

Is It Safe In The Locker Room?

By Jim Denison

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Is men's search for a masculine identity in sport linked to male aggression? Jim Denison meets an expert in the field

The leather jacket, shaved head, muscular frame and earring defy one stereotype. The published short stories examining a variety of men's sporting experiences defy another. Andrew Sparkes, ex-rugby player, now weight-training family man, is not your typical academic.

Sparkes's appearance, teaching style and research are provocative, dynamic and cutting-edge. Eschewing standard academic jargon, he writes highly accessible "research stories" about men and how they relate to themselves, their bodies and their health. This internationally recognised sport sociologist and ethnographer has published his compassionate, evocative narratives in journals and books around the world as part of the larger scholarly renaissance of men's studies and he recently co-edited *Talking Bodies*, a collection of autobiographical accounts by ex-athletes.

Men's studies is a broad field, and analysing the male situation has taken academe by storm. However, this is not the men's studies of Robert Bly and "Iron John", which was largely a knee-jerk reaction to feminism, but a more socially conscious examination of men's lives. New titles in the area include, *Crisis in Masculinity* by Leanne Payne, and *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex*, by Warren Farrell. The trouble with being a man today, the general argument goes, is that men have been emasculated by the loss of their traditional roles, they have fewer career options and, due to their emotional illiteracy, they have been traumatised by these changes. Scholars have also turned their attention to the relationship between masculinity and sport, as sport touches or has touched most men's lives.

This includes the way fathers react to their son's weekend victories and defeats and how physical education teachers construct lessons. Other issues under the microscope are the effects of Britain's sporting culture on men's attitudes towards violence, physical performance, pain and growing old and how sport shapes how men understand their relationships and how they live and act healthily.

Along with a growing number of sports scholars who study men's issues across Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, Sparkes, professor of social theory at Exeter University, is concerned with the increase in male antisocial behaviours including domestic violence, illicit drug use and gambling, and its links with competitive sports participation, particularly in relation to sports that involve a high degree of violence, such as rugby and ice hockey.

"For generations, sport was considered an innocent activity," he says. "It was what many men did in their spare time to relax. And it was seen as a normal and healthy rite of passage for boys to learn how to be men. With such powerful assumptions around sport, no one thought to examine it critically. But despite what Nike says, you don't just do sport, especially as a boy. Sport is the number one socialising agent for boys, so what goes on inside sport seems to me to be pretty important to investigate."

According to recent government statistics, more British men are dying every year from such killers as heart disease, hypertension and cancer. British men can expect to spend an average of 15 years of their lives chronically ill, partly because they are living longer. And the suicide rate among 15 to 24-year-old males has doubled in Britain in the past 25 years. Furthermore, it is men, not women, who crowd the country's jails and courts. These social problems, while varied and complex, have been associated by some researchers with the overwhelming influence sport participation has on men's attitudes and behaviours.

Research conducted in America has revealed that, for many athletes, sport is a source of constant pain, and for some, sport may even play a part in reducing their life span. University of Southern California sociologist Michael Messner's research shows that former professional American football players have an average life expectancy of about 56 years, roughly 15 years less than the average US life expectancy for males. Could sport, then, be slowly killing men?

Perhaps not directly, but strong evidence exists to show that by playing sport men learn to accept pain as normal. They remain silent when injured for fear of letting down the coach, their team-mates or for fear of appearing weak and soft. This attitude carries into adulthood long after the final whistle has blown, according to Messner. "Men believe they must be tough and behave as if they were indestructible and sport encourages this. Not only does this discourage them from looking after their health, it encourages many risk-taking behaviours such as smoking, drinking, driving too fast and not asking for help."

Leading masculinity researchers Toby Miller, from New York University, and Jim McKay, from the University of Queensland, Australia, further contend that when violence and pain become legitimised in sport, they can spill over disastrously into other social contexts, including, most dangerously, the home, where women and children may be at risk. And it is not just playing sports that may spark violence. Audience studies done in New Zealand suggest that even viewing contact sports on television can raise aggression levels in men.

Historically, though, sport has been associated with positive aspects of male "character building". According to 19th-century ideals of athletic masculinity, participation in sport could promote courage, chivalry, moral strength and military patriotism. Through sport, men could be taught a particular model of maleness and values such as being competitive, successful,

strong and hard-working could be promoted.

Robert Connell, a professor in the school of policy and practice at the University of Sydney and author of the influential book, *Masculinities*, believes that what men learn in sport can provide them with a special type of power: the ability to occupy space in a way that leads them to believe they can dominate others through the sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence.

Jennifer Hargreaves, a sport sociology professor at Brunel University, agrees: "Male ideals of sport have contributed to the formation and reproduction of traditional dualistic definitions of male and female physicality, trapping 'weak' women in their domestic 'natural' bodies while presenting 'strong' men as public, rational, cultural beings."

Research conducted in Norway suggests that boys are increasingly turning to sport in an effort to reify traditional male values, the same ones that so many scholars have suggested are behind many men's problems in the first place. In a study of male athletes, Fiona Dowling Naess, from the Norwegian University of Sport, found that many young men today perceive sport as a way of coping with a changing gender order.

"Sport for them is a comfortable haven from the daily onslaught of having to 'do' gender," she says. "Sport enables them to bond together and form a common front against the encroachment of feminist ideals and the fear and uncertainty posed by new social patterns."

So, will the same health and social problems facing men continue, or are there any cracks in the masculine sport facade? Sparkes believes that there is a degree of change afoot, and in some ways his innovative research approach seems to be making a difference.

"By studying chronic pain and injury, or violence in sport, and turning this 'data' into captivating stories, it is possible to connect with

a number of men who might not otherwise wish to examine themselves, their sporting backgrounds, their health and their body histories. Men need to be equipped with the narrative resources to enable them to re-story their lives, and reading stories about losing the big game, or crying when injured can make it easier for them to resist the 'macho' demeanour so prevalent in sport," he says.

"Even if this only leads to a few men opening up about how sport makes them feel, then I think we are on track towards making sports participation in all its forms something we can be proud of."
