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Studying Up On Sex

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Although there has been some scholarly scrutiny of gays and lesbians in sport, there has been very little "studying up" on the social construction of heterosexuality in sport. In this paper, I begin by drawing on recent historical research on sexuality to reflect on the significance of the emergence of the heterosexual at precisely the time in history when the institution of modern sport was being forged. Next, I critically examine recent theoretical issues raised by poststructuralists, postmodernists, and queer theorists. I argue for a materialist examination of sexuality as a key linking process in a socially structured matrix of domination along lines of race, class, and gender. Finally, I interrogate a "sexual story" as an example of one way the meanings of heterosexuality might be analyzed within sport.

Quoique les gais et lesbiennes en sport ait été l'objet d'une certaine attention académique, bien peu d'études ont été réalisées sur la construction sociale de l'hétérosexualité en sport. Dans cet article, je commence en m'inspirant de recherches historiques sur la sexualité pour discuter de l'importance de l'émergence de « l'hétérosexuel » au moment précis de l'histoire où s'établissait l'institution du sport moderne. Ensuite, j'examine de façon critique les questions théoriques récentes posées par les post-structuralistes, les post-modernistes et les théories « queer » ou gaies. Je suggère un examen matérialiste de la sexualité comme processus de relais clé, dans une matrice de domination socialement structurée à partir de la race, de la classe et du genre. Enfin, je questionne un « récit sexuel » et, ainsi, offre un exemple de façons dont les significations de l'hétérosexualité peuvent être analysées en sport.

The threat of precipitous expulsion from the class of heterosexuals, and from all the material and discursive privileges enjoyed by members of that class, bribes class members into complicity with a pervasive representation of the class as coherent, stable, exclusively loyal to heterosexual eroticism, and pure of any sodomitical desires or conduct.

—Janet Halley, 1993

As soon as we look into this over-worked, heterosexualized normativity, we see what it is working so hard to hide. Sexual relations are perhaps the most fraught

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and troubling of all social relations precisely because, especially when heterosexual, they so often threaten rather than confirm gender polarity. . . . Through sex, trouble looms.

—Lynne Segal, 1994

My aim in this article is to reflect critically on recent scholarship on sexuality in order to explore its relevance to sport studies. And I want to take a particular slant on this topic that's implied in my title, "studying up on sex." "Studying up" has one, generally recognizable colloquial meaning, but in sociology, it has another. It refers to studying "up" in the power structure. Sociologists have perhaps most often studied "down"—studied the poor, the blue or pink-collar workers, the "nuts, sluts, and perverts," the incarcerated. And though this research sometimes has empowering possibilities for socially marginalized groups, too often it is delivered to empowered agents who hope to use this information to further institutionalize their control, subordination, and exploitation of others.

The very idea of studying up rarely occurs to sociologists unless and until we are living in a time when those who are "down" have made identity claims, and have organized movements that challenge the institutional privileges of the elite. In such a politicized historical context, studying up has the goal of revealing and demystifying the mechanisms of power, identifying their internal contradictions and cleavages so as to inform movements for change. There is a long history of this sort of studying up on social class in classical sociology—for instance, Karl Marx's *Capital* and C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*. In sport studies, several scholars (e.g., Gruneau, 1983; Gruneau & Whitson, 1994; Sage, 1990) have revealed how capitalist relations are played out within corporate sport institutions. Over the past 25 years, the study of gender relations has increasingly involved the development of a critical studying up on the social construction of masculinity. In recent years, this concern has been developed in sport studies by numerous scholars (e.g., Kidd, 1987; Messner, 1992; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Sabo, 1985). In race relations scholarship, there has been a more recent turn toward studying up on the social construction of whiteness—most notably Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) *White Women, Race Matters*. In sport studies, we have a rich literature on race and ethnicity, but there has been very little studying up on whiteness—studying *race* has meant, for the most part, studying the experiences of African Americans.

Studies of sexuality, especially gay and lesbian studies, have blossomed since the mid-1970s, but only very recently have scholars such as Janet Halley (1993), Chrys Ingraham (1994), Lynne Segal (1994), and Jonathan Katz (1995) begun a systematic examination of heterosexuality. In sport studies, we have benefited from the work of Helen Lenskyj (1986), Brian Pronger (1990), and others who have delineated the experiences of lesbians and gay men in sports. But with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Kolnes 1995), there has been very little extension of these scholars' insights into a consideration of the social construction of heterosexuality in sport. Rather than viewing homophobia as part of a heterosexist system of power relations that serves to construct the heterosexual as a privileged historical identity category, discussions in sport studies of the negative implications of homophobia on "straight" athletes have tended to view it as a shared psychological disease that impedes the development of healthy identities and relationships.

My task here, then, is to draw from a discourse that has recently blossomed outside of sport studies in order to raise questions about the social construction of

heterosexuality in sport. I hope to demonstrate that it is crucial to study heterosexuality—not to reify it, but rather, to expose its constructedness, its internal differentiation and contradiction. I will argue that sexuality—the social organization and deployment of desire—and the attendant social construction of modern sexual identities, is a key linking process in what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls a “matrix of domination,” structured along lines of race, class, and gender. And I will suggest how this insight might inform our understanding of contemporary sport. The first task, though, is to locate the historical emergence of *the heterosexual*.

Locating *The Heterosexual*

By the late 1970s, in the face of religious right backlash, the gay and lesbian liberation movement had pragmatically adopted the discourse and strategies of the minority group model, previously developed by the civil rights and women’s movements. For many gay men and lesbians, this meant affirming, celebrating, and normalizing gay/lesbian identities, “lifestyles,” and communities. Differences among and between gay men and lesbians were often submerged in the face of the need to unite against escalating homophobic violence and institutional heterosexist backlash. For a brief historical moment, “We Are Family” appeared to unite a “gay/lesbian community”—and it was largely successful within the liberal, equal rights parameters of the struggle (Weston, 1991). However, the movement’s leaders and spokespeople were nearly all white, more often than not men, college educated, and of the professional class. Just as important, much of the sexual and gender diversity that had served as a radically subversive impulse within gay liberation, was submerged, even crushed, as gay leaders increasingly attempted to project a straight image to the public: “We are just like you.” Through this process, homophobia was challenged, but ironically, heterosexuality remained the unquestioned, unproblematic norm against which homosexuality attempted to normalize itself.

Radical gay and lesbian writers, though, were criticizing and problematizing this. Lesbians of color, such as Cherrie Moraga (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1982), challenged the false universalization of “women” and “lesbians.” In 1980, Adrienne Rich attempted to turn heterosexism on its head by arguing that lesbianism is a normal outcome of women’s development, but that “compulsory heterosexuality” bombards us with rewards, punishments, and incentives (Rich, 1980). Also in 1980, Monique Wittig, in a startling essay entitled “The Straight Mind,” argued that there is an “economy of heterosexuality” that serves to construct women as a subordinate social category (Wittig, 1992). But by far the most systematic examination of the historical construction of heterosexuality is Jonathan Katz’s 1995 book entitled *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. Katz draws from Foucault’s (1978) observation that the term *homosexual*, first used in 1868, was subsequently created as a modern identity category. In the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century, “heterosexual and homosexual appeared in public as Siamese twins, the first good, the second bad, bound together in public for life in unalterable antagonistic symbiosis” (Katz, 1995, p. 65). The term *heterosexual* was not printed in the US before 1892, but Katz assures us—with tongue firmly in cheek—that “looking back on past eras before the use of the term ‘heterosexual,’ we can, of course, find well-documented examples of same-sex erotic acts and emotions” (Katz, 1995, p. 32). However, heterosexuality is “not identical to the reproductive intercourse of the

sexes.” Rather, it “signifies one particular historical arrangement of the sexes and their pleasures” (Katz, 1995, p. 14).

The heterosexual’s birth as a “normal” modern identity category was not lacking in complication. The term’s first appearance in the 1901 edition of *Dorland’s Medical Dictionary* defined heterosexuality as “Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex” (as cited in Katz, 1995, p. 86). Freud, who rarely used the term, warned in his 1905 *Three Essays on Sexuality* that the “dangers of heterosexual intercourse” may result in a “fixation” on “homosexuality” (as cited in Katz, 1995, p. 65). In 1923, “heterosexuality” appeared for the first time in *Webster’s New International Dictionary* and was defined as a “morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex,” but by 1934, heterosexuality was being defined in *Webster’s* in its current mode, as “a manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality” (as cited in Katz, 1995, p. 92). In effect, the first quarter of the 20th century constituted the heterosexual’s successful coming out, “a public, self affirming debut” (Katz, 1995, p. 83). What had occurred here? What normalized heterosexuality? The term *heterosexual*, Katz argues, has two parts. First, modernization and feminism had challenged and undermined patriarchal power and sexual divisions of labor, thus leading to widespread anxieties among men. In the context of these upheavals in the social organization of gender, “hetero” served to reconstruct and renaturalize the “oppositeness” of the sexes. Second, the “sexual” in *heterosexual* reflected a “revaluing of pleasure and procreation, consumption and work in a commercial, capitalist society” (Katz, 1995, p. 90).

Scholars of sport are familiar with historical analyses that point to the importance of contested and shifting gender relations, class relations, and race relations as major impulses in the rise of modern sport. But with a few partial exceptions (e.g., Cahn, 1994; Crosset, 1990), these historical analyses have not attempted to come to grips with the emergence of the heterosexual at precisely the time in history when modern sport was being forged as a social institution. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, modernization, urbanization, the women’s movement, and the influx of black and new immigrant men into the labor force all led to a “crisis” of white middle-class masculinity (Kimmel, 1995). The creation of modern sport is one of these men’s institutional “responses” to this crisis in class, racial, and gender relations (Messner, 1992). An important dimension of this reconstitution of hegemonic masculinity through sport involved a clearly asserted linkage between masculinity and heterosexuality. The creation of heterosexual masculinity in sport and elsewhere enforced a much more clear distinction between what we would now call *homosexuality* and *homosociality* than had previously existed in early 19th-century elite men’s relationships with each other (Hansen, 1992).

Following this thought, a fruitful line of theoretical and historical inquiry might involve an interrogation of how sexuality—and in particular, *the heterosexual*—has served over the past century as a key linking process within a shifting matrix of domination, structured along lines of race, class, and gender. In fact, I would hypothesize that sexuality has been an especially *salient* process when it appears at the intersections of other structures of power. For instance, as Angela Davis (1981) has pointed out, the historical construction of “the myth of the black male rapist” served as a key ideological construct in the continued race and class subordination of black males in the post-Civil War years. When men who had been slaves attempted to move into the paid labor force, they were seen as a threat by many white men, who used terror tactics such as lynchings to enforce a color bar

in the work force. Some people responded to this terror with outrage. So instead of simply lynching black men, the white terrorists successfully invoked the image of an aggressively sexualized black male who threatened White Womanhood: Now black men were lynched *and* castrated. According to Davis, once the image of the black male threat was sexualized, most of the outrage expressed earlier by white liberals was silenced. We can see in this example how the imposition of an animalistic, sexualized image onto black men served as a means of control within a system of race and class stratification that had been destabilized by the legal emancipation of slaves. Paul Hoch (1979), employing a radical psychoanalytic perspective, suggests that white males have projected the image of the oversexed “black beast” onto black males as a means of sublimating their own repressed sexual desires. Thus, the “myth of the black male rapist” serves both as a means of holding the black man down economically, and also constructs a deep psychological fear of black men in white men’s minds.

Later, especially during the 1960s and early 1970s Black Power Movement, some black men actively took on and purposefully displayed an aggressively heterosexual masculine persona as a way of waging psychological warfare against their white male oppressors (Wallace, 1979). This brief example suggests how the imposition, manipulation, and contesting of heterosexualized images and identities becomes a key linking process in battles between men in race/class hierarchies. It should be added, of course, that in these sexualized battles within intermale dominance hierarchies, women often play key roles, either as (White) virgins to be “protected” or “threatened,” or as sexualized and debased objects through which to stake a claim to “manhood.” Women’s sexual agency or pleasure is rarely considered in these phallic wars between men.

Drawing from this same insight, we might ask today, how is sexuality perhaps similarly employed in constructions of black males—both inside and outside of sport—as dangerous sexual deviants? In other words, in the case of black men in the US, how has the suspicion of sexual deviance served to undercut black men’s otherwise ethically powerful claims to equal status within racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies? And in what ways have black males at times uncritically conspired with, manipulated, and/or contested these sexualized images?

Critical examinations of sexual identity categories in sport can also reveal the ways that sexuality and gender have been differently constructed for women and for men. In particular, the dualities of *lesbian versus heterosexual* and *gay versus heterosexual* have been differently constructed for women and for men in sport. As many people have pointed out, sport participation offers a normalizing equation for men:

athleticism = masculinity = heterosexuality.

For women athletes, the equation has nearly always been more paradoxical:

athleticism? femininity? heterosexuality?

Susan Cayleff’s (1995) biography of Babe Didrikson Zaharias reveals some of these issues. Didrikson’s incredibly successful athletic career spanned several decades, during which women’s sports surged in popularity and appeal (the 1920s) and then waned in light of a backlash against female athleticism and women’s rights in general (the 1930s through the 1950s). In this context, Cayleff shows how Didrikson’s conscious reconstruction of herself as heterosexual and feminine—

including radically changing her appearance and marrying a man—paid dividends in public acceptance. But Cayleff also argues that Didrikson was, in fact, a lesbian who had a long-term relationship with a woman. In an insightful review of the book, Mariah Burton Nelson (1995) challenges the straight–lesbian binary. Why must we assume, Nelson argues, that Didrikson was either–or? Maybe she had an emotional and/or sexual relationship with both her husband and her female partner? Maybe she was bisexual?

Deconstructing the Binaries?

Nelson's question raises an important theoretical issue. In recent years, postmodernists and deconstructionists have challenged the binary, oppositional thinking that underlies modern social thought, including that of liberation movements and their progressive academic counterparts. To the point of this article, queer theorists (e.g., Warner, 1993) have recently argued that the establishment of gay/lesbian identities and communities have served to buttress the unquestioned normality, and thus the political hegemony, of the heterosexual. The acceptance of the "gay–straight binary" by the gay/lesbian liberation movement inadvertently contributed to the institutionalization of sexuality as a discourse of medical and technical surveillance and control. In other words, as some radical Foucauldians (e.g., Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) have argued, the collective agency of "sexual liberationists" has operated conservatively, within the framework of dominant discourses of binary oppositions. There is a great deal of debate over the question of just what "queer theory" is (Gamson, 1995; Thomas, 1995). But Seidman (1993, p. 118) provides a useful description of queer theory as a

revolt of the social periphery against the center, only this time the center was not mainstream America, but a dominant gay culture. From minor skirmishes in the mid-to-late 1970's to major wars through the 1980's, the concept of a unitary lesbian or gay male subject was in dispute. Three major sites of struggle against the gay cultural center have been the battle over race, bisexuality, and nonconventional sexualities.

This multifaceted "revolt" has led to new strategies: Rather than organizing within the binary categories that have been created by agents of institutional control, queer theorists argue in favor of a new discourse and practice that disrupts and fractures gay and lesbian categories—thus the emergence of "post-gay" organizations like Queer Nation, which celebrate sexual diversity, transgender identities, and transgressive politics. Their aim is not to organize a liberation movement, but rather, to forge a radical break with what they view as the conventional, even conservative politics of a mostly older generation of gay and lesbian leaders. There is no essential homosexual, new queer theorists and activists are saying—and by extension, they hope to call into question the essential nature of the heterosexual.

Many sociologists—I among them—have reacted with skepticism or even defensiveness to theories of deconstruction that have originated largely in the humanities. One sociologist, Steven Ward (1995), has gone so far as to argue that postmodern deconstructionism constitutes "the revenge of the humanities" against the modern privileging of empiricism and rational scientific epistemologies. Deconstructionists' emphasis on discourse as *the* basis of social reality, some sociologists have argued, falls into a dangerous idealism that ignores material, structured

relations of power that shape language and ideology. I am sympathetic to these criticisms, but I think a major reason that what I call “the posties” have been so attractive to many social scientists is that our own theories of social inequality and change have been seriously flawed. In particular, poststructuralists have revealed the limits—and the oppressive implications—of falsely universalized categories like *the working class*, *women*, *gays and lesbians*, and *people of color*. However, though queer theory is powerful in its critique of modernist categories, its activist politics may ultimately tend to rely on “exquisite intellectual and political gesturing [that] draws its power more from its critical force than any positive program for change” (Seidman, 1990, p. 111). As Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1994, p. 184) have argued, the incoherence of queer theory’s political project is directly linked to its tendency to be preoccupied with literary and mass media texts:

Queer theorists . . . appreciate the extent to which the texts of literature and mass culture shape sexuality, but their weakness is that they rarely, if ever, move beyond the text. There is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore ‘real’ queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of texts. What can the rereading of a nineteenth-century novel really tell us about the pains of gay Chicanos or West Indian lesbians now, for example? Indeed, such postmodern readings may well tell us more about the lives of middle-class radical intellectuals than about anything else! Sociology’s key concerns—inequality, modernity, institutional analysis—can bring a clearer focus to queer theory.

Stein and Plummer put their finger directly upon one of the major shortcomings and dangers of poststructuralism: an overemphasis on the causal importance of language and a concomitant underemphasis on material social relations. In short, I would argue that although language is extremely important, simply deconstructing our discourse about binary categories does not necessarily challenge the material basis of master categories to which subordinate categories of people stand in binary opposition: the capitalist class, men, heterosexuals, Whites. In fact, quite the contrary may be true. As many feminists have pointed out, although it is certainly true that every woman is at least somewhat uniquely situated, a radical deconstruction of the concept *woman* could lead to a radical individualism that denies similarity of experience, thus leading to a depoliticized subject. In fact, it is around the concept of *woman* that feminists have succeeded in organizing valuable institutions like women’s shelters and rape crisis centers, and have succeeded in wresting concessions from the state like Title IX, and laws against sexual harassment and employment discrimination. These kinds of changes, despite their limits, have made real differences in peoples’ lives.

Similarly, the forging of gay and lesbian identities and communities, despite the way they mask difference, inequalities, and even oppression within these categories, has been successful in overturning some oppressive legal and medical practices. Deconstructing these categories risks dismantling the basis from which some progress has been won—and indeed, the basis from which more progress might be won in the future. Moreover, I suspect that heterosexuality, as an institution, can quite easily reconstruct itself in light of a bevy of queer public transgressions. *The heterosexual*, as a privileged identity category, does not necessarily need *the homosexual*, as its oppositional counterpart. The heterosexual can just as easily reconstruct itself in opposition to a polymorphously “queer nation.”

We do need to take into account the insights that deconstructionists offer us—especially the way they call into question the very categories we take for granted—for example, Cheryl Cole's (1994) radical challenge to our unquestioned use of the concept of *sport*. These kinds of critiques have contributed to a breaking down, or at least a blurring of, disciplinary boundaries. And this is a good thing, for like geographical boundaries, disciplinary boundaries are often arbitrary social constructions that keep new or opposing ideas out, while protecting and reifying narrow orthodoxies within. But though I agree with the necessity of crossing or eliminating disciplinary borders, I think it is important to assert two ways that sociological insights and concepts can contribute to this emergent multidisciplinary landscape.

A Materialist Conception of Social Structure

First, it is essential to retain and build upon the utility of the concept of social structure, with its attendant emphasis on the importance of peoples' shared positions within structures of power. Such a materialist analysis reveals how differential access to resources, opportunities, and different relationships to structured constraints shape the contexts in which people think, interact, and construct political practices and discourse. To be sure, we should reject narrowly defined theories such as crude Marxisms or feminisms that insist there is a singular dynamic (i.e., class or gender) shaping history. These reductionist and hierarchical theories have incorrectly named certain groups of people (the working class, women) as the subjects of history. The new social movements of the past 3 decades have thoroughly exploded these simplistic formulations and claims (Seidman, 1993). In place of a transcendent historical subject, we now have the concept of multiplicity, and of fragmented and fractured identity categories: There is no working class—instead, there are gay workers, black gay workers, women workers, heterosexual women workers, lesbian Chicano women workers, and so forth. When facing these complex realities, some postmodernists have argued that modernity has collapsed, and with it has evaporated the hope for a transcendent historical subject who can attain a conscious grasp of the totality of social life, who can organize and act to change it. Within this postmodern view (e.g., Lemert, 1994), a sociologist who asserts that her or his work is operating from the standpoint of a commitment to social justice is scoffed at as hopelessly mired in *passé*, modernist thought. Instead, postmodernists argue, we face an increasingly unstable and fragmented world in which knowledge can only be, at best, partial, and in which groups can only coalesce temporarily around limited and short-term goals.

Clearly, the world is complex. In fact, the idea of a single, transcendent revolutionary historical subject (such as the working class or women) who can understand and change the totality of social life was probably always an incorrect and naive assumption made by revolutionary intellectuals. The working class and women have always been internally differentiated and fragmented groups that, respectively, Marxists and some feminists have falsely universalized. However, to abandon the project of human liberation now is to engage in an act of historical capitulation to the forces of greed, violence, and oppression right at a time in history when new social movements have achieved partial (sometimes even dramatic) successes in decolonization, women's rights, gay and lesbian liberation, and antiracism. What is needed now are theories that can inform an alliance politics

that is grounded simultaneously in a structural analysis of power and a recognition of multiplicity (c.g., Baca Zinn & Dill, in press).

Counterhegemonic Resistance or Playful Subversions?

Even as we attempt to transcend (or leave behind us) the limits of a narrow empiricism, it is still crucial to create and utilize systematic ways to come up with good generalizations about groups of people's shared experiences and interests within social structures. This is especially important today, I think, in light of some sexual deconstructionists and queer theorists who are arguing for an escape from oppressive social institutions and the creation of "free zones" where individuals, couples, or groups can perform "playful subversions." Seidman (1993, p. 133) describes this emphasis on escape from institutions as "a celebration of liminality, of the spaces between or outside structure, a kind of anarchistic championing of 'pure' freedom from all constraints and limits." In sport studies, this perspective has been articulated most eloquently by Brian Pronger (1994, p. 10), who argues that sport is part of an oppressive cultural practice through which "the free flow of energy is stopped. This restriction of desire is a *process* in which organization, in the codifying interests of capital, resists the free flow of energy." Sport—and its disciplinary body practices—are inherently "fascist," according to Pronger, and thus the idea of struggling within sport to make it more democratic or humane is, in effect, conspiring with fascism. "The issue becomes not one, then, of including more people in sport, but of trying to exclude as many as possible from its fascist project" (Pronger, 1994, p. 10). In light of this perspective, Pronger then asks,

What does resistance look like? What are the possibilities for refiguring the discourse of sport? These are postmodern questions not of overcoming—but of lines of flight. Because, the problem of sport is the problem of modernity, which is the problem of the overarching fascist territorialization of the body, of desire, of the free-flow of energy in the many regions to which modernity has extended its grasp. Overcoming modernity, I think, is beyond our reach. [We should] explore, instead, strategies that are geared to undermining, thwarting, strangling, subverting, momentarily escaping fascist organizations of the body, rather than overthrowing the structural foundations of our era. (Pronger, 1994, p. 21)

No doubt Pronger is correct that sport—especially in its dominant institutional forms—has contributed to an oppressive territorialization of the body. But Pronger seems to ignore the various collective attempts to change sport that have taken place largely outside the dominant athletic institutions, as well as the incidents of resistance and emancipatory moments that sometimes take place even within the dominant sport institutions. These moments should highlight for us the fact that sport, like all institutions, is not a seamless totalitarian system. Rather, it is a political terrain characterized by internal contradiction and paradox that leave room for the play of oppositional meanings, and potentially for the organization of collective resistance and institutional change. I fear that the view of sport as a thoroughly and hopelessly fascist practice from which we should "escape" represents an historic capitulation to the challenge of struggling within sport—not only to make sport more democratic, equal, peaceful, and humane, but also to contribute toward the transformation of other nonsport institutions such as schools, families, and the

economy. Despite its limitations, I believe that the Gramscian concept of hegemony, with its attendant focus on structural constraint and collective human agency, is still the most useful macrotheoretical framework for exploring these historical and political questions about the possibilities for human freedom (e.g., Gruneau, 1983).

Escape from social institutions to a realm of absolute erotic freedom is really not possible anyway. Yet, some queer theorists appear to be arguing for a return to a Rousseauian notion of freedom, unfettered and unmediated by civilization. Instead, I would argue that in the context of social order—*any* social order—Eros, like all bodily matters, is always socially mediated. To paraphrase Connell (1995), the social takes up the body and its desire and transforms it, without changing the fact that it is a biological body. Thus, the idea of an unmediated “free flow of erotic energy,” is not only impossible, it is an idea that may mask the very relations of power it is embedded within rather than illuminating and subverting them. Even radical Freudians such as Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s and '40s and Herbert Marcuse in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, who aimed to liberate Eros, saw their utopian projects as attempts to eliminate surplus repression (the repression required for people to be willing to do alienated labor, to wage war, to administer death camps, etc.), while still arguing that any society will require a partial sublimation of Eros (Marcuse, 1955; Reich, 1972).

The following are key questions concerning erotic desire: How do institutional power relations shape, mediate, repress, sublimate, and desubliminate desire? How do individuals and groups respond in ways that reproduce, subtly change, or overtly challenge oppressive conventions? How do people (for instance, athletes and spectators) actively take up the construction of their own sexual identities and communities? And how do these sexual identities, relations, and practices intersect with other kinds of differences and inequalities within a socially structured matrix of domination?

Clearly, the framework and questions I have outlined above lie largely within what many would call a *modernist* world view, based upon the idea that the project of human liberty, democracy, and equality can be furthered by social movements that are informed by a rational analysis of social structures of power. But after asserting the strengths of a sociological perspective and outlining some of the dangers of deconstruction, I want to emphasize that I do not see my project here as a contribution to battering down the disciplinary hatches to hold off the deconstructionist barbarians. I think deconstruction has a contribution to make, and when it is done well it can illuminate oppressive institutional power dynamics in new and important ways (e.g., Cole & Hribar, 1995). A fruitful approach might be to engage in a seemingly contradictory enterprise: First, our scholarly work should critically and intelligently support the identity claims of disenfranchised groups. For instance, when we do research that supports Title IX compliance or sex-equal coverage in the sports media, we are relying on—perhaps even reifying—a male–female binary. There are dangers in reifying categorical views of women and men rather than emphasizing the empirical reality, a “continuum of performance” that reveals an enormous amount of overlap between women’s and men’s athletic abilities (Kane, 1995). On the other hand, since the institution of sport is materially structured along the lines of this binary opposition, the successful deployment of the category *women in sport* can have a real outcome in terms of redistribution of resources and opportunities (Carpenter, 1993). And though this in

itself is not necessarily revolutionary, it does alter the state of play of the gender order in such a way that makes new challenges possible. This does not mean we should endorse the oppressive use of falsely universalized categories in the name of reform. We need to point out when, for instance, the universalizing category *women* marginalizes women of color, lesbians, poor women, older or differently abled women. Some scholars might argue—correctly—that this minimal change still leaves the dominant category, *men*, essentially unchallenged. Thus, I suggest a second prong to our strategy: We should employ a practice of *strategic deconstruction*—not of the identity categories of subordinate groups, but rather, of the dominant end of binary categories. In short, our aim should be to study up in order to uncover the mechanisms at work in the social construction of whiteness, of hegemonic masculinity, of heterosexuality.

A Sexual Story

What does this mean concretely in terms of sport studies? First and foremost, it means interrogating our own values, biases, and domain assumptions. Are we operating from a deviance model that only makes sexual orientation visible when it is gays and lesbians we are discussing, but that leaves heterosexuality the unexamined, invisible norm? Second, it means we should analyze current sport institutions (including sport media) as material contexts within which heterosexuality is constructed. There are surely many ways to approach this task. One way is through a sociological analysis of what Ken Plummer (1995) calls “sexual stories.” Plummer argues that people’s sexual stories, their “narratives of the intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered and the relational,” offer a fascinating sociological window into the “late modern world” (Plummer, 1995, p. 6). I will present one such sexual story here as an example. It is a story that nudged itself out of the recesses of my own memory in the context of a group of men I worked with for 2 years doing a version of the “memory work” research developed by Frigga Haug (1987) for her book *Female Sexualization*. Our group followed Haug’s concerns and methods in a very general way. We were concerned with recalling and reconstructing our own experiences of gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized embodiment, and then collectively analyzing our stories. Through this process we attempted to reveal similarities and differences among us, and to move toward a theorization of embodiments of masculinity within shifting and changing structured contexts. As R.W. Connell explains the underlying aim of such research, “the theorized life history can be a powerful tool for the study of social structures and their dynamics as they impinge upon (and are reconstituted in) personal life” (Connell, 1990, p. 84). As Haug and Plummer both note, stories based on memories of events that took place years ago do not necessarily reveal an objective “truth” of that moment in time. The memories are mediated and often distorted by time. And the meanings we draw from these kinds of stories, ex-post facto, are often quite different than the meanings the events in the story might have had at the time. But the fact that the story is remembered and reconstructed in the process of group memory work, Haug would argue, means that the events in the story represented a particularly salient moment in life—and this moment is useful for theorizing the complex relationship between agency and social structure.

When I was in the 9th grade, I played on a “D” basketball team, set up especially for the smallest of high school boys. Indeed, though I was pudgy with

baby fat, I was a short 5'2", still prepubescent with no facial hair and a high voice that I artificially tried to lower. The first day of practice, I was immediately attracted to a boy I'll call Timmy, because he looked like the boy who played in the Lassie TV show. Timmy was short, with a high voice, like me. And like me, he had no facial hair yet. Unlike me, he was very skinny. I liked Timmy right away, and soon we were together a lot. I noticed things about him that I didn't notice about other boys: He said some words a certain way, and it gave me pleasure to try to talk like him. I remember liking the way the light hit his boyish, nearly hairless body. I thought about him when we weren't together. He was in the school band, and at the football games, I'd squint to see where he was in the mass of uniforms. In short, though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, I was infatuated with Timmy—I had a crush on him. Later that basketball season, I decided—for no reason I could really articulate then—that I hated Timmy. I aggressively rejected him, began to make fun of him around other boys. He was, we all agreed, a geek. He was a "faggot."

Three years later, Timmy and I were both on the varsity basketball team, but had hardly spoken a word to each other since we were freshmen. Both of us now had lower voices, had grown to around 6 feet tall, and we both shaved, at least a bit. But Timmy was a skinny, somewhat stigmatized reserve on the team, whereas I was the team captain and starting point guard. But I wasn't so happy or secure about this. I'd always dreamed of dominating games, of being the hero. Halfway through my senior season, however, it became clear that I was not a star, and I figured I knew why. I was not aggressive enough.

I had always liked the beauty of the fast break, the perfectly executed pick and roll play between two players, and especially the long 20-foot shot that touched nothing but the bottom of the net. But I hated and feared the sometimes brutal contact under the basket. In fact, I stayed away from the rough fights for rebounds and was mostly a perimeter player, relying on my long shots or my passes to more aggressive teammates under the basket. But now it became apparent to me that time was running out in my quest for greatness: I needed to change my game, and fast. I decided one day before practice that I was going to get aggressive. While practicing one of our standard plays, I passed the ball to a teammate and then ran to the spot at which I was to set a pick on a defender. I knew that one could sometimes get away with setting a face-up screen on a player, and then as he makes contact with you, roll your back to him and plant your elbow hard in his stomach. The beauty of this move is that your own body "roll" makes the elbow look like an accident. So I decided to try this move. I approached the defensive player, Timmy, rolled, and planted my elbow deeply into his solar plexus. Air exploded audibly from Timmy's mouth, and he crumbled to the floor momentarily.

Play went on as though nothing had happened, but I felt bad about it. Rather than making me feel better, it made me feel guilty and weak. I had to admit to myself why I'd chosen Timmy as the target against whom to test out my new aggression. He was the skinniest and weakest player on the team.

Years later, I can now interrogate this as a *sexual* story, and as a *gender* story, unfolding within the context of the heterosexualized and masculinized institution of sport. It certainly doesn't take a Kinsey Scale to recognize the fluidity and changeability of sexual desire in this story. It doesn't require the employment of a Freudian theory of bisexuality to recognize homoerotic desire operating in my story. Nor does it take an Adrienne Rich, a Marcuse, or Reich to see how the institution of compulsory heterosexuality led me to deny and repress my homoerotic desire

through a direct and overt rejection of the desired object, through homophobic banter with male peers, and through the resultant stigmatization of the feminized Timmy. And eventually, we might read the sublimation of the original homoerotic desire into an aggressive, violent act as serving to construct a clear line of demarcation between self and other. In short, the rejection of Timmy and the joining with teammates to stigmatize him in ninth grade stands as what Connell (1987) calls “a moment of engagement with hegemonic masculinity,” in which I actively took up the collective project of constructing heterosexual/masculine identities in the context of sport. The elbow in the gut 3 years later can be seen as a punctuation mark that occurred precisely because of my fears that this project might be failing.

It’s also interesting to compare my story with “coming out” stories in sport. Though we have a few lesbian and bisexual coming out stories among women athletes, there are very few gay male coming out stories. When I interviewed Tom Waddell over a decade ago about his sexual identity and athletic career, he made it quite clear that for many years sports *was* his closet (see Messner, 1994). He was conscious of entering sports and constructing a masculine/heterosexual athletic identity precisely because he feared being revealed as gay. It was clear to him, in the context of the 1950s, that being revealed as gay would undercut his claims to the status of manhood. Thus, though the athletic closet was hot and stifling, he remained in the closet until several years after his athletic retirement. Waddell’s coming out story may invoke a dramaturgical analysis: He clearly attempted to control and regulate others’ perceptions of him by constructing a public “front-stage” persona that differed radically from what he believed to be his “true” inner self. My story, in contrast, suggests a deeper, less consciously strategic “going in” with my homoerotic desire. Most likely, I was aware on some level of the dangers of such feelings and was escaping the dangers, disgrace, and rejection that would likely result from being different. But in retrospect, I can see that perhaps it was not a “closet” I was going into—perhaps I was stepping out into an entire world of heterosexual privilege. My story also suggests that a threat to the promised privileges of hegemonic masculinity might trigger a momentary sexual panic that can lay bare the constructedness, indeed, the instability of the heterosexual/masculine identity.

In either case—Waddell’s or mine—we can see how as young male athletes, heterosexuality and masculinity were not things we “were,” but things we were *doing*. It is very significant, I think, that as each of us was “doing heterosexuality,” neither of us was actually “having sex” with women (though one of us desperately wanted to!). This underscores the point made earlier, that heterosexuality is a constructed identity, a performance, and an institution that is not necessarily linked to sexual acts. Though for one of us it was more conscious than for the other, we were both doing heterosexuality as an ongoing practice through which we sought to link ourselves into systems of power, status, and privilege. In other words, each of us actively scripted our own sexual/gender performances, but these scripts were constructed within the constraints of a socially organized (institutionalized) system of power and pleasure.

Queer Questions About Heterosexuality

What do heterosexuals, as a category of people, actually share with each other? As it turns out, not very much. Heterosexuals certainly don’t share a singular

economic status, racial or ethnic identification, or religious or political belief system. In fact, they don't even share the same sexual tastes and practices—we've known that at least since Kinsey in the 1940s and '50s. Peter Nardi, a prominent gay sociologist, visited my sexuality class this past spring and stumped my class with a question: "I have a gay male friend and a lesbian friend, and occasionally they like to have sex with each other. Is that straight sex? It is, after all, a man with a woman. But they identify as a gay and as a lesbian. So is it gay sex?" We could ask similar questions about people who identify as heterosexuals. What are we to make of heterosexual men who like to dress in women's clothes while masturbating? What about the heterosexual man who rapes other men in prison, or the heterosexual men identified by Laud Humphreys in his classic (1971) study, *The Tearoom Trade*, who occasionally have sex with other men in public restrooms? And what of heterosexual groups of young men who, in fraternities or sport teams, engage in group rapes of women? Women tell us that from the woman's perspective, rape is not sex, it's a violent and degrading act of abuse. That's certainly true. But research on gang rape, such as that done by Peggy Sanday (1990), suggests that there is a highly erotic charge for the men involved in gang rapes. But it's not "sex with a woman" that's behind this erotic charge. Rather, the woman serves as a debased object through which the men have sex *with each other*. This is an example of how heterosexism and misogyny work to simultaneously affirm and deny the erotic bond in male groups.

So if we can't identify heterosexuals as a category by their shared sexual desires, practices, or even object choices, what *do* they have in common? What heterosexually identified people do share is, perhaps, a belief that they are categorically different from gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and "queers." And they also share a privileged status that serves to link them into other classed, racialized, and gendered systems of domination and subordination. Heterosexuality as a linking process is evident, for instance, in the vehemence with which many racially subordinated men make claims to heterosexual status so as to shore up a masculinity already undercut by racism, or, in the ways that women in the LPGA or in other elite sports collectively take up the project of constructing an image of heterosexual femininity in order to secure privileges for themselves within an increasingly commercialized professional sport context (Crosset, 1990; Kolnes, 1995). It is the task of a critical sport studies, I think, to explore and demystify these kinds of links, to expose the cracks and fissures in them, and to point to creative possibilities for change.

In 1982, M. Rochlin published the now widely reprinted "Heterosexual Questionnaire," a one-page, tongue-in-cheek list of 18 questions that people who identify as heterosexuals might ask themselves (Rochlin, 1995). For instance, "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?" "If you have never slept with a person of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?" "Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality?" There is a queer, destabilizing impulse in this kind of humor that we might creatively employ in our research and in our teaching in sport studies. To boxing fans, we might ask, "Is it possible that you just need to watch less violent games in order to get in touch with your homoerotic desire?" Or, we might ask male coaches in women's sports, "Can we really trust a heterosexual male coach to understand the needs and desires of lesbian athletes?" And we might interrogate the entire institution of sport by asking, "If heterosexuality is so natural, why do we all have to work so damned hard to recruit new heterosexuals among every generation of youth?"

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