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Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities

By Eric Anderson, New York, Routledge, 2009, 190 pages, ISBN10: 0-415-80462-0

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Eric Anderson's text explores the intersections between masculinities, sport, sexuality and homophobia in a vibrant, provocative, and insightful manner. Many researchers have previously explored these intersections but Eric asserts his text is significant as it reveals that the former narratives that portrayed university sportsmen as homophobic, violent and sexist are dated. His text draws on rich ethnographic data to illustrate that seemingly radical changes have occurred in diverse sporting contexts with respect to how young, white, educated men relate to each other, females and gay men and how they express emotions and identify themselves. This text, accordingly, counters the repeatedly negative images of sportsmen that have peppered the sociological study of sport. Michael Messner relatedly states on the back jacket of the book it "gives us some cause for (dare I say it?) optimism." The back jacket, moreover, is replete with unabashed praise for the text from the leading scholars who helped canonize the concept of hegemonic masculinity and popularize masculinity studies. Michael Kimmel describes *Inclusive Masculinity* as "an astonishing book—one with insights and suffused with hope." Don Sabo states that it is "a touchstone for readers to rethink their assumptions about men and masculinities" and Alan Klein praises the text as a bold and nuanced work that will become a "benchmark for studies of masculinities." I agree that *Inclusive Masculinity* is important and should be read by gender and sport scholars yet I am more reserved about its potential of becoming a benchmark in masculinity studies.

The prime thesis of the text, drawing from a somewhat promiscuous array of social theories and academic disciplines, rests on the reductive claim that homophobia is the "most important policing agent of masculinity" (p. 8). Homophobia, as such, is theorized as central to the production of "orthodox" masculinities which reject expressions of femininity but demand hypermasculine displays and compulsory forms of heterosexuality. At a broader level, Anderson theorizes that homophobic societies encourage what he calls "homohysteria" or the fear of being "homosexualized" or stripped of one's masculinity. In recent years, however, Anderson reveals that the conditions that once produced homohysteria have decreased so that orthodox masculinities are no longer dominant. These developments have allowed the growth of an oppositional form of masculinity, "inclusive masculinities", which celebrate or at least accept the tenets of feminism, gay rights and allow greater emotional and physical intimacies between men. Anderson explains further that given the existence of "two oppositional masculinities, each with equal influence, co-existing within one culture" (p. 93) that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is no longer an appropriate tool for analyzing contemporary masculinities. In

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replacement he proposes "inclusive masculinities" as a new masculinity theory with its central focus for analysis revolving around fluctuating levels of homohysteria. Anderson boldly summarizes: "Claiming that inclusive masculinities exists, explicating the claim through rich, qualitative data from a variety of men in a variety of geographical locations, and framing it with a sophisticated new gender theory, is the project of the book" (p. 9).

Inclusive Masculinity is divided into three parts. The first section, *orthodox masculinities*, somewhat ironically provides a rather orthodox reading of masculinities, gender relations and sport. Chapter one provides a broad brush stroke history of homosexuality and sport to argue that sport was designed, promoted and used throughout the 20th century "as a homosocial institution principally aimed to counter men's fears of feminism and homosexuality" (p. 29). Chapter two extends this meta-narrative by arguing that the institution of sport is "a perfectly integrated, self-reinforcing system with few internal contradictions or conflicts" (p. 17) that "serves as an efficient and resilient mechanism for the political project of promoting orthodox masculinity at the expense of women and gay men" (p. 76). This well-worn thesis continues in chapter three, with discussion of how orthodox masculinity is not only harmful to gay men and women but also to those men who adhere to its rigid ideologies. The concluding chapter in this section draws intriguingly from Zimbardo's (1971) experiment on the psychology of imprisonment and power and Milgram's (1974) psychological study on authority and obedience, to infer that sport teaches males to be complicit to authority and to "accept and inflict masculine policing" (p. 17). Overall, the first section gives little hint that the text is aiming to offer a new way of conceptualizing sport, masculinity and sexuality relations. Indeed, its prime argument vociferously acts to reaffirm readings of sport and masculinities that have drawn on the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

The second section, *inclusive masculinity theory*, consists of two chapters that aim to illustrate how contemporary western societies have become increasingly gay friendly or, at least, refreshingly tolerant. The first chapter draws on a fascinating and somewhat eclectic range of sources to illustrate how broad understandings of homosexuality have changed over the last century. Anderson makes specific use of John Ibson's (2002) extensive photographic history of men's relationships to reveal the changing nature of physical intimacy between men. He states that "prior to the 1920s his photographs show athletes hugging, laying their heads in each other's laps, holding hands, or draping their arms around each other" (p. 82). In other words, men were supposedly *not* homophobic within the time period that sport was becoming institutionalized. Such evidence seemingly counters Anderson's earlier claims that, modern sport was designed and developed at the turn of the 20th century to counter men's fears of homophobia and that "the construction of sport as a masculine and homophobic enterprise was both deliberate and political..." (p. 30).

The final section, *inclusive masculinities*, is the strongest, most captivating and convincing section. Within three chapters, Anderson reveals findings from his extensive ethnographic studies of gay athletes, heterosexual male cheerleaders, men in a mainstream fraternity, and male university rugby and football players. The results overwhelmingly suggest that "inclusive masculinities are increasingly dominating university settings, and that the homophobia, misogyny, violence and homosocial separation associated with orthodox masculinity is increasingly unfashionable" (p. 153). Although I was not overly surprised by these broad

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findings, some of the results were eye-openers. For example, within Anderson's study of a UK male football team he reveals that the heterosexual men would typically engage in prolonged, public kissing involving tongues with other men. In addition, I was surprised to read how several so-called "orthodox" men indulge in same-sex sex with belief that it is an acceptable sexual recreation that does not pose threat to their heterosexual identities.

Overall, the text argues that gender/sexuality power relations are fluid and a more tolerant or progressive phase is underway that is positively shaping masculinities and gender relations. This, of course, sounds optimistic. Anderson is, however, careful (at times) not to generalise his results but encourages other researchers to help document if similar changes are taking place in other social contexts.

A strength of the book is related to Anderson's underpinning argument that social theory is always contingent on social context and given the evident changes in contemporary masculinities, there is a need to develop new ways of theorizing about masculinities. In this manner he observes that the prime weakness of structural based theories is that their tools are only effective if the "known" social structures remain the same (e.g. the gender order remains unchanged). Anderson's text, however, indirectly highlights another weakness of structuralist theories, which is that it is difficult for researchers to know with any certainty what the social structures actually are. Prior to Anderson's work, for example, few sociologists would likely claim that male fraternities or rugby teams would promote masculinities that are supportive of gay rights and feminist thinking. Anderson, nevertheless, resorts to developing and using a structuralist theory. And this leads to my prime concerns with the text, which is not simply that he employs a structuralist lens, but that his attempt to meld diverse and competing forms of knowledge, disciplines and theoretical perspectives into a coherent theory of masculinities is not wholly successful.

Anderson draws, for example, on psychological and psychoanalytical studies and theories but then suggests that he principally relies "upon a social constructionist framework" (p. 32) and anti-essentialist theorizing for understanding masculinities. He rejects Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity for its inability to explain his contemporary findings but suggests that in times of high homohysteria Connell's theoretical lens is still suitably robust. From a sociological perspective I find this contention difficult to understand. Is he suggesting that the social structures are prone to radical change so that the workings of power, as tied to ruling groups and ideological domination, can on occasion break down and then re-build? In addition, Anderson attempts to combine Gramsci and Foucault to make his book "accessible to a wide body of scholars and readers" (p. 34). To do this difficult theoretical task he crudely challenges each theoretical lens. He rejects Gramsci's observation that power is unevenly distributed according to hierarchical positioning and mistakenly accuses Foucault of suggesting that "all people share in power equally" (p. 34) (Foucault was blatantly clear that power is not a possession that people could hold and therefore share). And, within two sentences, he proclaims "I therefore suggest that instead of having two paradigmatic camps, we blend these epistemologies to nuance social constructionism while keeping its political viability" (p. 34).

In this broad manner, Anderson recognizes various theoretical limitations but then still attempts to work within them. For example, he accepts that understanding gender via binary categories is problematic but nevertheless decides to use the "polarized categories of orthodox or inclusive archetypes because these concepts

prove useful … in understanding a macro analysis of men ...” (p. 32). Similarly, he accepts “the limitations of identity categorization” (p. 32) but still decides to talk as if singular male archetypes exist as “this simplifies the complexities of describing men’s gendered attitudes and behaviours and permits me to make meaningful discussion of an otherwise nebulous social matrix” (p. 32). In addition, Anderson undertakes qualitative ethnographic studies but tends to make generalized statements about men and homosexuality. As an example, Anderson draws on psychoanalytic explanations to imprudently suggest, “I am quite nearly ready to say that any university-aged man who exhibits homophobic attitudes *is* concealing same-sex desires” (pp. 110-11).

The overall effect in drawing from such a wide range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives is that Anderson is not able to clearly articulate the social processes associated with the construction of masculinities. I am unsure whether this complex social process, for example, is understood by Anderson to be achieved via the workings of ideologies, discourses, power relations, essentialized traits or desires, agentic interpretations of lived experiences or some combination of all these factors. It is with respect to this concern, that I suggest that inclusive masculinity theory is not, as yet, wholly coherent and is in need of further refinement. Relatedly, I am concerned that the central tenet of inclusive masculinities theory (i.e. masculinities are primarily constructed in relation to prevailing attitudes about homosexuality) simplistically overestimates the significance of homosexuality in shaping men’s lives, identities and gender relations. This circumscribed focus neglects the social importance of gender as a relational concept (e.g. masculinities and femininities) and other important social variables (e.g. globalization, capitalism, governmentalities) that shape how men understand themselves and socially interact.

Finally, having raised my critical concerns, I still encourage others to read the book as Anderson’s prime ethnographic findings need to be grappled with. Moreover, as I have already stated, the text is thought provoking, boldly written and refreshingly unique!

Note

This review was completed before Richard Pringle became a *Sociology of Sport* Associate Editor.

Reference

Ibson, J. (2002). *Picturing men: A century of male relationships in everyday life*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.

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