

Active Changes in Monolithic Manliness The Case of the 2004 NHL Lockout

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Abstract:

Many theorists in the study of masculinity and sport assume that gender stably reproduces hegemony over time in a given system by valorizing certain traits or behaviors among athletes. This type of analysis, however, cannot easily account for rapid changes in homosociality within a system, nor for systems in which no dominant form of masculinity is evident, as has been the case in the post 2004 lockout National Hockey League. This paper argues that activity theory better accounts for both the rapid changes in male-male relationships, particularly in terms of fighting and team cohesion, as well as in models of proper manliness, such as the roles of “enforcers” and “agitators,” that occurred in post-lockout hockey.

Keywords: activity theory, masculinity, NHL Hockey

Monolitik Erkeklikte Etkin Değişiklikler: 2004 Ulusal Hokey Ligi Lokavt Örneği

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Özet:

Birçok erkeklik ve spor kuramcısı, toplumsal cinsiyetin sporcular arasında belirli nitelik ve davranışlara değer biçerek var olan hegemonyayı sistem içerisinde düzenli olarak yeniden ürettiklerini kabul eder. Bu doğrultuda yapılacak bir analiz, 2004 sonrası Ulusal Hokey Ligi lokavt örneğinde de görüldüğü üzere, sistem içerisindeki homososyal ani değişiklikleri ve baskın bir erkeklik formunun görünür olmadığı durumları açıklamakta eksik kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, etkinlik kuramının lokavt sonrası hokey örneğini, hem özellikle mücadele ve takım bütünlüğü açısından erkek erkeğe ilişkilerdeki hem de “uygulayıcı” ve “kışkırtıcı” rollerinin de işaret ettiği uygun erkeklik modellerindeki ani değişiklikleri daha iyi okuyabildiğini belirtmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Etkinlik kuramı, erkeklik, Ulusal Hokey Ligi Lokavtı

Social codes are a key part of human interactions. Codes of masculinity, one type of social code, are constructions with concrete implications that define and inform the ways men behave. This social contract is one which seems entrenched and beyond reproach. However, social values, roles, rules, and regulations can and do change, sometimes in dramatic fashions. “The Code” in hockey provides an illustration of just how quickly ingrained beliefs in masculinity can change when there is a disruption to a system, which contradicts the prevailing idea in masculinity studies that gender is stably reproduced over time. This shift was particularly evident in the days prior to and following the 2004 National Hockey League lockout in North America. The significance of this type of shift is further illustrated in that the most recent NHL lockout, which resulted in no rule changes and brought no apparent alterations to the subcultural understanding of masculinity in terms of systemic interactions¹. Unfortunately, traditional approaches to understanding masculinity in such situations may focus too intently on the role of time to create, reinforce, and reinscribe a particular brand of maleness as a dominant feature. Other approaches, though, may provide insight into the sometimes volatile nature of long held beliefs. Specifically, activity theory is an approach that values the historicity of systems, but activity theory also acknowledges the possibility of systemic interruption that can create rapid change to seemingly concrete value sets.

Hegemony and Masculinity Studies

Until recently, masculinity studies has operated under certain assumptions about gender. Namely, the field has presumed that systems of masculinity are slow to change (though changeable), are organized in terms of hierarchical relations of power, and are dominated by a generally unattainable but universally held hegemonic

¹ Systemic interactions are the ways that participants within a particular activity system relate.

standard. The 1980s and 1990s saw an explosion in the use of “hegemonic masculinity” as a conceptual framework for evaluating male-female and male-male relationships, as well as public presentations of men in sport and media (Connell and Messerschmidt 831). Donaldson describes hegemonic masculinity, as it came to be understood by many scholars of masculinity studies, as “ a culturally idealized form ... a personal and collective project, and ... the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated. ... It is constructed by difficult negotiation over a lifetime” (645).

Discussions of hegemonic masculinity among these scholars often enforced a trait-based understanding of manliness, in which certain attributes (usually whiteness, high socio-economic status, physical and sexual dominance over women, homophobia and brawniness) are held as the dominant cultural standard for which all men ought to strive; in such discussions, males who actively resisted or failed to meet the hegemonic standard were described as “subordinate” males. According to these theories, singular definitions of ultimate manliness are constantly reinforced, lauded, and reinscribed, and this “exaltation stabilizes a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole... [employing] exemplars who are celebrated as heroes” (Connell 94).

In such discussions of masculinity, changes to the hegemony were slow, but possible. As Connell and Messerschmidt note: “[these theories] assumed that gender relations were historical, and so gender hierarchies were subject to change [over time]. ... There could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones. This was the element of optimism in an otherwise bleak theory” (833). However, most masculinities scholars assumed that such change was slow, over long historical periods and governed by massive, systemic change. Small derivations from the hegemonic standard might exist in smaller systems, but it was unlikely that such derivations would compete for dominance over all. It was even less likely that multiple, equally valid forms of masculinity could appear in a given system.

Instead, one dominant, normative masculinity modeled on unattainable exemplars would be stably reproduced.

In many academic studies of masculinity in sport, this hierarchical, externally enforced, trait-based, slow change, singular exemplar model became the standard way of discussing *homosocial* relationships². Laurel Davis evaluates *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue, and the portrayal of sport in the magazine as a whole, in relation to a hegemonic standard which she believes includes the eroticization of women and an emphasis on virile heterosexuality. Her study follows the magazine over thirty years, during which time she contends the swimsuit issue consistently performed and reinforced a hegemonic masculinity, changing very little in its portrayal of race, dominance, and heterosexism. Eric Anderson also exemplifies this tendency to see sport in terms of hegemony in his article on homosexuality in men's sports. Anderson identifies homosexuality as a derivative form of maleness which contests but doesn't necessarily replace or truly compete with the heterosexist norm in male sport. A subsequent Anderson article notes that homosocialization and segregation in sport reproduces misogyny and reinforces an "orthodox masculinity" ("I Used to Think"). Similarly, Pappas, McKenry and Catlett argue that hockey's emphasis on physical aggression socializes male players to objectify women and reinforce a general culture of aggression, which stably reproduces over the long term.

Thus we see that many theorists on masculinity -- and especially sport and masculinity -- assume that any given system has a singular, trait-based, hierarchical conception of gender that stably reproduces over time. However, perhaps by employing a different method of analysis, we might discover that there are multiple spheres and /or layers of meaning that both inform and reinforce homosocial relationships. Indeed, we find that a multiplicity of masculinities are particularly evident following the 2004 NHL lockout, none of which is

² Homosocial relationships are generally understood as male-male friendships or affiliations with close emotional and social bonds, but lacking overt sexual expression.

entirely dominant nor fixed. In the context of the lockout, we suggest that while gender may be considered to be external, hierarchical, or monolithic, it is actually a carefully constructed dance of apposition and opposition. In the end, masculinity, like many things, is constructed from an inner and outer relationship of rules, roles, and hierarchies. This intricate relationship of the internal and external is what destabilizes conceptions of gender when the rules of the game are suddenly changed, whereas following the most recent lockout conceptions of gender remained relatively static. We illustrate how male-male relationships in sport can undergo rapid change and produce multiple non-hierarchical concepts of masculinity. We do so by using an activity theory framework for analysis, rather than the more widespread emphasis on hegemony.

Activity Theory and Conceptions of Masculinity

Within an activity theory framework, acts and activity are carried out in activity systems. The acts themselves are directed by a social human need. The human needs “do not mean the biological drives which underlie the activity of all animals, but rather the range of sensitivities which are cultivated in social life, and the artifacts in which they are objectified” (Blunden 177). The significance of this idea lies in the interaction of people and ideas in a social manner. Fulfilling the social need then becomes an important driving factor in the interaction.

Systems are often designated around groups of people interacting with a common set of raw materials or contexts. The people within the system interact with an artifact or ideological tool, which then influences the possible outcomes. Susanne Bødker shows that “artifacts crystallize knowledge” (150). The ideological becomes concrete as it becomes part of the tool or artifact, which in turn constricts the possible future outcomes. A key factor then becomes the process of mediation. Through mediation, the artifact shapes the action -- and even the psychological perspectives of the people in the system -- through the values that are embedded within the artifact or ideological premise. The manner in

which the beliefs and values of people are mediated is often subtle in nature, to the extent that the participants won't realize mediation has occurred. Thus, the historic nature of the ongoing system creates a set of rules or values that are seemingly always present.

Participants do have an effect on the values of the system as they externalize personal values and create change. The manner in which this occurs, expansive cycles, is described by Yjrö Engeström who notes the balance of internalization and externalization are part of systemic development. Paul Prior also illustrates this give and take in academic settings. However, the extent to which the individual act can change the systemic values is complicated, at least, and at times rather inconsequential. In this way the people are influenced by and influence the ideology as they move toward a possible outcome. This interaction does not happen within a vacuum, rather it is connected to a greater social context of rules, community, and division of labor. Thus, the system will act within a greater set of interactions and boundaries which will at times affect the trajectory of the system itself. The system will continue its trajectory unless a contradiction or some form of resistance ceases that fluid interaction.

While four types of contradictions have been discussed among activity theorists, a secondary contradiction (a shift in the interaction of components of the system due to outside influence) is perhaps most relevant to our discussion. In the days following the 2004 NHL lockout, there was a dramatic external shift -- specifically in the form of rule changes that inhibited the role of fighting and placed a greater emphasis on speed and scoring ability. This change in the rules then displaced the normal function of the ideological code, which previously informed notions of masculinity and proper behavior in this particular system. Thus, the shift in ideology played out in very real ways on the ice. This shift, as with all systemic contradictions, affected the other components in the system, but resulted in a quick and meaningful change to important aspects of what it meant to live by that code. Historic systemic shifts are often seen to be a slow process thus allowing monolithic conceptions of guiding values, but through the secondary contradiction a

much quicker change has taken place. The change to the monolithic has taken on a nearly instantaneous pace.

“The Code,” Activity Theory, and Masculinity

Ross Bernstein discusses “the code” in the National Hockey League as “a living, breathing entity” (xvii). Moreover, “it was hockey’s sacred covenant, it’s unwritten rules of engagement that had been handed down from generation to generation. . . a mysterious chain of accountability that dealt with issues of violence and fighting” (xvii). Bernstein continues, writing:

The code is so much more than just fighting. It is about players sacrificing their bodies to block shots; about getting stitched up between shifts, not periods; about standing up for one another no matter what--even if that means having to square off against a former teammate or best friend. . . . [Players see] every little act of disrespect, every little insult, every subtle cheap shot, every excessive celebration after a goal, and every bit of obstruction out in the slot. They see it all, and when the time is right, they will react to each act with varying degrees of intensity and passion. That is the code (xx).

The code in hockey played an important, and often unacknowledged, role on the ice. Passed on from player to player through the values espoused on the ice, the code provided an important means of enculturation as it created a meaningful set of rules that governed acceptable behavior and, in the end, helped define what it meant to be a man.

Men, by the code, would use violence in a prescribed manner and would also maintain a low profile off the ice. Players, particularly enforcers, weren’t to turn down a fight when it was warranted; however, enforcers also showed a great amount of respect for one another. Doug Smith, retired NHL enforcer, noted two kind of fights in an interview

with Davy Rothbart, those in defense of a teammate or self, and those meant to spark the team. His discussion of how the fights are initiated illustrates the degree to which the code and respect affected the situation:

We've got a code of conduct, so to speak. That guy might say, "yeah, no problem. Let's go, Smitty," and we drop our gloves and have a good, fair fight. But he might say to me, "You know what, I can't fight tonight, I got a bad hand." I've had guys that say to me, "I can't fight you. My coach said he doesn't want me to fight tonight." At that point our code says that you don't jump the guy, you don't sucker-punch him, you don't do anything dirty. You just catch him the next time around.

The code dictated who fought and how fights were to occur. There were times when a player couldn't turn down a fight and the code made clear that you never hit a man that was down on the ice. Behaviors like this illustrated the beliefs and values of the NHL, pre-2004 lockout, as the code mediated the behavior.

The code also enabled hockey players to "police themselves." When an act took place on the ice (such as delivering an illegal hit to a star player) the team's enforcer, or a player on the designated level as the offender, would challenge that player to a fight. In this way acceptable behaviors and relationships between men were maintained. The NHL's unofficial code of conduct governed the roles of masculinity in the system. The system remained governed by these rules of homosociality until there was a disruption -- the lockout of 2004.

The lockout and its resolution were not explicitly about male relationships on the ice, of course. The lockout originated in a labor dispute, in which the league and its commissioner (Gary Bettman) demanded a salary cap and entered negotiations with the players' union. No agreement on the cap could be reached in a timely fashion, and so the 2004-2005 season was first postponed, then canceled in full. The two sides finally agreed to a cap, and other rule changes, on July 13, 2005.

As conditions to end the lockout, the following rules were changed, which directly impacted the non-official “code” discussed above. The so-called “Instigator Rule” decreed that: “A player who instigates a fight in the final five minutes of a game will receive a game misconduct and an automatic one-game suspension.” Another significant change was the new “Increased Flow” rule, stating that “[p]asses from behind the defensive blue line to the attacking blue line will be considered legal. The center red line will be ignored for purposes of the ‘two line pass.’” A third rule demanded “[z]ero tolerance on Interference, Hooking and Holding/Obstruction,” a common tactic of slower, more physical teams to hold up opposing players in the neutral zone. In their summary of these changes, the NHL commented that “[o]ne primary objective of the new rules will be to reduce the scope of defensive ‘tools’ a team may effectively employ, and to create a corresponding benefit to the offensive part of the game -- thus allowing skill players to use their skills and increasing the number and quality of scoring chances in the game” (“NHL Enacts”). It is widely believed that the term “defensive tools” refers to the role of the “enforcer” particularly.

Thus we see that following the lockout rules were changed that emphasized speed and skill, and lessened the role of the enforcer and increasing the profile of star players. This shift in the system via a secondary contradiction resulted in a change in what is acceptable on the ice. Whereas players were not to take liberties with others on the ice, the disruption to the mediating ideological artifact, the code, led to a change in what was deemed acceptable behavior as seen in the rise of the agitator, acts of violence on the ice, and players no longer answering the call to fight or defend the team. Each of these is directly related to the changing of the rules associated with homosocial interaction post-lockout, that made enforcers (enforcers of code) less viable members of the team. Since that time, a lack of stability in what is perceived to be acceptable masculine behavior has defined the league. When there is a shift in the way masculinity is performed there is a shift in what it means to be masculine.

Several established voices in hockey have discussed the decreased role of fighting, and how this shift has enabled previously forbidden acts to become prevalent. In the Rothbart interview, Doug Smith speaks to this shift in regard to the 2012 injuries of the NHL star Sidney Crosby that resulted in a long absence from the game.

Look at Sidney Crosby. He got body-checked and he's out of hockey. Sidney Crosby should not be out of the game because someone took a run at him. If there's a guy on Crosby's team who's there to kick your ass if you take liberties against him, you might have second thoughts before running him into the boards.

Other signs that the code has shifted appear in discussions of the game. In the November 12, 2011, game between the Buffalo Sabres and Boston Bruins, the open ice-hit on goalie Ryan Miller that in the past would have brought swift retribution under the code did not lead to immediate retaliation. Sabres defenseman, Tyler Myers, was a healthy scratch in the following game for his lack of action and Sabres coach, Lindy Ruff, decried the lack of a physical response. Reaction to the lack of retribution was varied, but the change was noted by Jeff Klein and Stu Hackel, the New York Times sport reporters, who wrote "Throughout most of the sport's history, bad hits have brought fisticuffs. In recent seasons that practice has become muted to a degree. The on-ice officials used to allow fights to proceed, but they now step in more often to break them up" (para. 9). John Buccigross, noted ESPN anchor and avid hockey fan, wrote in his hockey column:

The possibility of fighting gives NHL games an edge, especially in person, and a possibility of machismo and justice served. Some hockey people also view fighting as an ethic and value of either protection or support of a teammate. It is practically a political view. This "protection" could be for the star of the team or those who can't physically protect themselves, whether it's their size or because they were injured. Some feel this is very important,

that it actually makes us more human. I think they have a point. How many people in your life do you think would actually put themselves in harm's way to fight for you or with you? And not just to fight for you or with you, BUT DO IT WELL. No offense, but if you got my back I prefer you are very good at distributing "justice." [. . .] The curtailing of fighting has been slowly legislated and it will continue. Even if fighting eventually results in ejection and/or suspension, there will always be a fight now and then like there is in baseball, basketball and football. But the standout characters like Shawn Thornton and Colton Orr will vanish. And that's kind of like eliminating one of your favorite characters from one of your favorite television shows. You might still watch the show, but it will never be the same.

While the role of the enforcer has waned, players have now become valued as agitators -- players that operate on the edge of what is legal to disrupt the scoring of stars. As Cory Twibell notes in "NHL's New Breed," "the post-lockout NHL spawned a new, distinct breed of NHL player: the agitator. Sean Avery, Steve Ott, Daniel Carcillo, Patrick Kaleta, Steve Downie, Alex Burrows come to mind, and all are either loved or loathed depending on the given venue. Some can score, some can't and few argue their effectiveness." Note that here male roles are not clearly defined by a trait or exemplary standard that stably reproduces. Instead, multiple competing forms of homosociality are mutually existent and previously reviled roles are tolerated in a generally unsettled atmosphere.

Hockey's previous code had also praised the quiet player that meant business on and off the ice. Players and media alike noted athletes like Joe Sakic as outstanding yet humble figures. They were unassuming stars that attributed success to the team and not the individual. The post-lockout NHL's desire to increase visibility left some calling for players to be more accessible. This change has been embraced by some, as has been seen in players like Alexander Ovechkin who is renowned for his goal celebrations ("Ovechkin Wants"). Olaf Kolzig was quoted as attributing

this to Ovechkin's 2011-2012 struggles stating, "He just has to get back to being the way he was in his younger days and maybe not get wrapped up too much in the rock star status that comes with being Alex Ovechkin" ("Ex-Cap"). The code once prohibited players from taking too much individual credit or celebrating too long. However, the changes facilitated by the NHL lockout have encouraged players to take a more pronounced role.

Once again, acts that would have been mediated out of the system several seasons ago are becoming more commonplace. There are certainly players that still play by the code and fights are still part of the game, but there has been a sudden and dramatic shift where what was once an act of cowardice is now just part of the game. Furthermore, players once lauded for their lack of accessibility in order to increase team ethos and cohesion have been marginalized in favor of players willing to step into the individual spotlight via media and goal celebrations. The significance lies not only in the change itself, but in the swiftness of the change. The resistance did not come from within the system, but through the removal of the ideological tool/artifact by which the definitions of the participants were influenced. Even in a system with a history of unwavering devotion to the ideological artifact, a "culturally idealized form," change came swiftly to the underlying definitions of masculine behavior. This shift becomes not only evident but explainable through the construct of activity theory.

Accounting for Systemic Change in the Post-Lockout NHL

Hegemonic ideas of masculinity, while accounting for tradition, do not address the fluid and sometimes quickly changing nature of rules and roles that can come from a shift in ideological positions. Basically, social interaction and societal roles are based on often unstated but highly regarded "common knowledge." Common knowledge, though, is not nearly as static as some might like to believe. Stephen Toulmin writes, "We acquire (and handle) knowledge of people and things in everyday life in ways that are *in part* culturally universal

and spontaneous, *in part* the result of the individual's internalizing of *his or her own* native culture" (60; Toulmin's emphasis). While there is a culturally universal aspect of common knowledge, there are also spontaneous aspects that allow the individual to influence the systemic values. Thus, when there is a shift in the ideological artifact, as has taken place in the NHL, common knowledge becomes fluid and changeable. This means that the roles and relationships also become fluid, as they must adapt to the systemic change. Whereas a hegemonic perspective assumes a static nature of values, activity theory assumes that any change to the system will affect all other aspects of the system. Thus, any contradiction, or disruption, will in the end allow for meaningful change to occur. Activity theory openly acknowledges that there are social roles and contexts that explicitly affect what people do; however, activity theory also has a means of acknowledging resistance and expecting systemic change in some form. This will not always be quick, but when the opportunity arises for a major contradiction, it stands to reason that even notions of what is "right" or what is "manly" can and often will change dramatically.

The masculinities climate pre- and post-2004 NHL lockout provides a dramatic illustration of such shifts. Pre-lockout, the NHL relied heavily on the code. Respect, manliness, and the prevailing set of ethical behaviors were dictated by tradition. Though often not openly discussed, players knew the rules and roles they were expected to fulfill, whether it was fighting for a teammate, blocking a shot, playing through extreme pain, or never taking on a high profile. With that code absent, there has been a continual renegotiation of those roles. Enforcers, such as Doug Smith, note the changing roles and vulnerability of the stars. This vulnerability, though, suggests a greater change in values. The rise of the agitator suggests a shift in values as well. What once was not manly or acceptable became acceptable -- or at least tolerable -- until another shift occurs. As activity theory illuminates, the once accepted and static values suddenly shifted with a disruption in the system.

While the previous lockout brought about specific rule changes that altered male-male relationships, the 2012 lockout brought no such

rule changes. What this illustrates, then, is how external contradictions can dramatically and quickly transform conceptions of gender. The 2012 lockout did not overtly change systemic interaction; it was merely a change for economic benefit. Thus, the lack of contradictions -- seen through the lack of rule changes -- allowed conceptions of gender to remain stable. Activity theory provides a lens that not only allows us to account for rapid changes in masculinities, but to differentiate conditions in seemingly similar situations.

Conclusion

Applying activity theory to masculinities studies allows us to account for changing structures of male roles, homosocial relationships, and codes of male conduct in ways a more rigid hegemonic approach does not. For many masculinities scholars, committed to the idea that singular, hierarchical, and stably reproduced ideals of manliness prevail, an event like the 2004- 2005 lockout is difficult to explain. How did male-male interaction change so drastically, in such a relatively short period of time? How did one form of manly behavior, the enforcer, become devalued so quickly, while another, the agitator, rose in the span of a few seasons to such prominence? How did a few rule changes so completely reorient (or disorient) homosocial relations such as team cohesion? A hegemonic understanding of masculinities can not account easily for such radical and unfinished shifts. However, activity theory -- with an emphasis on constantly negotiated relationships as determined by artifacts, participants, and human need -- can better account for these rapid changes and seemingly non - structured relationships. It makes it possible to analyze these changes and also to account for fluidity in definitions of manliness more broadly. We conclude that this theory better accounts for the values changes after the 2004-2005 NHL lockout, but also that it might be valuable to use this approach to better understand the relationships, roles and values of men in other sports.

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