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**Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity:  
Competing Masculinities Among Heterosexual Men in a Feminized Terrain**

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ABSTRACT: Using in-depth interviews and participant observations from sixty-eight male cheerleaders and four selected cheerleading teams, this research examines the construction of masculinity among college-age heterosexual male cheerleaders. Whereas previous studies of men in feminized terrain have shown that hegemonic processes of dominance and subordination influence most men to bolster their masculinity through an approximation of orthodox masculine requisites, this research finds that heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading today exhibit two forms of normative masculinity. One form retains most tenets of orthodox masculine construction, while the other is shown to be more inclusive. Men who subscribe to this inclusive form of masculinity do not respond to their transgression into feminized terrain in the same manner as has been shown in other investigations of men in feminized arenas because they are shown to accept feminine behavior and homosexuality among men. The emergence of this more inclusive form of masculinity is attributed to many factors, including the structure of the sport, the reduction of cultural, institutional, and organizational homophobia, and the resocialization of men into a gender-integrated sport.



This research uses sixty-eight in-depth interviews of collegiate male cheerleaders and ethnographic fieldwork from four selected cheerleading teams to examine the construction of masculinity among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain. Previous studies maintain that a hegemonic process of masculine dominance and submission (Connell 1987, 1995) influences most heterosexual men in feminized arenas to bolster their masculinity through the approximation of orthodox masculine requisites, including the expression of homophobic and antifeminine-acting attitudes (Davis 1990; Majors 1990; Messner 1992; Sargent 2001; Williams 1989, 1993, 1995). This research shows, however, that men in collegiate cheerleading today exhibit two contrasting and competing forms of normative masculinity, each supported by organizational and institutional culture and each with near-equal membership.

The first category of masculine performance is labeled as *orthodox*. The men categorized into this group are shown to perform masculinity in a manner consistent with previous studies of men in feminized terrain: they attempt to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity, largely by devaluing women and gay men (Adams 1993; Davis 1990; Hanson 1995; Sargent 2001; Williams 1993, 1995). The performance of masculinity among men in this group is influenced by a number of factors, including the institutional culture of one of the two major cheerleading governing bodies, the “Orthodox Cheerleading Association.”

The second category of masculine performance is labeled as *inclusive*. The men in this group view orthodox masculinity as undesirable and do not aspire to many of its tenets. Particularly important to the study of men in feminized terrain, this research shows that inclusive masculinity is based less on homophobia and antifemininity than orthodox masculinity. Men in this group willingly embrace the feminized underpinnings of their sport and largely value their gay teammates. Notably, the construction of inclusive masculinity is influenced by the institutional culture of the other major governing cheerleading body, the “Inclusive Cheerleading Association.”

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

## **BACKGROUND**

David and Brannon (1976:12) have categorized four basic tenets that “seem to comprise the core requirements” of American masculinity. These include: (1) no sissy stuff, (2) be a big wheel, (3) be a sturdy oak, and (4) give ’em hell. Although all four rules are important in understanding the construction and stratification of masculine power and privilege, this research is mostly concerned with the “no sissy stuff” principle because of a durable sociological understanding that contemporary masculinity largely exists in opposition to femininity (Bourdieu 2001; Chodorow 1978; Connell 1987; David and Brannon 1976; Dellinger 2004; Frye 1983; Gilmore 1990; Kimmel 1996, 2004; Lorber 1994; Lucal 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987). Kimmel (2004:97) says, “While different groups of men may disagree about other traits and their significance in gender definitions, the antifemininity component of masculinity is perhaps the single dominant and universal characteristic.”

The marginalization of men in feminine fields has been shown effective in deterring heterosexual men from engaging in these settings (Adams 1993; Davis 1990; Sargent 2001; Williams 1993, 1995), perhaps because men who enter these fields find their sexuality publicly scrutinized (Martin and Collinson 1999). Accordingly, it has also been shown that North American masculinity is based in a disassociation from homosexuality (Chauncey 1985; Gorer 1964; Halperin 1989; Humphreys 1975; Kimmel 1994; Lancaster 1988; Plummer 2001; Pollack 1998), something particularly true to athletic

settings (Adams 1993; Anderson 2005; Pronger 1990). When one adds homophobia to David's and Brannon's (1976) tenets, it produces an orthodox form of masculinity. Orthodox masculinity is reflected in and reproduced through an institutionalized, gender-segregated, and highly competitive sporting culture in North America (Anderson 2005; Burstyn 1999).

Previous investigations into the social construction of masculinities have shown a relationship between the dominant form of masculine expression and subordinate forms (Anderson 2002; Connell 1987, 1995; Gramsci 1971; Messner 1992). Connell (1995:77) has described hegemonic masculinity as a social process in which one form of institutionalized masculinity is "culturally exalted" above all others. Key to understanding the operation of hegemony in relationship to masculinity, Connell (1987, 1995) maintains that most men exhibiting a subordinate form of masculinity actually desire to obtain the hegemonic form. Essentially, the process of hegemony influences the oppressed to maintain the rightfulness or naturalization of their oppression. Indeed, it is this aspiration that makes the process hegemonic (Gramsci 1971). Thus, if hegemony applies to masculinity, one would expect most who transgress masculine-defined boundaries to preserve, if not inflate, their position by adopting as many tenets of orthodox masculinity as possible. These identity management techniques might include: (1) being homophobic, (2) devaluing femininity, (3) increasing masculine bravado, and (4) claiming masculine space within the larger feminized arena.

Examinations of feminized terrain have consistently shown men to approximate orthodox masculinity and to justify their transgression as consistent with hegemonic expectations of masculinity (Adams 1993; Anderson 2002; Davis 1990; Klein 1993; Majors 1990; Williams 1993, 1995). For example, men who occupy feminized space are quick to defend their transgressions as consistent within normative boundaries of orthodox masculinity, maintaining that they have not transgressed masculine acceptability, rather that the space has been inappropriately gendered. Or, if men do acknowledge the feminine underpinnings of their field, they attempt to select a particular role within that space and define

it as masculine (Davis 1990; McGuffey and Rich 1999; Sargent 2001; Williams 1993, 1995).

Accordingly, heterosexual male cheerleaders have been shown to emphasize that certain tasks within cheerleading (such as lifting women above their heads) are masculine, believing women lack the strength to perform these tasks as well as men. Conversely, they designate other tasks (such as erotic dancing) to be exclusively feminine (Davis 1990; Hanson 1995).

Although the types of identity management techniques exhibited by men in feminized terrain are considered to be a reflection of the social process of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995), it is important to clarify that hegemonic masculinity is not an archetype, “It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 1995:76). And while Connell does describe the contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity as including the tenets of homophobia and antifemininity, she does not assign a categorical label to this group. This makes it easy to erroneously conflate the process of hegemonic masculinity with an archetype of masculinity. This study refrains from using “hegemonic masculinity” as a categorical label; instead, the term is used to describe a social process of subordination and stratification. In this research, the difference between an archetype and a social process of dominance is understood by delineating the traditionally hegemonic category of masculinity as *orthodox masculinity*. Thus, traditionally marginalized masculinities (such as gay, nonathletic, or feminine-acting men) occupy the lower rungs of the hierarchy based in defiance to orthodox masculinity (Anderson 2005; Messner 1992, 2002).

## METHODS

This research uses in-depth interviews and participant observations to examine how heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading construct masculinity through micro and macro social processes (Dellinger 2004). Because cheerleading is commonly understood to be a feminized terrain, this research also examines the relationship between hegemonic processes of masculine dominance and individual agency (Dilorio 1989;

Glaser and Strauss 1967) in the social construction of gendered identities. Considering previous investigations of masculine construction in cheerleading were conducted more than a decade ago (Davis 1990; Hanson 1995), this research might also capture the effect of decreasing homophobia in recent years.

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

My orientation into the culture of collegiate cheerleading began with informal discussions with friends who were collegiate male cheerleaders and through the analysis of cheerleading Web pages. Next, twelve collegiate male cheerleaders were contacted for interviews by using the member profile search on America Online, which provides a search engine for accessing the stated interests of AOL's 33 million subscribers. After communicating with these cheerleaders through instant messaging, I asked them for in-depth, taped telephone interviews. Snowball and theoretical sampling techniques (Corbin and Strauss 1990) were used with these initial informants to obtain an additional twelve interviews. The forty-four other informant interviews were obtained randomly at cheerleading competitions by asking potential informants if they were willing to participate in academic research. In total, sixty-eight interviews with self-identified heterosexual male cheerleaders were transcribed and coded.

The interviewer began by asking informants to discuss their life history in sports and the process by which they came into cheerleading. Informants were then asked about their views on homosexuality and feminine expression among men as well as their perceptions of women's athleticism and leadership

qualities. They were also asked to discuss how they maintained a heterosexual identity in cheerleading and how their identity, or identity management techniques, might vary from when they were in football. In addition to these coded and transcribed interviews, twelve informal group interviews (60 to 120 minutes) were conducted on coed cheerleading teams throughout the United States, some of which included women, coaches, and gay men. Men in these groups were asked about their relationships with women and gay men and about the gendered underpinnings of cheerleading.

In addition to these interviews, 300 hours of participant observation were conducted on four selected coed teams. These teams were solicited in advance of a major competition, and each agreed to be observed and interviewed over three to four-day competitions, but observations also took place at practices in their home states and while they socialized away from the athletic arena. Field notes (with either a microrecorder or a pocket-sized memo pad) were recorded outside their direct presence. The teams' willingness to be observed was due in part to the author's experience as a coach. Knowledge of kinesiology and sport psychology enabled me to speak their language and help with their athletic endeavors. During the analysis of this research, I maintained relationships with several heterosexual male cheerleaders (from both cheerleading institutions), who were used as key informants for understanding the complexities of cheerleading rules, maneuvers, and cultural practices.

Categorizing informants as belonging to one form of masculinity or the other was based largely on an informant's perceptions of how men and women should act and what tasks men should or should not perform within the sport of cheerleading. Categorization was also influenced by the informant's views on homosexuality and feminine-acting men. For example, athletes who expressed dislike of gay men or held antifeminine or misogynistic attitudes were grouped as orthodox cheerleaders, while those expressing support for gay men and femininity among men were classified as inclusive. Thus, men who stigmatized the performance of certain roles within coed cheerleading as strictly feminine (such as erotic



dancing or being thrown into the air) were classified as orthodox, and men who comfortably performed these feminine-coded roles were grouped as inclusive.

It is important to understand that there are two major competing associations that control the world of cheerleading. This research, however, analyzes these associations only as far as they relate to collegiate cheerleading. This is not an analysis of high school or professional cheerleading. Each cheerleading association is a profit-oriented corporation that markets cheerleading instruction, merchandise, and training camps. At the collegiate level, each of these two associations maintains near-equal university membership, and each organizes a series of competitions leading to a national meet that draws hundreds of college teams. To protect their identity, the names of these associations have been changed in this article to the Inclusive Cheerleading Association and the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. Since these two cheerleading associations maintain different institutionalized perspectives on gender (in collegiate cheerleading), data collection was evenly split between them.

It is also important to understand that the given names of the two cheerleading associations are intentionally conflated with the categorized forms of masculine expression found in this study. This is primarily for simplicity but also because, as one might expect, the informants of each association largely reflect the institutional creed of their governing body. Men who belonged to the Orthodox Cheerleading Association largely displayed and valued the tenets of orthodox masculinity, while the men in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association largely displayed and valued the tenets of inclusive masculinity. During the coding of the research, however, men were classified as belonging to one group of men or the other, independent of their organizational (university) or cheerleading association affiliation.

## RESULTS

Cheerleading has evolved from the days of simply cheering for the victory of other athletic teams. Cheerleading squads today compete against each other in complex athletic performances in which

contestants dance, cheer, perform stunts, and tumble to rhythmically synchronized, high-energy music. Higher, faster, and more complicated are the hallmarks of winning squads, and these qualities demand cheerleaders of both sexes to be fearless acrobats who perform dangerously complicated maneuvers.

Research on cheerleading, however, shows that despite the evolution of cheerleading from the sidelines to the main stage, the sport has largely maintained its cultural ascription of femininity (Adams and Bettis 2003). Hanson says, “The overriding contemporary perception that cheerleader equals girl is reinforced by popular culture which defines it strictly in feminized terms” (1995:116). Adams and Bettis have even shown that young women who play other, masculinized sports often participate in cheerleading as a way to counter stereotypes of their masculinization, reporting that cheerleading offers young women “a space to revel in what they called being a ‘girlie girl’” (2003:84).

Men who cheer in college, however, have been shown to view themselves as being far from “girlie men.” Previous studies of these men have found that they maintain themselves to be “real men:”daring, heterosexual, and strong enough to hold a woman (or two) above their heads, while still agile enough to perform gymnastic feats (Davis 1990; Hanson 1995). Despite the fact that the entire field is culturally feminized, many cheerleaders of both sexes maintain that certain tasks within the sport are actually highly masculinized activities, even if women perform the same tasks in the all-women’s division of cheerleading.

Gendering certain tasks as masculine has been credited with paving the way for more men to join cheerleading (Hanson 1995). Still, because not enough men cheer in high school, most collegiate teams competing in the coed division must recruit men who have no experience in cheerleading. They often look to football players, believing them well suited for the complexities of competitive cheerleading because they are strong, used to rigorous training, and value self-sacrifice in the pursuit of victory. But because football players have been socialized into a highly sexist and homophobic arena (Anderson 2005; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990) and because cheerleading is culturally defined as a feminine activity

(Adams and Bettis 2003; Davis 1990; Hanson 1995), convincing men to *give up* football is not effective. After all, football players occupy a space described to accrue social power, prestige, and privilege (Anderson 2005; Bissinger 1990; Connell 1987, 1995; Messner 1992, 2002; Miracle and Rees 1994; Pronger 1990). Football, however, is also a highly competitive sport, and there are a large number of former high school football players who do not make their university teams during tryouts. It is these men that become the recruitment targets for cheerleading squads.

Threatened by a disengagement from their previous athletic identity (Messner 1987) and desiring an association with the highly masculinized ethos attributed to men in team sports, former football players report a desire to join other competitive athletic teams. However, they are generally not trained in the rigors of other team sports (such as baseball or basketball), which also maintain a competitive selection process. Thus, cheerleading becomes a common avenue for “getting back into the game.”

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

### **Performing Orthodox Masculinity**

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

It is really important for you guys to give these women a lot of respect. . . . You are going to be putting your hands in certain places, and catching them when they fall, so be sure to

be respectful. . . . Remember that we do things better; we pick up on things faster than women do, so don't rub that in by telling them, "We are better than you." Be respectful of the fact that guys are better. Just as important, when you are out in the field you have to portray a masculine image. When you are on the field, you must be the king of masculinity. We don't care what your sexual orientation is; that is none of our business. What you are at home is none of our business. But when you are here you have to be masculine. And if anyone gives you shit, and says you are gay or whatever, remind them that while they are out there playing with guys, you are out here with all these beautiful women.

Randy's talk illustrates the institutional and cultural attitudes of masculinity, homophobia, and sexism among men categorized as belonging to the orthodox group. This speech, in some variation, is traditional for veteran male cheerleaders to give to new men in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. It is something they call "guy talk," and it best exemplifies orthodox masculinity because it maintains that men should strictly avoid activities culturally determined to be feminine and portrays women as less intelligent and less athletic than men. The form of masculinity promoted in Randy's speech also subjugates homosexuality and sends a message to gay men that to be accepted they must downplay their sexuality and act in accordance with dominant notions of orthodox masculinity (Anderson 2002, 2005; Connell 1987, 1995; Messner 2002). Thus, similar to previous investigations of men in feminized terrain—and synonymous with the findings of marginalized men in masculinized terrain—this study found that the orthodox group of men in collegiate cheerleading attempted to mitigate and justify their transgression into feminized terrain (Anderson 2002; Davis 1990; Majors 1990; Messner 1992; Williams 1989, 1993, 1995).

Those who valued orthodox masculinity often relied on the same identity management techniques discussed in previous investigations of collegiate cheerleading (Davis 1990; Hanson 1995). Namely, they

maintained that their role within the sport was consistent with orthodox expectations of masculinity and that the feminized nature of their terrain was falsely attributed. Daren said, “I know that people don’t think that this is a masculine sport, but I challenge them to throw a girl up in the air and then catch her as she falls. Besides, the original cheerleaders *were* men.” Daren, like many men in cheerleading, postulates that not only is cheerleading a sport in which men and women are polarized into masculine and feminine roles, but that it is also a sport that requires men to be “really” masculine. “Yeah, most of the guys are *really* masculine. . . . We aren’t a bunch of fairies out here dancing in skirts.”

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

Patrick agreed:

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

In addition to the maintenance of sexist attitudes, many of the men categorized as belonging to the orthodox group also expressed varying degrees of homophobia. While this was sometimes found in overt expressions, it was most often expressed covertly. Perhaps much of this group’s homophobic and/or heterosexist sentiment was used to challenge cultural assumptions that male cheerleaders are gay. Indeed, it is common for heterosexual men to confront (or displace) accusations of homosexuality with homophobia (Anderson 2002, 2005; Martin and Collinson 1999; McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 1992; Plummer 1999, 2001; Smith 1998), and these men certainly found themselves inundated with homosexual suspicion. In

fact, the suspicion of homosexuality may be even more prominent among male cheerleaders today than among male cheerleaders of yesteryear.

Loftus (2001) used General Social Survey data to show that homosexuality was not as visible two decades ago as it is today, and Ibson (2002) has shown that the mere awareness that homosexuality exists is enough to alter men's behaviors. Furthermore, Pronger (1990) suggests that homosexuality in the 1980s was largely thought incompatible with athletic men, but recently it has been shown that athleticism no longer provides the same veneer of heterosexuality (Anderson 2005). Finally, the reduction of cultural homophobia in recent years may also have encouraged a larger percentage of male cheerleaders to come out of the closet, and this might place the heterosexuality of other male cheerleaders under suspicion through a guilt-by-association process (Anderson 2000, 2005). Therefore, heterosexual men who cheered a decade or more ago may not have had to prove their heterosexuality in the same manner heterosexual cheerleaders do today.

However, the reduction of cultural homophobia and the increased presence of openly gay men seems to have made the expression of homophobia somewhat outmoded, even among many members of the orthodox group. The expression of homophobia is therefore largely accomplished through covert mechanisms of heterosexism. One such manner comes in the form of *defensive heterosexuality*.

Defensive heterosexuality is characterized by the expressive signaling of heterosexuality through a variety of repeated mechanisms. For example, the most common narrative heterosexual male cheerleaders used to explain their transgression into feminized space was a well crafted and collectively constructed story about men lusting for their female teammates. One male cheerleader said, "Yeah, there are all these hot chicks in cheerleading. That is why I came out for the team." Another said, "Who wouldn't want to be out here with all these beautiful women?" The story was common: so compelled to be around hot women, heterosexual male cheerleaders were sexually drawn to the feminized arena of cheerleading.

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

For the orthodox men in this study, masculinity is constructed within well-established feminist findings (Chodorow 1978; David and Brannon 1976; Frye 1983; Kimmel 1994; Lorber 1994; Lucal 1999; Plummer 1999, 2001; Pronger 1990; Smith 1998): namely, that to be a "real man," one must not be like a woman and one must not be gay. Most of the men in the orthodox group stressed their athleticism and their masculinity, and they attempted to distance themselves from acting feminine or being perceived as gay. They justified their transgression into feminized terrain by challenging the feminine attributes of the arena and by claiming that their particular tasks (e.g., holding women above their heads) were inappropriately labeled as feminine.

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

### **Performing Inclusive Masculinity**

With their competition finished, dinner eaten, and the movie over, a group of seven men (five straight and two gay) walked back to their hotel. Howie said, "Time for some drinking games. I've

invited over the guys from Lincoln.” When asked if he was worried that the cheerleaders from the other team might think him gay since he was not only sharing a room with a gay man, but also sharing a bed, he responded, “No. Why would I?”

After an hour of drinking games, one of the heterosexual men said, “Hey guys, do you want to see if coach will drive us to a club?” Howie responded, “You guys know of any around here?” To which his best friend, Steve, answered, “There is Gold Diggers, the Slush House, and then of course there is the Phoenix; it’s a gay club.” Howie interrupted, “Let’s go there,” and the others agreed. When asked why they would rather go to a gay club than a straight one, Howie answered, “The vibe is better, the music is better, and there are still good-looking women, so why wouldn’t we want to go there?” When asked, “Aren’t you worried about being thought gay?,” the five heterosexual men shook their heads no and Howie asked, “Why would we?” They rounded up more teammates, piled into two vans, and headed for the club. Once there, heterosexual men danced with both women *and* gay men, two heterosexual men even “freaked” each other (a term used by these men to describe two people dancing with their groins together).

While there was not a universal position on homosexuality among men in the inclusive group (just as there was not in the orthodox group), these men had few inhibitions about homosexuality. Their attitudes ran from tolerant to celebratory. Typical comments included, “I don’t care what people think of me” to “Why is it necessary to have a label?” One male cheerleader even said, “I used to go to gay clubs all the time, and then I actually got a job at a gay club. I got hit on all the time. It was flattering.” Still another said, “Why should I care? Why should people care if I’m straight?”

These attitudes are particularly unusual given that these men previously played high school football. “I used to hate gays,” one inclusive cheerleader told me. “But now I don’t care. I’ve gotten over it.” His teammate added, “Yeah, most of my teammates used to just hate gays. I mean, what football player doesn’t?” Perhaps most telling, another cheerleader said, “To be honest with you, I used to be



homophobic. I used to be one of the guys calling the cheerleaders on my high school team fags.” He continued, “Now, I’m on the other side. I mean, I’m not gay, but others sometimes think I am because I cheer, and if that’s what they want to think, I don’t bother to try to tell them different.”

Data suggests that this shift in attitude from homophobic to gay-friendly might be made possible for several reasons. First, gay male cheerleaders seem to have strong support from female and older male teammates. For example, Dan said, “Oh yeah, you learn not to be homophobic real quick. I mean, you can’t be. The women and coaches in cheer would never stand for that.” Another said, “I made some homophobic comment when I first joined, and one of the guys pulled me to the side and schooled me on it.” Second, heterosexual men generally befriended at least one gay male teammate. Jeffrey, a fourth-year cheerleader, said:

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

A third possible reason for the shift in attitude is that institutional support has helped in shaping a new understanding of homosexuality. While overt homophobia was generally replaced with heterosexism in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, homosexuality and femininity among men was institutionally supported in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association. This has led many gay men who cheered in high school to self-select into colleges that compete for the Inclusive Cheerleading Association. Thus, there are more openly gay athletes in this association, and this makes it easier for closeted men to come out.

The heterosexual men classified as belonging to the inclusive group were not only less concerned with mitigating homosexual suspicion through homophobia and heterosexism, but they were also less concerned about associating with femininity. That is to say, men who subscribed to inclusive masculinity

were far less concerned with the expression of femininity among other men. In fact, discussions of what behaviors were considered feminine or masculine often suggested a great deal of thought and critical thinking as to the nature of gender performance in the sport. Men in this group were willing, often eager, to participate in role-reversal activities otherwise stigmatized by men in the orthodox group. Some men in the inclusive group agreed that certain behaviors were understood to be feminine but displayed irreverence for such essentialist thinking. Other men questioned the usefulness of categorizing things as gendered. Men from one inclusive squad even wore sleeveless shirts that zipped up the back (something associated with women's uniforms in this sport). In this respect, the gendered perspectives of many men in this group might best be understood from a queer theory perspective (Jargose 1996; Kosofsky 1993; Seidman 1996).

For example, Jeff, a heterosexual cheerleader, practiced with another male teammate for nearly half an hour, trying to put a female into the air with perfect form. But after growing bored he said, "My turn." The athletes switched positions, and Jeff stood atop the hands of a male and a female. According to those with an orthodox understanding of masculinity, this position is one of the most feminine things a man can do in cheerleading. Jeff, however, was unconcerned. He willingly embraced the coded femininity of such tasks. In this respect, men in this group were shown to be less concerned about performing consistently with some of the tenets of traditional masculinity, challenging the bifurcation of gender.

When men in this group were asked about their masculine identities, many indicated that they considered themselves to be "metrosexual," a recent pop-culture term they understand to describe a gay-friendly heterosexual male who presents himself with the style-conscious behaviors otherwise attributed to gay men (Cashmore and Parker 2003; Flocker 2004; Hyman 2004). Thus, just as "guy talk" was a useful defining construct for men in the orthodox group, the term "metrosexual" was useful for men in the inclusive group.

It is important to note that in the collegiate cheerleading arena, it would be inappropriate to describe the men belonging to the inclusive group as maintaining a subordinate form of masculinity. That label does not work for these men because (like hegemonic masculinity) subordination describes a social process, not an archetype. Specifically, Connell (1987, 1995) describes subordinate masculinity in relation to a dominant (and hegemonic) form of masculinity. But because these men construct a hierarchy that esteems inclusivity and stigmatizes orthodox masculinity, it would be hard to say they are subordinate. Furthermore, Connell describes subordinate masculinity as existing *only* in relationship to a dominant *institutionalized* form of masculinity, and in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association, it is inclusive masculinity that is institutionalized, not orthodox masculinity. This highlights that the process of gender construction in collegiate cheerleading is a product of individuals, organizations, and institutions.

### **Structure and Agency in Constructing Masculinity**

Individuals are not free to construct simply any version of identity that they desire; identity construction is influenced and constrained by a number of micro and macro social processes (Acker 1990; Connell 1987; Messner 2002; Walkerdine 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). To understand how cultural scripts and organizational rules institutionalize gender in collegiate cheerleading, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered institutions was employed—the same theory used in other investigations of men in feminized terrain (Davis 1990; Williams 1993, 1995).

Acker views organizational hierarchies, job descriptions, and informal workplace practices as containing deeply gendered assumptions that eventually become naturalized. In this manner, gender is institutionalized by employing hegemonic processes that reify gender myths and stigmatize those who do not follow institutional norms. Within the same institution, however, there can be variances in gender

expression, suggesting that organizational culture and individual agency also maintain influence in the process of gender construction (Dellinger 2004).

The Orthodox Cheerleading Association institutionalizes masculinity along the lines of other masculinized team sports. It values a bifurcation of gender and views homosexuality as a threat to this polarization. In the maintenance of orthodox masculinity, this cheerleading association uses covert and overt techniques to police masculine behaviors. For example, cultural norms stigmatize men (or entire teams) that perform in ways contrary to orthodox masculine perspectives. Men who dance complicated or erotic choreography (similar to women) find that their showmanship lowers their team's score. Because of this, men move in a rigid fashion, leaving the hip-swinging and erotic choreography exclusively to women.

In the Inclusive Cheerleading Association, however, men are expected to dance as competently and erotically as women. Men often take center stage, thrusting their pelvises and caressing their bodies to the thunderous approval of the audience, while their female teammates wait on the side. In the Inclusive Cheerleading Association, men even throw other men into the air, the strictest taboo in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. While this does not happen with regular frequency (largely because it is more difficult to throw and catch a 180-pound man than a 100-pound woman), one squad concluded their national championship routine in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association by having a man fly over a two-person high pyramid and land safely into the arms of four other men. This finale brought cheers of deafening approval that carried on longer than is customary. Because of this kind of activity, the Inclusive Cheerleading Association's competitions are widely recognized as being more dynamic and daring than those of the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, whose members, in turn, feel that they uphold the traditional form of cheerleading.

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

team that participates in an Inclusive Cheerleading Association event. In this manner, the Orthodox Cheerleading Association relies on traditional tools of marginalization, stigmatization, and institutional punishment for associating with femininity. The Inclusive Cheerleading Association makes no such demands of its participants.

The two leading cheerleading associations also maintain near-opposite perspectives on homosexuality. Highlighting the institutional perspective on homosexuality in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, men who are out or who act in less than masculinized ways are equated with being unprofessional. Accordingly, it was harder to find openly gay cheerleaders in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. Similar to the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy found among openly gay athletes in highly masculinized team sports (Anderson 2005), their status was often privately recognized but not publicly discussed. Conversely, in many cases, gay members of the Inclusive Cheerleading Association talked more freely about their sexuality.

But just because a cheerleading association sanctions a particular version of masculinity does not imply that all the cheerleaders who belong to that governing body agree with this perspective. Some individuals and, in some cases, entire teams publicly protested their association’s gender paradigm. The best example of organizational contestation in reformulating representations of institutionalized masculinity comes from participant observations of the Troubadours. Unlike the coaches of most teams of the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, the Troubadours’ coaches made a decision to challenge the tough-guy image that their governing body esteems. One of the coaches told me, “Oh, I say to hell with all that macho stuff. We are just here to have fun, and if others don’t like us for who we are, to hell with them.” One of his athletes agreed, “Everyone here is like ‘that’s just stupid, acting so macho and stuff.’” His comments were supported by participant observations, which showed a great deal of physical intimacy (hugging and holding) between men on the Troubadours team. In a restaurant after one competition, one heterosexual man even kissed another on the cheek in an expression of his friendship.

The Troubadours have also taken a political stand against the conservative nature of the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. The coach reflected, “I remember one year, well I knew we would be dinged points for it, but I had this male flyer (one who is thrown into the air) that was just amazing. So I took a chance. I figured why not? I put a guy into the air.” When asked if this wasn’t the most feminine movement possible in a cheerleading routine, he answered, “Of course, and we were dinged points for it, too. But I didn’t care.”

The gender rebellion the Troubadours exhibited in the Orthodox Cheerleading Association made them highly ostracized by other Orthodox Cheerleading Association teams. One coach raised his eyebrow even at the mention of the Troubadours, saying, “Oh, you don’t want to talk to them. They are not what cheerleading is all about,” despite the fact that the Troubadours hold five consecutive national championship titles in their division. Furthermore, the Orthodox Cheerleading Association has recently responded to the Troubadours’ embracement of femininity and homosexuality by removing points for the dance portion of cheerleading routines. One coach told me that this was a direct response to the fact that *some* judges had ceased to demerit the Troubadours for dancing in other-than-masculinized ways, suggesting that the institutional creed of this organization is contested by individuals as well as organizations.

Likewise, not all teams that belonged to the Inclusive Cheerleading Association reflected an inclusive form of masculinity. Several teams competed in the style of the Orthodox Cheerleading Association, even interrupting their high-energy and dynamic performances to yell cheers such as “go! fight! win!” to the crowd (something considered taboo in this association). Upon finishing an orthodox-styled performance at the Inclusive Cheerleading Association’s National Championship meet, one team even handed out Bibles to other teams. When asked why, one of the male cheerleaders said, “So others can see God’s word.” When asked, “See God’s word on what?,” he answered, “Well, like on homosexuality.”

## DISCUSSION

Previous investigations of masculine construction among men in feminized terrain have shown that hegemonic processes serve to stigmatize the expression of masculinity in ways that do not meet orthodox perspectives (Davis 1990; Williams 1995). This is attributable to the hegemonic understandings of masculine construction that requires cultural and institutional punishment for those who fail to meet the mandates of the dominant form, in whichever form it currently exists. The hegemonic privileging of one form of masculine expression and the subordination of all others are particularly salient among men in feminized terrain because these arenas have been shown to be more permissive of marginalized men than masculinized arenas (Connell 1995). Thus, there is a greater variance of masculinities exhibited among men in feminized terrain than among men in highly masculinized fields (Anderson 2005).

The presence of feminized, gay, or otherwise marginalized men in feminized terrain has not, however, been shown to influence a significant number of men to challenge the dominant form of masculinity. In fact, just the opposite has been shown to occur. Previous investigations of heterosexual men in feminized occupational and/or recreational terrain find that orthodox masculinity retains its hegemonic position. Men in these terrains have been shown to distance themselves from subordinate status by aligning themselves with orthodox masculinity (Adams 1993; Anderson 2002, 2005; Davis 1990; Hanson 1995; Sargent 2001; Williams 1993, 1995). Thus, men in feminized spaces have been shown to preserve and/or inflate their masculine identities by being homophobic, devaluing femininity, and claiming their space to be erroneously labeled as feminized.

In this study, male cheerleaders who ascribed to orthodox understandings of masculinity also relied on these identity-management techniques. Men in this group were shown to inflate their masculine worth, distance themselves from acting feminine, and use “guy talk” to socialize new cheerleaders into their gendered perspective. Men in this group also reproduced heterosexism by classifying gay male

cheerleaders who discussed their sexuality as “unprofessional” and sexism by stressing that they are athletically superior to women. In other words, most men within the orthodox category devalued and distanced themselves from homosexuality and femininity.

Additionally, this research found that, similar to the fashion in which men must prove and reprove their masculinity (Kimmel 2004), male cheerleaders who desire a public image of heterosexuality had to prove and reprove their heterosexuality. Most heterosexual men in the orthodox group signaled their heterosexuality through a variety of overt and covert methods. One method of doing this was found in the display of defensive heterosexuality, which included overt sexualization of women and, for those who did not desire to be thought overtly homophobic, prefacing many statements with, “I’m not gay, but...”

Conversely, those who subscribed to inclusive masculinity were shown to behave in effeminate ways without experiencing social stigma. This group largely chose not to value whether people perceived them as gay or straight, masculine or feminine. In this respect, they were less (or not at all) defensive about their heterosexuality, and they regularly stated support for homosexuality. Because these men had a culturally positive association with homosexuality, homophobia ceased to be a tool of masculine marginalization. Conversely, homophobic expression was stigmatized among men in this group. In fact, the inclusive form of masculinity proposed by this group was the near-antithesis of orthodox masculinity. Many self-identified heterosexual men in this (equally large) group found the label “metrosexual” useful for self-identification of their modified masculine perspective.

Men in the inclusive group also participated in tasks traditionally defined as feminine and supported women who performed tasks traditionally defined as masculine. This included allowing themselves to be tossed into the air (flying), standing atop the shoulders of others, wearing clothing defined as feminine, and dancing in the same erotic fashion as their female teammates. With the performance of these tasks, these men challenge the utility of binary thinking. Thus, about half the men in



the world of collegiate cheerleading contested the masculine/feminine binary that previous studies have shown to be intensely policed.

To be clear, the existence of marginalized men in feminized terrain is not new. What is significant with these findings, however, is that about half the heterosexual men in collegiate cheerleading were found to align themselves politically away from the orthodox form of masculinity. They responded differently to their transgression than previous investigations of men in feminized terrain. In fact, they resisted many of the tenets of orthodox masculinity and constructed a normative form of masculinity based on inclusiveness. What is also new is that their inclusive definition of masculinity was institutionally supported by one of the two dominating cheerleading associations, as there was found to be a variance in the institutionalization of masculinity between the two dominating cheerleading associations that govern the sport.

The Orthodox Cheerleading Association was shown to codify orthodox masculine behaviors by penalizing those who perform in ways it deems feminine, while the Inclusive Cheerleading Association merited behaviors that break the traditional mode. Foucault (1984) suggests that power must be understood as a multiplicity of factors emanating from individuals, organizations, and institutions. In this manner, men are not merely subject to institutional modeling on masculinity, they are simultaneously active in shaping institutional perspectives through their complacency or protest. Foucault's analysis of power seems fitting in describing gender construction in these cheerleading associations because, despite attempts toward universal solidarity, both associations experienced internal dissension from both individuals and organizations (teams).

I suggest that the emergence of inclusive masculinity characterizing a group with an institutionalized power and membership equal to those of orthodox masculinity is the product of a number of influences. First, the increasing structural demands for originality and innovation in cheerleading routines has compelled the Inclusive Cheerleading Association to replace the "go, fight, win" mantra of

yesteryear's cheerleading (Hanson 1995) with a choreographic philosophy of "higher, faster, and more complicated." But this is not the sole or even the primary impetus for the creation of an inclusive form of masculinity. If this were the case, one might expect to see men dance in feminized ways and then, when away from competition, return to orthodox prescriptions of masculinity. This did not occur.

Observations confirm that men who exhibited inclusive masculinity during competition also expressed it while socializing away from competition. These men also self-reported a reconstructed understanding of homophobia and sexism in other social spaces (family, school, work), although these self-reports were not confirmed with observations.

Second, the research design provides evidence of a strong institutional influence on the construction of gender within collegiate cheerleading. While virtually all informants mentioned that as football players they displayed orthodox notions of masculinity, those who attended a university with membership in the Inclusive Cheerleading Association substantially reformulated their masculine perspectives compared to men who attended a university belonging to the Orthodox Cheerleading Association. Men who ended up at universities belonging to the Inclusive Cheerleading Association also exhibited a greater openness to homosexuality and feminine-acting men than men from teams belonging to the Orthodox Cheerleading Association.

Because orthodox masculinity is largely predicated on homophobia, this study also suggests the emergence of inclusive masculinity to be a product of the rapidly decreasing levels of cultural homophobia in American society (Laumann et. al. 2004; Loftus 2001; Persell, Green, and Gurevich 2001; Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). It is reasonable to suspect that if masculinity is based largely on homophobia, then as homophobia declines there might also be a change in the way masculinity is constructed and valued (Carillo 2003; Gutman 2003). Accordingly, even men in the orthodox group reported they were *less* homophobic than they had been as football players.

Finally, the emergence of inclusive masculinity in this feminized arena might also be influenced by the athletes' introduction to the narratives and experiences of women and gay men as teammates. Men in cheerleading, from both associations, reported that their relationships with women and gay men had helped them reconstruct their views on homosexuality and femininity among men, a finding that has implications for the sex-segregated manner in which competitive, institutionalized team sports are currently structured in North American society.

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