "legitimacy to the structure of authority that occasions it, for the majesty of judgment is affirmed in its very capacity to injure" (Bartky, 1996, p. 237). The masculine failure here is rooted, psychologically and physically, in the body and its (in)ability to replicate or clone itself to a dominant masculine standard.

#### BODY IMAGE — THE SHAPE OF MASCULINITY

Physical education teachers may not acknowledge important issues for boys with regards to the healthy development and appreciation of their bodies. Because there is a focus on a hegemonic ideal masculine body in PE class, there is little room for *alternative bodies*; that is to say, bodies that do not fit with the norm. If you cannot shape yourself to the masculine standard demanded in PE class, you risk being shamed by the PE teacher and by other students. One example of this is the common procedure of having to line up to be picked for a team. Those who are picked last are publicly displayed as the weaker, less fit, less masculine bodies. There is little a student can do to escape from this humiliating position. PE class acts to categorize and "sort" bodies and reinforces the hegemonic ideal.

With regards to the physical *embodiment* of maleness, Connell (1987) states:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particularly physical skills, and the lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it [and] the way it operates at work and in sexual relations. (p. 84)

These elements of maleness are important within the school environment. If your body is smaller than other men's bodies, you can be seen as a weakling and as an

easy target for verbal or physical attacks. If you walk with a mincing step assumptions are made about your sexuality. If you are less coordinated in sport, you are alienated and humiliated in PE class. Alternatively, bodies that are conditioned to perform in ways which are closer to the hegemonic ideal may be able to exercise a certain degree of body privilege.

I remember being ashamed of changing in front of other students because I was so unhappy with the shape of my body. As a result, I would avoid taking showers completely because of my dislike of my body and because of a general fear and mistrust of the other boys. This type of shame is referred to by George Yúdice (1995) as “toxic shame,” which is “an unhealthy and self-disempowering indulgence in self blame” (p. 275). As Erica’s experience illustrates, “When you’re late developing, then you become ridiculed even more. As an adult I have no body hair. Then, I had nothing to remotely suggest masculinity. That whole essence of image is just so important and so powerful, and it does stay with us for an awfully long time.”

Only very recently have there been studies that take into account the importance of body image to boys and men (Scott & Morgan, 1993; Weinke, 1998). PE itself is concerned with strengthening and “building” the body, male and female, and yet little consideration is paid to how PE can negatively affect students’ body image and feelings of self-esteem. Salisbury and Jackson (1997) point out that:

Those boys who can’t measure up against the traditional standards of the dominant body-culture begin to perceive themselves as inadequate, failed boys and, as a result, are often put down and marginalized. A great deal of personal unhappiness and psychological damage result from this marginalization. (p. 190)

Thus, we come to see that what we often take for granted as masculine behavior and identity in boys is actually a delicate, complex, and sometimes dangerous balancing act for young men. PE plays an important pedagogical role in “helping” young men meet the challenge of hegemonic masculinity.

I believe that one of the purposes of PE in schools is to teach or encourage group dynamics on teams and to provide a space/place for healthy physical activity. However, as the experiences of the men I interviewed illustrate, there are many factors that prevent these goals from being achieved and can quite easily result in producing a very unhealthy environment for young men. The effect of PE on Aaron sums up some of the lifelong unhealthy effects of mandatory Physical Education.

It did continue its damage on me long after public school because for a whole combination of reasons, I’ve loathed my body and loathed myself for years, and after public school—it was all tied into my coming out experience too—I loathed my body and was self destructive. I was willfully negligent, I was careless and reckless. I got into binge eating, and reckless dieting. I was overweight for years. What I was doing at that time was actively rebelling against a fit and active life. Which is the greatest irony; a physical education trying to nurture and develop an appreciation for the

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body and for physical arts, and it did diametrically the opposite for me. I was so repulsed by the whole experience.

### CONCLUSION

The experiences of the men who were interviewed illustrate that there are many lessons in masculinity taught in mandatory physical education in schools. Many of the lessons in PE reinforce the ideals of hegemonic masculinity that the participants recognized when they were students and recalled in the interview. Other social lessons helped to create an unhealthy psychological masculine identity for the participants as boys and as young men that has remained with them throughout their life. Men grow up evaluating our bodies and carefully calculating how we can measure up to the masculine “norm,” but we rarely problematize the procedure itself.

Perhaps this lack of critique may come from an inability to speak the sense of gendered failure into existence. “Some boys’ images of themselves are so full of hatred that they find it impossible to talk about. It is a forbidden zone where to let other boys into the world of internal doubt would risk the fear of ridicule and the possibility of being excluded” (Salisbury & Jackson, 1997, p. 193). As a result there is a great deal of silence around men, their body image, and masculine identity. The fear of not “being” and embodying the masculine “norm” is reinforced in public schools. And learning to “fit” into hegemonic masculinity, by definition, requires that young men accept and participate in homophobia, sexism, misogyny, and violence as everyday masculine practice.

Physical education classes are positioned within young men’s social, physical, and educational sphere and may offer the possibility to broaden the way boys and men think about their bodies in relation to everyday gender practices. Educators may problematize contradictions, privileges, and oppressive masculine ideals. The location of hegemonic masculine bodily performances and practices in schools shapes the social interaction of the institution (Frank, 1987; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). The creation of a discursive space where young men can speak of possible contradictions inherent to masculine performances may allow for a better understanding of body health and may encourage more respect for their bodies and other boys’ bodies and offer students the possibility to enjoy physical education class to a greater extent.

### NOTES

1. Participants’ names in the text are pseudonyms.
2. The subject of this article does not permit me to explain at length Erica’s transgendered experience, and for the most part, I will not be drawing on how her unique transgendered experiences specifically affected her understanding of masculinities in schools. However, Erica’s transgendered experience growing up as a boy and becoming a man/woman must be pointed out to the reader to add a dimension to reading her experiences within this text.

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