

Boyhood, sport and the mild brutalisation of the body

Jeff Hearn

Abstract: In this contribution, I offer some appreciative links and qualified connections between Raewyn Connell's work and my own. In particular, I use the example of sport, a key area in the making of boys and young men in many societies, with special reference to questions of practice, body, theoretical and empirical conceptualizations of masculinity.

Keywords: body, boyhood, masculinity, sport, young men

So, where to start? I first encountered Raewyn Connell at long distance, through texts, that is, drafts of two papers (I think mimeograph was the term), in the early 1980s. These were eagerly consumed by me, along with a few close colleagues interested in developing studies men and masculinities at Bradford University. The texts were to become, in due course, the landmark paper, 'Towards a new sociology of masculinity' (Carrigan et al., 1985).

At the time, although there was an emerging social sciences literature that considered men and masculinity (singular) through various critical lenses, much of this work did not take a strongly sociological, let alone structural, analysis of the concept of masculinity. In the early 1980s, even critical approaches still tended to speak of masculinity in the singular, akin to elaborated versions of sex role theory. Often starting out from a social psychological or micro- or middle-range sociological baseline, gender, men and masculinity were interpersonalised. Interestingly, as I learnt years later, another feminist version of sex/gender role theory was developed in the Nordic region framed differently within patriarchy theory. Significantly, the 1985 article (Carrigan et al, 1985) began with a critique of sex role theory, and the male sex or gender role – a critique that could be located within wider theoretical critique of role theory (Eichler, 1980; Gerhardt, 1980), especially Anglophone role theory, as theoretical concept, and social evaluation, reality or experience, and its associations with (neo-)structural functionalism. These associations never seem to go away completely.

Work on boys, girls, schooling and education have been at the core of Raewyn's work. In fact, it was my late friend, the scholar of ethnology, gender and education, Marie Nordberg, who stressed that to understand Raewyn's scholarship, it was necessary to appreciate her location in studies of education and vocation as an educator. I think Marie was right. It is a great skill that Raewyn has in being able to impart complex ideas in an accessible way (some others think that imparting not very complex ideas inaccessibly is the way forward!). In fact, it was partly through the collaborative studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s on schooling, gender and class – as in *Ockers and Disco-maniacs* (Kessler et al., 1982), *Making the Difference: Schools Families and Social Division* (Connell et al., 1982), and *Teachers' Work* (Connell, 1985) – that thinking on masculinities theory and hegemonic masculinity evolved.

Following a lot of further theoretical and empirical work, notably in the books, *Gender and Power* (1987) and *Masculinities* (1995), *The Men and the Boys* (2000), hereafter *TMATB*, represented a wide-ranging synthesis, geopolitically, and across multiple themes and issues. The book is fast-paced and accessible to the specialist and the more general reader. It is educational! The book brought together a range of thinking on boys and men – that is, the earlier work on education, children and younger people from the 1970s and 1980s with the broad theorising on masculinities and gender relations from the 1980s and 1990s. So, in celebrating that book and Raewyn's further work, there is much to choose from.

Here, I have decided to say something on an issue that, for some reason, I've previously managed to avoid writing much about, namely sport. So, for the remainder of this contribution, I take Raewyn's several commentaries on sport in *TMATB* as my inspiration. The topic, or rather institution, of sport figures variously in *TMATB*: in life story work; in the resolution of contradictions, both (inter)personal and structural; in analyses of schooling and education, and of health (or not); in institutional and organisational analysis; and as an exemplar of wider processes bringing together diverse social forces (Connell, 1987).

Sport is important, in its own right and as illustrative of wider social dynamics. In *TMATB*, it is identified as a "vortex of power, symbolism and emotion in a particularly potent combination." (p. 159). Echoing Messner (1990), Connell writes that "the formal structure of organized sport provides a temporary resolution for developmental problems of masculinity", linking to the more general problematic that: "It is clear that the sex-role model will not work;" (p. 132). Beyond those theoretical insights, *TMATB* specifically addresses sport as an institution in relation to the interconnected issues of men's health and commercialisation of sport. On the first count, the sub-section, "Attempts to make men's bodies healthy" (p. 188f.), begins by noting that "The image of sport is one of healthy bodies in vigorous action." (p. 188). Yet far from promoting health, sport is intimately tied to commercial promotion of consumption, unhealthy food, alcoholic drink, and smoking, promotion of risk behaviour and winning at all costs, and damage especially to elite sportsmen (pp. 80-83). On the second count, contemporary sport is understood as very much part of the commercialised service sector and commercial mass entertainment: "Professional sport is overwhelmingly men's sport, and has become a major arena for the promotion of dominant forms of masculinity." (p. 189). Connell shows how sport is concerned with matters that are personal and political, psychological and sociological, with interactions between conscious values and beliefs, less conscious internal dynamics, and social institutions.

These critical discussions in *TMATB* on sport provide a firm foundation for critical theoretical, empirical, political, policy and personal reflective work – leading in several different directions, and with diverse potentialities. Here, I outline some thoughts on just three possible avenues for further development: the body, mild brutalisation, and social change since *TMATB*'s publication.

The body

First, there is the question, and importance, of the body in sport. The body, bod(il)y practice and gendered embodiment are all clearly of central interest in analysing sport. Much, if not all, sport is bodywork, and the gendered-sexed-gexed body is central as an organising principle in sport, with very few exceptions, such as showjumping. The body figures as part of the multi-faceted account of sport presented in *TMATB*, as in the self-definition of what counts as the "natural", as in the "natural athlete" or "natural ability" in sport, and as resulting from collective practices that construct masculinity.

Notably for present purposes, though not so often recognised, the first substantial discussion of hegemonic masculinity was based in a discussion of boys' and adult men's *bodies*, framed within the patriarchal context, in the paper, "Men's bodies", published in 1979, then republished in *Which Way Is Up?* (Connell, 1983). Connell stressed that "the embedding of masculinity in the body is very much a social process, full of tensions and contradiction; that even physical masculinity is historical, rather than a biological fact ... constantly in process, constantly being constituted in actions and relations, constantly implicated in historical change." (1983: 30). Moreover, the 'men's bodies' paper discussed the social construction of the body in boys' and adult men's practices and "the physical sense of maleness" in the key

site of sport. Sport is said to be marked as “the central experience of the school years for many boys” (1983: 18), emphasising the practices and experiences of taking and occupying space, holding the body tense, skill, size, power, force, strength, physical development, and sexuality. Further key social sites of body practice and hegemonic masculinity are addressed in analysing the bodies of adult men: physicality at work, sexuality, fatherhood. In this line of thinking, sport is an exemplary institution.

The construction of (real) boyhood, the move from boyhood-to-manhood, and the practice(s) of sport are often in a close symbiotic relation, across institutions, schooling systems, communities, classes, and social groups. Having said that, there is clearly considerable variation in the relations of boyhood, masculinities, sport, and the body – cross-culturally, but also across specific sports and sporting arenas, and amongst boys and young men themselves.

Sport, as a cultural institution, is not universal, at least not in what is usually called or understood as sport. Play, games and physical exertion may be almost universal, in some form, for most children, especially young children, cross-culturally, but their funnelling into sport involves further social organisation. This is most obviously so in terms of the place of adults in organising and constructing the rules of sport, even if they are there to be broken. To put this another way, sport – in the making of boys, boyhood and manhood – is largely an *adult*-[read men’s-]organised aged and gendered set of activities for organising male-assigned and male-identified bodies. Sport is fundamentally aged-gendered. This is also illustrated in a different way in old(er) age sport or sport for old(er) ages-genders.

Then there are variations in the place, and use, of the body across different sports and sporting arenas. Clearly, not all sports involve the body in the same way. Contact sports, with direct (mutual) attack, as in boxing or UFC, and physical adversarial confrontation, as in rugby, contrast with non-contact sports where participants are in the same arena, as with, say, tennis or croquet, and more individualised sports, where there is spatial separation, ranging from ice skating to shooting, even fishing. The body may be directly ready and active for competition, risk and danger in a direct physical meeting – or less directly charged. Different parts of the gendered body figure as the focuses of attention and activity – hands, arms, and so on, even when the whole body is employed. With some sports, boys may appear to become boys more through training certain parts of the body, say, legs and feet. In some sports, conflict and competition, even assault, are mediated either through attached prosthetics, such as a glove, an oar, a bat, or conveyed via mobile objects, such as a ball, a puck, a shuttlecock (cf. Hickey-Moody, 2015). Accordingly, the practice(s) of different sports intersect, in different ways, with the construction of (real) boyhood, the move from boyhood-to-manhood, and the process of the making of boys through bodywork.

Another complication concerns the differential orientations amongst boys and young men themselves, as individuals and groups make for huge differences in the relations, reactions and responses to sport. In some settings, disaffection with sport or certain kinds of sport can be a source of hegemonic power and authority. These anti-(certain) sport positionings may be linked to class, ethnicity and racialisation, religion or command of technology, as with geek and nerd masculinities, an issue of increasing interest. The individual and collective boy-body-in-sport has variable significance across contexts.

Mild brutalisation

Next, the question of boyhood and sport is also a personal matter, for millions, including me, even whilst the personal is not separate from the political and the theoretical. (Re)reading *TMATB*, it is very difficult not to relate to it through both its own personal dimension, and one’s own personal reflection. In reflecting personally on sport and boyhood, I need to add

that although I have worked quite a lot on children, boys, child abuse and other aspects of age and generation, I have often felt some reluctance to foreground young age as the main motor of and solution to social change on gender relations and the problem of men, masculinities and patriarchies. There is much research connecting boy's experiences of receiving or witnessing violence and greater probabilities for doing violence (Campbell, 1993; Levitov et al. 2014). However, whatever men's background as boys, men still have to change in dismantling patriarchy. In an earlier piece of reflective memory work writing, I expressed this, writing in the third person:

Much later he realized he didn't want to spend much time working on, that is studying, questions of education, schooling and what is often called "Socialisation". For one thing, it was so obvious that class overrode a lot in seeing what happened to boys and young men; it was obvious and painful. And then, at the same time, although he has for time to time written several things on boys and young men, he has always been suspicious or wary of explaining men's bad behaviour from their background, as that can be such an excuse in some cases. (Hearn, 2018: 42).

With that off my chest, I turn next to some critical reflections on my own relations to sport (see Barber et al., 2016: ch. 7). It is perhaps in mirroring my comments above about a certain reluctance not to prioritise study on boys, schooling and education that I have tended to avoid thorough investigation of sport. This is despite the fact that sport figured strongly in my own boyhood and early adulthood. Indeed, in the early 1980s I wrote an unpublished piece that was probably too personal and poetically inclined for academic publication. In that, 'Sport: The mild brutalisation of the body', I discussed my bringing up with sport as a boy and later.

I am child of sport. Until recently I had played some form of competitive sport ever since I was able as a child. ... Much of this I enjoyed greatly – the excitement and the thrill, the security of being part of the group first of boys then of men, the hurting of others and even the hurting of myself. However, while part of me has enjoyed this ..., another part of me has found it all very uncomfortable and at times detestable.

Part of me has wanted to stop playing competitive sport for about the last three years. I have been particularly concerned with the way in which playing sport affected my relationships with other men, and confined them to a friendly distance. One might share with another man what a tough match it had been or even how someone breaking their leg was very upsetting, but that was short-lived and that was all. Last April I suffered a back injury from playing football, which knocked me out of circulation for two months. I haven't played any competitive sport since over the last year. (Hearn, 1982: 1).

This edited text raises several ambivalences and contradictions: between the will to be playing and not playing competitive and contact sport; between being close to other boys/men and not being close at all; and between mild brutalisation and sheer physical enjoyment. In some situations, but far from all, boys are made into men through friendly brutalising. This is what may be called a minor version of the argument Connell (2000: 12), echoing Messner (1992), makes that the exemplary masculinities of sports professionals "result from a sustained active engagement with the demands of the institutional setting, even to the point of serious bodily damage from 'playing hurt' and accumulated stress": what I called the mild brutalisation of the body.

At this point you might say, shout, ‘This is all very well’, ‘This may be true’, but ‘You’re talking about team sports, physical sports, contact sports’, ‘I only play squash, tennis, table tennis, badminton’, ‘These sports are nicer’. At first sight this is a reasonable distinction to make; but on second look I am not so sure. In some of these non-contact sports the mild brutalisation of the body is more acute as it operates psychologically and indirectly rather than directly body-to-body. In non-contact sports the body is held tense through the mind and there is the likelihood of the calculated stroke rather than the spontaneous movement within the flow of the game. In a sport like table tennis the whole body can become rapt in the service of calculated, aggressive or defensive play of one against the other within the rules of the game. The sportsman willingly enters in the service of the impersonal and indisputable rules such as we have in patriarchy. (Hearn, 1982: 5).

Sport is the convenient vehicle for the gradual, controlled, organised, competitive, and below all mild change in mind and body. Sport provides the ideal site for boys and men to meet with other boys and men, engage in chummy (literal and/or metaphorical) homosocial bruising, and then leave each other alone. Following Connell’s comment on boys’ and men’s bodily practices of occupying space when playing sport, sport also occupies boys and men who “willingly enter in that service”. One of the main points of sport can be to occupy young men. The fact that some, or many, boys and men learn to love the activity of sport, sometimes even specialise in it, may be secondary.

Sport can be crude and obvious, and intricate and elaboratable. It almost runs itself, invents new forms, with (adult-led) rules, yet non-rule-based behaviour. Have you ever heard discussions on the rules and intricacies of cricket? Sport has the supreme advantage that each sporting occasion, each moment, appears to show *unique permutations of bodies*. This also applies to the watching of sport, IRL, on live broadcast, or through ‘live’ recording. Each match is different. There is always the ultimate reason for seeing it ‘the first time’; it’s always worth ‘staying in specially’ to see the Highlights, the fascination of the moment. Modern sport, especially professional, televised and videoed varieties, is obsessively quantified (long before the quantified self), recorded, re-played, ironically for those special moments.

Sport is the taking of the moment by moment of continuous, sensuous reproduction, and breaking it down, placing it gently, squarely and firmly in the world of patriarchy we all know we inhabit. Sport is bodily, but it is founded upon the separateness and mild brutalisation of the body for our partial enjoyment. It is one major way that we, as boys then men, learn to experience our bodies. While girls at puberty experience their bodies through the onset of menstruation, for boys there is sport. It is the ‘next best thing’ we have to living. Sport doesn’t explain our sexuality but rather it gives some healthy clues to its understanding. (Hearn, 1982: 6).

And sexuality can blend with and into violence. In these mild, or not so mild, brutalisations, sport, both the doing and the watching, tells a lot about violence, and the carnal and visceral enjoyment of violence, conflict and competition. Studies of boyhood, sport and violence need to be brought into closer conversation, whether that is direct brutal violence or through “exclusion from sport, and/or trivialisation and ridicule within or through it, [which] have often been the experience of women, gay men, and various others who sit outside of the narrowly defined norms of gender built around such spaces” (Matthews and Channon, 2020: 375). I am brought back to the very making of boys:

To socially create ‘masculinity’ in ‘boys’ and ‘femininity’ in ‘girls’ frequently involves doing violence to that person in terms of the coercive overriding of them in almost every way – toys, tastes, clothes, language, moods. At what point does the removal of all the options, other than becoming a ‘masculine’ boy or ‘feminine’ ‘girl’ become (or cease to become) violence?’ (Hearn, 1990: 74).

Social change?

Third, thinking about sport through the lens of *TMATB* prompts attention to social change – and to what extent the book’s analysis has been affirmed or is in need of development. What about sport has changed since 2000? Commercialisation and marketisation of sport and sport entertainment have certainly accelerated over the last 20 years, not least through technological changes, even if there is now more national and international policy concern, and sometimes controls, on some forms of sponsorship, from, say, alcohol and tobacco companies. Commercialisation, professionalisation and biotechnology have intensified on-field legitimated violence and brutality in some contact sports, notably elite rugby and American football, which then influence play at lower and younger levels. In turn and belatedly, concerns with sport concussions and other damage are now higher on some policy agendas. Men’s domination in sport politics and management persists; high-level corruption and cheating through illicit drugs have been demonstrated, most famously with FIFA (Hughson and Hughson, 2019) and the Sochi Winter Olympics. And one of the biggest changes over the last 20 years is the mammoth rise in online gaming (Jones, 2020), as both everyday activity for millions and specialist esports elite competition.

The relation of sport to (men’s) health has become more complex, with contradictory tendencies towards ill-health and obesity (including of boys) alongside more widespread awareness of and public discourse on men’s health, including across social classes (Pietilä, 2008). More particularly, in some countries, such as the UK, there have been major state cutbacks in both the time given over to sport within school curricula and in school playing fields and access to public open spaces; and in some contradiction this can also be accompanied by governmental policy against obesity, and unhealthy food and drinks.

Issues of race, racism and anti-racism are currently higher profile, not least through Black Lives Matter, and ‘taking a stand by bending the knee’. Along with racialised capitalism and racialised migration dominant in some sports, anti-racist action has become quite established in some sports, for example, Kick It Out and Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football established in 1993, and the Fare network (previously Football Against Racism in Europe) set up in Vienna in 1999s. At the same time, women in professional sport are in much higher profile than 20 years ago, even if still structurally subordinated. Women and girls outside of professionalism are more active in what were previously largely men’s sports, with football, rugby and boxing as examples. Sexism, harassment and sexual assault have been highlighted, as in scandals in the ‘training’ and abuse of girl gymnasts.

Gender and sexual diversity in sport is slowly expanding, with, for example, an active and contested politics and mainstream policy and bio-legal debate on transgender in sport. Though violence in sport continues apace, sport has been used to engage boys and young men against violence and racism, such as Sport Respects Your Rights, and SAVE - Sport Against Violence and Exclusion, and for peace broadly, as in work of the UN, its agencies and the Social Development Goals. Such initiatives raise numerous contradictions between new inclusions and exclusions, solidarity and competition, winning and consent to be beaten,

sometimes in more than one way, all underwritten by transnational governance. Masculinist sporting means may be employed in seeking to undo masculinist violating ends.

All these current issues and more suggest further analyses building on the formulations of boyhood, masculinities and sport presented in *TMATB*, even while the fundamental structures of sport have not changed so much.

Ending by acknowledging

It is usual to place acknowledgements outside the main text, an afterthought. Here, rather than a conclusion, I end simply with acknowledgements – I have been and am immensely grateful to Raewyn Connell for all sorts of connections, encouragements and support over the years, as well as direct collaborations: co-editing the 2005 Sage *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, assisting the GEXcel Centre of Excellence at Linköping and Örebro Universities, Sweden, as co-editors of *Men and Masculinities* and, then, *NORMA: The International Journal for Masculinity Studies*. Many thanks, Raewyn!

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