No Pain Is Sane After All: A Foucauldian Analysis of Masculinities and Men’s Rugby Experiences of Fear, Pain, and Pleasure

Richard Pringle
University of Waikato

Pirkko Markula
University of Bath

In this article we present research that used Foucauldian theorizing to examine the articulations between masculinities and men’s rugby union experiences of pain, fear, and pleasure. Data was collected via semistructured interviews with 14 New Zealand men of diverse rugby backgrounds. Results suggested that although rugby provided an influential discursive space for the negotiation of masculinities, these negotiations did not result in the simple (re)production of dominating discourses of masculinity. This finding supports the judgment that sport does not consistently or unambiguously produce culturally dominant conceptions of masculinities. The interview accounts revealed, nevertheless, that the games of truth surrounding rugby and masculinities were not played in an equitable manner. This finding helps justify concern about the social significance of popular heavy-contact sports and gendering processes. A strategy of resistance based on the resurrection of marginalized knowledges is discussed.

Rugby union in New Zealand, infused with masculinist and nationalist discourses, provides an exemplary site for examining the complex ways in which men negotiate understandings of masculinities and self. Although rugby is widely recognized as a rough sport played predominantly by males, it is characteristically regarded as New Zealand’s national sport and even as a way of life or secular religion (Laidlaw, 1999; Richards, 1999). Rugby’s privileged sociocultural position results in it dominating the sportsmedia (McGregor, 1994), gaining high profiles in schools, producing high injury costs, and shaping understandings and relations of gender (Pringle, 2002; Star, 1999b; Thompson, 1988). Regardless of whether New Zealanders celebrate, resist, or are ambiguous about rugby’s influential position,
the sport is an omnipresent reality in their lives. Despite rugby’s social significance and concerns regarding its positioning as a key signifier of masculinity, there has been little empirical examination in New Zealand of how rugby influences men’s understandings of what it means to be manly. There is also a paucity of international research concerned with how males who are not elite-level athletes—the overwhelming majority of males—encounter and make sense of heavy-contact sports with respect to understanding masculinities. In this article, as an attempt to address these research omissions, we examine the multiple subjective rugby experiences of a diverse group of men.

Our article begins by highlighting the prime findings and polemics surrounding sport and masculinity literature, as well as a focused concern on the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This leads into a discussion that introduces and details Foucauldian theorizing and how it was used in this study. We drew on Foucault in recognition that sport feminists have effectively employed his analytical tools but, they have “been largely neglected by . . . scholars interested in examining the relationship between sport and the male/masculine form” (Andrews, 2000, p. 125). We then engage in a discussion of our findings and conclude by presenting a Foucauldian inspired strategy for understanding sport and masculinities.

Polemics Surrounding Sport and Masculinities

The enduring links between sport and masculinities, although publicly celebrated by many, has long been of concern for a number of critical sport scholars (e.g., Dunning & Sheard, 1979; Sabo & Runfola, 1980; Sheard & Dunning, 1973; Thomson, 1977). It was not until the early 1990s, however, aided by the promotion of feminist theorizing (e.g., Bryson, 1987; Hall, 1982; Hargreaves, 1982; Theberge, 1981; Willis, 1982), appropriation of neo-Marxist understandings of power/hegemony (e.g., Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985), and the influential work of Messner and Sabo (e.g., 1990, 1994), that concern about the relationships between masculinities and sport became prominent in sociological studies of sport. This research has been typically underpinned by the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and gender order, as popularized by Connell (1987, 1995).

Connell argued that hegemonic masculinity, as a state or condition of ideology, helps frame understandings of how particular ways of performing maleness seem natural and normal, yet at the same time act to sustain problematic relations of dominance within an assumed structure or order of gender. Connell (2002) described the hegemonic form of masculinity, as the “most honoured or desired in a particular context” (p. 28) and, more specifically, as “the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Connell, as inspired by Gramsci’s (1971) understandings of power, connected the constitution and promotion of hegemonic masculinity with the actions of ruling classes or groups, economic activities, and a hierarchical structure of power:

We might propose . . . that the hegemonic form of masculinity in the current world gender order is the masculinity associated with those who control its dominant institutions: the business executives who operate in global markets, and the
political executives who interact (and in many contexts merge) with them. I will call this “transnational business masculinity.” (Connell, 2002, p. 39)

Connell did not provide a definitive list of the traits or behaviors representative of hegemonic masculinity but stated that contemporary forms of hegemonic masculinity link exalted notions of manliness with toughness and competitiveness, and current exemplars are male participants in the popular winter football codes, such as “those who run out into the mud and the tackles themselves” (Connell, 1995, p. 79). Connell (2002), more specifically, linked this hegemonic form of masculinity with the ostensibly divergent form of “transnational business masculinity” by arguing:

Transnational business masculinity does not require a powerful physique, since the patriarchal dividend on which it rests is accumulated by impersonal, institutional means. But corporations increasingly use images of the exemplary bodies of elite sportsmen as a marketing tool (as seen in the exceptional growth of corporate “sponsorship” of sport in the last generation), and indirectly as a means of legitimation for the whole global gender order. (pp. 39–40)

Connell’s concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the gender order as heuristic devices for understanding relationships between sport and masculinities have been widely acknowledged as useful. Indeed, the critical analyses concerning sport and hegemonic masculinities were quickly and widely accepted within the sociology of sport: “some might even say, canonized” (McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000, p. 3). Many critical commentators have subsequently argued that sport, particularly the popular winter football codes, problematically link violence, tolerance of pain, competition, and physical skill with masculinities (e.g., Hickey, Fitzclarence, & Matthews, 1998; Lynch, 1993; Miller, 1998; Nauright & Chandler, 1996; Rowe & McKay, 1998; Trujillo, 1995; Young, 1993; Young & White, 2000). Sport has, accordingly, been represented as a prime social institution that promotes the construction of a dominant form of masculinity and male privilege in society (e.g., Bryson, 1990; Messner, 1992; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994), the relative poor health of males (e.g., Sabo, 1998; Sabo & Gordon, 1995), the marginalization and denigration of other masculinities (Connell, 1987; Whitson, 1990; Young et al., 1994), and acts of violence, particularly against women (Cobb, 1993; Curry, 1998; Loy, 1995; Sabo, Gray, & Moore, 2000). The conclusions drawn by Schacht (1996), from his ethnographic examination of rugby in North America, highlight the prime concerns raised within the sport and masculinity literature:

Rugby players situationally do masculinity by reproducing rigid hierarchical images of what a “real man” is in terms of who is strongest, who can withstand the most pain, and who relationally distances himself from all aspects of femininity through forms of misogynistic denigration. . . . Rugby, like other sporting events, is literally a practice field where the actors learn how to use force to ensure a dominant position relative to women, feminine men, and the planet itself. (p. 562)

A number of researchers, however, have raised pertinent questions about the analyses of sport and masculinities. Commentators, for example, have questioned the salience of focusing reductively on masculinities for examining understandings
of pain or processes of male identity formation in sporting contexts (e.g., Albert, 1999; Curry, 1993; de Garis, 2000; Hunt, 1995; Pringle, 2003; Young & White, 1995). Questions have also been raised about whether the critical analyses have unduly focused on negative aspects and correspondingly trivialized the positives (e.g., de Garis, 2000; McKay et al., 2000). McKay et al., for instance, asked: “Have sport studies scholars overstated the extent to which sport is a conservative institution that largely reproduces existing inequalities, while ignoring or downplaying the range and diversity of existing sport activities?” (pp. 6–7). In addition, some researchers have questioned whether the well-established concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the gender order provide an effective theoretical framework for examining the complexities and contradictions associated with power (e.g., de Garis; Donaldson, 1993; Martin, 1998; Miller, 1998; Speer, 2001; Star, 1999a; Tomlinson, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Tomlinson argued, for example, that hegemony theorists have tended to focus on power as a form of domination that operates in a top-down manner that subsequently encourages representations of sport as part of an “all-pervasive power structure” (p. 237). Star (1999b) more pointedly argued that Connell’s “tentatively poststructuralist multiple masculinities” (p. 41) framework is hampered by the “rather moribund power-over/down hegemony model” (p. 40). Star (1999b), in turn, suggested that “Foucault’s radical retheorizing of power” (p. 40) has helped revitalize feminist research. Indeed, a growing number of feminists, despite Foucault’s relentless use of masculine pronouns, have employed his ideas on discourse and power to investigate issues associated with female sport and exercise contexts (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Chapman, 1997; Cole, 1994; Duncan, 1994; Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Markula, 1995, 2003; Theberge, 1991).

Given the existing concerns surrounding the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the apparent fruitfulness that Foucauldian theorizing offers “for challenging the blithe, uncritical celebration of sport’s status as a natural male domain” (Andrews, 2000, p. 125), we drew on Foucault to help understand the influence of rugby in shaping men’s understandings of masculinities and self.

Foucault, Discursive Power, and Sporting Masculinities

Foucault (1988b) summarized that his prime research objective throughout twenty-five years of research had “been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves” (pp. 17–18). In this research project, as underpinned by a similar objective, we were interested to help understand how males develop knowledge about themselves and masculinities through rugby. Foucault argued that such knowledge of humans was constituted within relations of power. This notion of the conjunction between power and knowledge has helped position Foucault as a social theorist of import (Maguire, 2002).

Foucault (1978) rejected that power was primarily repressive in its exercise and argued against a neo-Marxist model of power that represented power as stemming primarily from the actions of an elite class and as acting in a top-down manner (e.g., Connell’s theoretical framework). Yet Foucault did not reject the importance of
the State but warned that analyses of power “must not assume that the sovereignty
of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at
the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes” (p. 92). In this
manner, he asserted that influential individuals, such as professional athletes or
transnational business people, do not arrive at their position because they possess
power, but they become influential as a result of the workings of discourse or the
manner in which power is exercised. Foucault (1977) further argued that power was
productive and omnipresent because it was produced through all actions and rela-
tions between people in a capillary-like fashion in the “depths of society” (p. 27).
Rugby in New Zealand, for example, is typically known as the country’s national
sport, yet the power source of this nationalistic discourse is somewhat unidentifi-
able; it is everywhere and nowhere in particular, circulating in a dispersed fashion
through multiple networks of social relations in a manner that simultaneously helps
produce rugby’s social dominance.

In asserting that power is always present within human relations, Foucault
(1977) located the body as the site for the workings of power. The body, he claimed,
was “directly involved in a political filed” (p. 25) because power was invested in,
as well as transmitted by and through, the body. His focus on the body rather
than the individual is significant in that it reflects his anti-essentialist philosophy.
The individual or subject, according to Foucault (1980), was the effect of the
workings of power and not of some inner essence. He argued that it was through
the productive abilities of power “that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain dis-
courses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (p.
98). Foucault’s focus on the politics of the body has been influential within sport
research by stimulating the following: theoretical debate within the field (e.g.,
Andrews, 1993; Cole, 1994; Gruneau, 1993; Harvey & Sparkes, 1991; Maguire,
2002); a turn to poststructuralism within feminist analyses (e.g., Cole; Markula,
1995; Theberge, 1991); a greater recognition of the importance of the body and
embodied representations (e.g., Loy, 1991; Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993; Rail
& Harvey, 1995); and analyses of the production of particular sporting bodies (e.g.,
Chapman, 1997; Duncan, 1994; Hargreaves, 1986; Heikkala, 1993; Kirk, 1996;

Foucault’s (1978) schema of how power is exercised was linked to his under-
standings of the complex workings of discourse. He argued, “It is in discourse
that power and knowledge are joined together” (p. 100), and, more specifically, that
“Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines
and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). Fou-
cault (1972) considered that discourses were more than linguistic phenomena and
maintained that they should be treated as “practices that systematically form the
objects of which they speak” (p. 49). Discourse, accordingly, can be regarded as
constraining or structuring the “order of things,” or perceptions of reality includ-
ing knowledge of self and others. The Foucauldian notion that the self is produced
via the constructed and contingent workings of multiple and, at times, competing
discourses acts to reject liberal humanist assumptions that position the self as stable,
whole, and unified. In order to replace the humanist subject, Foucauldian ideas
have been built upon to suggest that the self is “necessarily unstable, disunited
and fragmented . . . [and is] produced in specific historical and institutional sites
within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Andrews, 2000, p. 115).

Given the conjunction of discourse and power, Foucault (1978) stressed the importance of analyzing the complex interplay of discourses to help understand the complexities of social life. He emphasized, more specifically, that social commentators should be concerned with how discourses are used, because he was concerned that discursive resources could be employed to sustain regimes of truth that act to marginalize other ways of knowing and help sustain or produce problematic relations of power. Foucault stated that discourses should be analyzed in relation to their *tactical productivity*; that is, researchers should question "what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure" (p. 102). Consequently, our prime research question within this current study asked: How do men’s rugby experiences of fear, pain, and/or pleasure articulate with discourses of masculinities? By asking this question we aimed to gain greater understanding of the mutual effects of power and knowledge on rugby and masculinities.

Our interest in examining men’s emotional experiences of pleasure and fear stemmed from the recognition that these topics have been rarely examined yet are meaningful and significant aspects of participation in sports of risk. Heavy-contact sports, for example, are recognized to be as “much about dealing with fear and anxiety in oneself as it is about dominating an opponent” (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001, p. 129). It has also been postulated that a male athlete’s performance of masculinity is vulnerable if he cannot sustain a display of fearlessness in times of corporeal risk (Sabo, 1986; Young et al., 1994). We assumed, therefore, that an analysis of men’s experiences of fear in rugby could help aid understandings of the links between sport and masculinities. We also believed it would be advantageous to examine men’s embodied experiences of rugby pleasure. Gard and Meyenn (2000), for example, argued that if critical researchers want to help change the social influence associated with heavy-contact sports, there is a need to examine the discourses of sporting pleasure. Indeed, many are attracted to heavy-contact sport participation, despite the risks of injury and pain and the “numerous social and cultural shortcomings” of such sports (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001, p. 133).

We regarded “discourses of masculinities” as relatively cohesive systems of thought that identify particular bodies as males and particular human performances as masculine and, in due process, help constitute multiple and fragmented masculine subjectivities. Although there are multiple discourses of masculinities, we were cognizant that the power effects of these discourses act, in part, to “characterize men and women as fundamentally different” (Mills, 2003, p. 65). Discourses of masculinities can, therefore, be regarded as prime “dividing practices” between humans. Foucault (1977) asserted that dividing practices were constructed via the use of particular discourses to justify social and, at times, spatial divisions between various categories of humans, such as males/females, mad/sane, and gay/straight. He was particularly interested in examining how these discourses were created, legitimated, protected, negotiated, and, at times, resisted. Moreover, Foucault considered dividing practices as a particular disciplinary technique that “made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body” (p. 137). Therefore, in paraphrasing the ideas of Foucault, human bodies can be regarded as invested, marked, pleased, and tortured by discourses of gender in a manner that helps
constitute a body’s postures, thoughts, performances, and subjectivities as typically male or female. Discourses of masculinities can, more specifically, be deemed as helping to produce very real sets of lived differences and inequitable sets of power relations within and between the sexes while at the same time subjecting male bodies to a particular “political anatomy of detail” (p. 139).

It has long been noted that the sporting world is complicit with the division between males and females, the production of idealized images of masculinity (e.g., Connell, 1987; Sheard & Dunning, 1973), and with the disciplining and subsequent production of docile bodies (e.g., Hargreaves, 1986; Heikkala, 1993; Johns & Johns, 2000; Kirk, 1996). Elite sport, for example, has been represented as a disciplinary practice that employs techniques of power—such as hierarchical observation, ranking, partitioning, normalizing judgment, and the establishment of routines and rigid time schedules—in the production of compliant athletic bodies (see Shogan, 1999). The sporting world, therefore, appears particularly well suited for the application of Foucauldian theorizing for helping to understand the political production of male bodies. The sporting research that has employed Foucauldian theorizing, however, has typically focused on the constitution of female bodies (Andrews, 2000). These studies have tended to focus on how females’ bodies are normalized, disciplined, surveyed, classified, divided, and rendered somewhat docile within sporting contexts (e.g., Chapman, 1997; Cole, 1993; Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995).

Such a focus has drawn heavily from Foucault’s (1988b) interest in “technologies of power” (p. 18), which he defined as specific forms of power that act to “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (p. 18). Some commentators, however, have been concerned that such a focus portrays an unnecessarily pessimistic image of sport-and-exercise contexts. Gruneau (1993), for example, stated that such a focus “can too easily deflect attention from analyzing the creative possibilities, freedoms, ambiguities, and contradictions also found in sport” (p. 104). In his later works, Foucault (1988b) stated that he had “perhaps . . . insisted too much on the technology of domination and power” (p. 19) at the expense of understanding how individuals can actively influence power relations and systems of knowledge. He subsequently explored how humans employ specific practices to help transform their understandings of self; he referred to these processes of self-formation as “technologies of the self” (p. 19). Through focusing on technologies of self, Foucault (1988c) stated that he aimed to illustrate that people “are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have built up at a certain moment during history, and this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed” (p. 10). Foucault (1988a) further accepted that humans are not simplistically constrained by technologies of domination but can be active in crafting different ways of knowing, performing, and, at times, challenging specific “cases of domination—economic, social, institutional or sexual” (p. 12). He was particularly interested in exploring technologies of self that could be used by individuals to help them care for themselves in a critically aware manner, so that these processes of subjectification could simultaneously help transform problematic relations of power:

The problem is not trying to dissolve them (i.e., relations of power) in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one’s self the
rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, *the ethos*, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 18)

Foucault’s interest with technologies of self has informed recent research concerned with sport, power, and possibilities for social transformation (e.g., Chapman, 1997; Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 2001; Johns & Johns, 2000; Markula, 2003). This research has helped illustrate that athletes are not simply disciplinary dupes but are able, within particular sets of circumstances, to critically reflect on their own involvement in sport and in a manner that can possibly produce resilient and challenging, rather than just docile, sporting bodies. This research, moreover, acknowledges that technologies of domination and of the self are unlikely to “function separately” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 18). With similar recognition, we did not undertake this current study to selectively examine rugby as a technology of dominance. In contrast, we wanted to examine the discursive articulations between rugby and masculinities with the desire to understand how men actively negotiate understandings of rugby, masculinities, and self.

**The Research Approach**

Data was collected in relation to our focal research question through in-depth interviews with a purposefully selected group of adult men (Patton, 1990). Our process of selecting appropriate interview participants was designed in response to the recognition that previous masculinities research, concerned with sport and pain, had overwhelmingly examined the experiences of elite-level athletes (e.g., see Curry, 1993; Malcolm & Sheard, 2002; Messner, 1992; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Sparkes & Smith, 1999). Little was known, therefore, about how so-called normal men negotiate understandings of masculinities in the face of the cultural dominance of heavy-contact sport. We recognized that such knowledge would be important for helping understand gendering processes associated with sport. Hickey and Fitzclarence (1999), for example, contend:

We want to argue that while the sporting spotlight is overwhelmingly filled with the glorification of celebrated maleness, those illuminated represent an infinitesimal sample of the numbers that loiter in its shadow. . . . Somewhere between the mythology of “sporting” maleness and postmodern regard for difference and ambivalence, young males must negotiate deeply contradictory directives as to the make up of acceptable masculinity. (p. 54)

Heeding Hickey and Fitzclarence’s (1999) claim, we invited 14 men with a diverse range of rugby-participation experiences to be interview participants; all accepted this invitation. Although we attempted to interview men of varying social and ethnic backgrounds, all indicated that they were heterosexual. The ages of these men, given pseudonyms here to protect their identities, ranged from 21 to 50 years, and their rugby histories were suitably varied: six had ephemeral experiences of participation during boyhood years, three participated into their teens, and another five into their twenties. Of the five adult players, one had played professionally whereas the other four considered themselves to be average-ability club players.
It is important to note that in New Zealand rugby participation was effectively compulsory for all young males up until the 1970s (Star, 1999a) and many men of varying performance abilities still play rugby into their early adult years.

By interviewing this range of men we wished to understand the uniqueness of how each man made sense of his rugby experiences, while also examining the broader discursive influence of rugby that cut across their narratives. We therefore aimed to help connect the unique stories of a range of men with wider sociopolitical issues associated with sport and gender.

The interviews were conducted between September 2001 and April 2002, varied in length between 2 and 5 hours, and were recorded via audiotape and transcribed verbatim. We did not remain neutral or passive during the interviews but aimed to construct an environment in which the interview participant’s interpretive capabilities were “activated, stimulated, and cultivated” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 17). This interview technique allowed the participants to reveal the complexities of their lived experiences, subjective understandings about masculinities and rugby, and the discursive resources used in constructing these understandings. Accordingly, the in-depth interviews were effective for disclosure of the workings of discourse and power in relation to the men’s lived experiences of rugby. The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide that consisted of three key, but overlapping, topic areas: personal sporting histories; rugby experiences of fear, pain, and pleasure; and understandings of masculinities, gender relations, and rugby.

The “free interplay” (Kvale, 1996, p. 203) of analytical techniques used to inform our interpretations of the audiotaped recordings was guided, in part, by Foucault’s (1978) strategies for undertaking discourse analysis. He warned that one could not identify discourses purely on the basis of their strategic outcomes, but he suggested:

It is this distribution [of discourses] that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises; with the variants and different effects—according to who is speaking, his [sic] position of power, the institutional context in which he happens to be situated—that it implies; and with the shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes. (pp. 100–101)

Taking Foucault’s advice into account, we analyzed what the interview participants reported and also attempted to understand what was not being said, as well as what discourses underpinned these utterances and silences. We also paid careful attention to the multiple and changeable subject positions of the speakers and how the interview participants tactically used discursive resources to position themselves and others.

### Pleasure and Terror: Reflections on Boyhood Rugby

Rugby provided a prominent discursive context within which the interview participants, as elementary school children (ages 5–11 years), gained formative understandings of masculinities, gender differences, and self. All of the interviewees reported that they were expected or required to participate in rugby, and most did:
13 of the 14 men participated in organized rugby competitions before their 11th birthday. For many of these men, rugby was a compulsory aspect of their youthful education:

Rugby was part of the curriculum—the boys would play rugby as part of their schoolwork and the girls would play netball. That was how it was: you milked cows, you went to school, you played rugby, you went home. . . . All the boys did rugby. (Lionel)

The interview participants suggested that they played not only because it was required but also because “it was the thing to do” (George), “it was fun” (Willy), or to simply “fit in” (Sebastian) and be “normal” (Colin). Edgar was the only interviewee who did not play competitive rugby while at elementary school. He explained his lack of participation in a somewhat defensive manner:

I was always the smallest kid in class: all the way through. And there wasn’t a strong rugby influence in my family. My father was much older; he must have been approaching 50, so he never took me to rugby games or enrolled me at the local rugby club. . . . But the prime reason why I didn’t play was because . . . I was sick a lot with asthma.

Edgar, however, clearly understood that “rugby was a prime way of being socially accepted” and poignantly remarked, “Obviously, I would have liked to have been good at rugby.” Such is the impact of being subject to a masculinity discourse that implies—if you are a boy and you do not play rugby—that you are different and less valued. Rugby participation, in this respect, was a prime normalizing practice for males; it helped mark boys’ bodies as appropriately masculine.

The pervasive influence of rugby was legitimated by three dominating discourses that intersected to position rugby as New Zealand’s national sport, a sport for males, and an exciting but rough sport. These discourses of rugby were invested in everyday practices and circulated with particular prominence within male peer groups in school environments. In fact, we were somewhat struck when conducting and analyzing the interviews by how complicit the schools were in the production of normalized masculinities. The discourse that constituted rugby as the national sport—despite the knowledge that the sport was played, until relatively recently, almost exclusively by males—was spoken into existence as a “truth” by the interviewees. Sebastian, for example, stated that “rugby was a representative symbol of New Zealand,” and others, such as Derek, directly informed us: “I just recognize that rugby is New Zealand’s national game.”

In a similar matter of fact manner, many of the interview participants reported that rugby was a male sport. George, in typical fashion, stated, “I believe it’s a man’s game personally,” but then added, “Actually it’s a young man’s game, but if you want to play it when you are older then that is cool.” George was therefore liberal minded enough to remove the ageism from his statement, but he neglected to recognize the inherent sexism. The discourse producing the “truth” that rugby was a sport specifically for males simultaneously prevented recognition of female involvement in rugby. This example helps illustrate how discourses not only produce the objects of which they speak, but also constrain what can be thought, expressed, and acted upon (Foucault, 1972).
The third prime discourse of rugby positioned the sport as an exciting but rough sport, and this was evidenced in the energized manner of interviewees when they talked of their rugby experiences, as well as in how they typically referred to rugby, somewhat euphemistically, as a “hard-contact sport” (Colin), “good–vigorous sport” (Neville), or as a “bruising game” (Seamus). Underpinning the three dominating discourses of rugby was the knowledge of rugby as a “sport” or “game.” The power effect of this particular knowledge encouraged the majority of the interviewees to view rugby somewhat quixotically.

The knowledge of rugby as a male sport was reciprocally supported by particular discourses of masculinities. The men’s interview accounts revealed, for example, that the cultural significance of rugby helped promote belief, within the context of their youth, that males should be tough, relatively unemotional, tolerant of pain, competitive, and, at times, aggressive. Moreover, it was apparent from the interview accounts that these discourses of masculinity were lived into existence and performed with animated vigor primarily on school rugby fields. It was typically only boys, accordingly, who regularly displayed feats of bravery, skill, and aggressive competitiveness, and these actions congealed over time to help constitute the interviewee’s youthful understandings that males were naturally different from females. Edgar, for example, stated:

The boys generally played contact sports at lunchtimes, such as rugby . . . whereas the girls . . . did hopscotch or skipping or just sat around talking. So there was a clear difference in roles and they tended not to play together . . . there were clear differences between males and females because they were different.

Yet it would be problematic to suggest that the interview participants only had to negotiate discourses of masculinity within the contexts of their youth. Indeed, they would have also been subject to the same discourses of humanity that females were. The discourses of masculinity, accordingly, can be regarded as primarily helping constitute gender differences.

The interview participants’ understandings of rugby and masculinities were also produced in relation to an array of contingency factors, such as their body shapes, physical abilities, and family backgrounds. The disciplinary practices of youthful rugby, therefore, helped produce a plethora of individual bodies and understandings. For example, Seamus, as an 11-year-old emigrant from England, was acutely aware of how playing rugby helped him feel accepted:

Coming to New Zealand from England I was a “pommie bastard,” that was what I was called. And so it was a little bit difficult for me to come to terms with it. So being in any team, playing any sport gave me the opportunity to actually fit in and I actually quite enjoyed it. It gave me a chance to conform to a New Zealand standard by participating in a game that Kiwis (New Zealanders) did, and it just happened to be the sport of rugby.

Participation in rugby, therefore, helped mark Seamus’ body as normal. In contrast, Lionel was cognizant of how rugby constituted his body as “weak and weedy”:

I was the weakest link in the team. I was always the tallest in the class, but . . . I was very thin and I couldn’t run fast. I don’t know if I was more
afraid of getting hurt or doing the wrong thing. I couldn’t really tackle to stop somebody . . . it was embarrassing at times.

The interview participants, therefore, made sense of their early rugby experiences in a multitude of different ways—the dominating discourses of rugby did not bend all males into a coherent masculinity type. This finding supported Foucault’s (1977) assertion that a disciplinary practice does not shape “all its subjects into a single uniform mass, it separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures to the point of necessary and sufficient units” (p. 170).

Despite the production of individual “males,” all of the interview participants had to contend with the knowledge that, as males, they were expected to play the potentially damaging sport of rugby and remain overtly fearless throughout. The complex articulations between participating in heavy-contact sports, taking pain, and dominant forms of masculinities have been clearly acknowledged (e.g., Messner, 1992; Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2001; Young et al., 1994). The ability to not give into pain, for example, is typically regarded as “appropriate male behavior” (Young et al., p. 182). Young and colleagues further suggested that although male athletes might not enjoy pain and injury, they continue to participate in an uncritical manner because “injury becomes more constituting than threatening” (p. 188). In this respect they theorized that male athletes, in their desire to reap the benefits associated with performing the traits of hegemonic masculinity, come to accept sporting pain and injury as normal.

Within this study, the discursive articulations among masculinities, rugby, and toughness were also influential in shaping the men’s early rugby experiences. Yet the men tended to respond in divergent modes to these significant articulations. The 7 interview participants who prided themselves on their rugby-playing abilities, for example, reported that they gained considerable pleasure in participating in the ruggedness of rugby with its risks and realities of injury and pain. “Primary school rugby was exciting,” Willy informed us, “and I think that the physical contact side made it more exciting, you know: the tackling, the fending—trying to rip the ball off of someone.” He further suggested, “We felt good about playing rugby at lunchtime . . . because we took the hits, scratches, grazes, and stuff.” The knowledge that these interviewees played a corporeally dangerous sport and could “absorb the pain” was primarily meaningful as a link with their youthful understandings of what it meant to be manly. In this manner, these men’s accounts helped support the theoretical position that pain and injury are, in part, masculinizing (e.g., Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Schacht, 1996; Young et al., 1994).

In contrast, the 7 interview participants who were typically not confident playing rugby reported that participation caused considerable tension. This tension stemmed from their knowledge of rugby as a potentially injurious sport, their associated fears of pain, and their conflicting desires to appear normal through playing rugby. Lionel, for example, reported, “I knew that as soon as I got on the field there was going to be some occasional moments of terror, but I also knew that it was just the way things were.” Lionel, more specifically, defined rugby as a sport of pain: “I simply didn’t like rugby because it hurt . . . . In fact everything about rugby hurt.” Lionel’s fear of rugby and pain was not unusual; Sebastian, for example, bluntly stated, “I was . . . very fearful of fights and rugby terrified me. Here was a game full of physical contact, fights, and a game that is purely nothing but someone running into you and knocking you over.”
The interview participants who were fearful of rugby reported they did not share this knowledge with anybody, not even their closest friends or family; the topic was taboo. This silencing process would have helped rugby maintain its cultural dominance because silence, as Foucault (1978) asserted, is “a shelter for power” (p. 101). The experiences of rugby trepidation, however, encouraged these interviewees all to quit playing before their teenage years. They quit in part because their fear of rugby helped create a sense of self that was not comforting. Colin, for instance, reported, “Playing rugby sort of destroyed me . . . it made me feel like I wasn’t quite good enough; I felt soft. Looking back now I can remember it well; it’s quite clear, it made me feel soft.” Rugby participation for these interviewees, more specifically, produced a sense of self that caused tension with respect to how they knew their masculine selves. For example, they typically used adjectives that were antithetical to dominant understandings of masculinities when describing their rugby-playing selves such as: timid, sensitive, soft, weak, nonaggressive, scared, inadequate, bewildered, and uncompetitive. This is not to suggest that the interview participants’ stories of self became scripted by their rugby experiences—they knew of themselves in multiple ways. Nevertheless, these gender tensions helped fuel, in combination with the realities of embodied pain and their concerns about their abilities to perform on panoptic rugby fields, their decisions to quit and avoid future rugby participation. Pain and injury were not masculinizing experiences for these men.

The Teenage Years and the Tentative Performance of Alternative Masculinities

In the transition from boyhood, when few injuries occurred in rugby and all males were encouraged to participate, to the teenage years, when participation was no longer mandatory and it was played with greater physicality, rugby was discursively transformed from a “sport for all males” to a “man’s sport.” Rugby was subsequently played by a more select group of males; typically those that were more skilled, confident, faster, stronger, and bigger. In the process, the rugby players, particularly in the school’s premier team, the First XV, became positioned as “men.” Associated with this prized masculine subject position, the First XV players gained significant status. Moreover, this status was augmented by various school practices, including the provision of a distinctive and respected school uniform: the exemplary uniform of businessmen.

The First XV had a different uniform—different to all the other students—we had ties and a blazer and special long pants. You’d get dressed up and walk about the school and people would notice you. It was a sort of special thing, and you felt good about being in the team. It gave you status. (Tom)

The secondary school’s promotion and organization of rugby contributed to the constitution of rugby as a “technology of domination.” Rugby, for example, was no longer just a “dividing practice” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208) between males and females, it also acted to divide and objectify males, subsequently producing particular relations of power that helped “determine the conduct of individuals”
Pringle and Markula
Masculinities and Men’s Rugby Experiences

(Foucault, 1988b, p. 18). Our participants’ accounts revealed, however, that these power relations were not neatly or simply divided between rugby players and nonplayers but were dense and entangled: power was “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978a, p. 94). Those who chose not to play rugby, for example, were not all positioned in one particular social group or as one type of masculinity. Similarly, not all of the rugby players gained equal social advantage through participating in rugby and they were also subject to dominating discourses of masculinity. Darryl, as a First XV school player, for example, reported that he enjoyed playing the piano, writing poetry, and the academic side of secondary school life, but he kept these pleasures secret. He was concerned that his esteemed subject position as a “rugby man” could be threatened if his peers, particularly his rugby friends, knew that he enjoyed activities typically but problematically perceived as feminine.

The dividing practices associated with rugby, nevertheless, helped constitute some notable trends. The teenage males who did not play rugby were, for example, characteristically envious of the attention and status granted to the rugby players. Edgar told me, “The rugby boys were a very high status group, and I wouldn’t have minded being in that social group.” The “rugby nonplayers” were also aware that they did not necessarily have the same ability to use specific discursive resources to help construct respectful teenage masculine subjectivities. They found it more difficult, for example, to construct a sense of self around the well-worn masculine traits of competitiveness, strength, and toughness. In addition, these men reported that, at times, they were positioned adversely through their participation in alternative leisure activities, especially given that some of these activities were objectified, in their teenage years, as feminine and/or homosexual.

Derek, for example, was aware that as a soccer and chess player, he was typically regarded as “less of a man”; in fact, he knew that these activities were regarded as “poof’s games.” Consequently, these men’s teenage stories of self were not always comforting. Sebastian, for instance, defined his teenage self by stating, “I was just one of the small, weak, skinny kids that hung around with the loser crowd.” In a similar self-derogatory manner, Lionel reported that he avoided the rough games of rugby at lunchtimes and “hung out in the library.”

I didn’t know what else to do at lunchtimes, but there was enough of us so it didn’t really matter. There were four or five of us as a close group that frequented the library and that number was enough to have validation that you weren’t entirely screwed up.

In order to help negotiate respectful masculine subjectivities, these men typically used a variety of techniques with varying degrees of success. Sebastian, for example, in his late teens re-shaped his body through a weight-training program in an attempt to help constitute an alternative mode of being. He reported, “I just wanted to get bigger and bigger because it gave me respect. And I got respect from the rugby players—the people that I had always been intimidated by. I admit that that was important for me.” Sebastian explained this significance:

Because growing up in New Zealand you cannot help but feel a failure if you are not accepted into that rugby culture. And I guess my initial strategy was to
think, “Oh I don’t care; I don’t want to be like them.” But *secretly* I was weight training to get as big as I could. And I guess I had a desire to be admired by them, and I guess that is what I achieved in the end.

Sebastian’s new sense of self was produced by drawing on discursive resources associated with the link between a celebrated form of masculinity and displays of strength and power. His account helped reveal that alternative discourses of masculinity for producing comforting stories of self were limited. In contrast, Finn, Edgar, and George transformed their senses of self by drawing on reverse discourses of rugby to position rugby players, in part, as shallow, insecure, weak in character, and foolish for risking injury. A reverse discourse, according to Foucault (1978a), often uses “the same vocabulary” (p. 101) as a dominating discourse but produces an opposing strategy or social effect. Finn, for example, suggested that rugby players, rather than being real men,

were uncritical thinkers and followers of the crowd. . . . I saw the rugby players as clones who didn’t have the confidence to act independently. They were always in a group and rugby was their security blanket to keep them accepted.

He stated further:

There were players at school that I knew had had serious injuries; one had had a series of concussions and carried on playing. I felt that was a bit reckless, a bit cavalier, and a bit foolish. To be honest I thought that that whole “go hard and ignore the pain” attitude was rather stupid. I never respected that.

George, in similar tone, stated, “I could never relate to the mentality of the rugby players, that kind of aggressive talk, and the language they used—the whole culture seemed very primitive, and how they associated with each other, it was a bit like cavemen.” By developing reverse discourses about the rugby players, George, Finn, and Edgar were able to position themselves as somewhat courageous, independent, and intelligent for not playing rugby while simultaneously positioning rugby masculinity as less worthy. This technology of self, therefore, acted to transform their senses of self to help them “attain a certain state of happiness” (Foucault, 1988b, 18). In this process of differentiating themselves from the rugby players, however, they still clearly drew on dominating discourses of masculinity; they still thought of themselves as courageous and independent. This, in a somewhat ironic manner, helps illustrate the dominance of these discursive resources for constituting masculinities.

Nevertheless, the dominance of rugby can be regarded from a Foucauldian perspective as providing “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101) against rugby and its links to dominant discourses of masculinity. Edgar, for instance, with a bitter taste still in his mouth, reported, “I ended up resenting all the attention that the rugby players got; I think the school had its values around the wrong way—they gave little respect or attention to those who did well academically.” And George bluntly stated, “For a period of time I considered that rugby players were thugs, basically macho violent types . . . that had a really poor attitude towards women. . . . I remember being pissed off and
anti towards them.” These types of concerns about rugby and rugby players were not exclusively limited to those who felt marginalized by rugby’s prominence. Seamus, for example, became highly critical of rugby after he broke a wrist bone in a tackle:

I realized that a lot of people were getting injured from the game and . . . I thought that they would pay for it in later life. I realized that if you had a broken bone that you were more prone to get rheumatism or arthritis. I concluded that from a health perspective the game wasn’t worth it.

Discourses of health provided Seamus with the resources necessary to consciously critique rugby. His discursive repositioning of rugby was also linked to a changed view of rugby players: “Amongst my new friends we would make fun of the rugby players . . . we would say that they were completely brainless to be able to put up with the injuries and that they had nothing between their ears.” In this respect, Seamus’ concern that rugby players would continue to subject themselves to the “pain principle” (Sabo, 1986) encouraged him to view the rugby players disrespectfully. These critical views of rugby, as displayed by Seamus, Edgar, Finn, and George, were not typically revealed in public, so they did little to dampen the social significance of rugby in the men’s secondary schools; the dominance of rugby acted to silence their concerns. These reverse discourses of rugby were, nevertheless, reflective of Foucault’s (1988c) contention of the instability and complex relational character of power within relative contexts of freedom:

One must observe . . . that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. . . . That means that within relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibilities of resistance—of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation—there would be no relations of power. (p. 12)

This is not to suggest that the cultural dominance of rugby mechanistically or simplistically resulted in critical concerns about rugby; such a belief would undermine the complexities of the interview participants’ experiences of rugby pain and fear and the multiple relations of power that they were enmeshed within. Yet at the same time it is important to reflect that if rugby had not been so dominant and linked to prevailing discourses of masculinity, negative concerns about rugby and rugby players would not likely have developed such prominence for Seamus, Edgar, Finn, and George.

The Adult Years:
No Pain Is Sane After All

The discourse that constituted rugby as New Zealand’s national sport acted to ensure that rugby remained relatively prominent in the interview participants’ lives as adults. The majority of these men, for example, had a keen interest in viewing televised professional rugby and rugby knowledge, particularly of the men’s national team, provided a topic of conversation that still helped mark the men as normal. In their transition from the teenage years, however, from when
rugby players were often respected as exemplars of a dominant type of masculinity to the cultural pastiche of the "adult world," a variety of other ways of performing masculinity gained in status. In this process, the interview participants found that physical involvement in rugby was no longer a prime means of gaining masculine status. As a consequence, the social importance of participating in rugby decreased and fewer men continued to play.

The decreased status of rugby was not a concern for the five men in this study who played as adults. These men typically reported that they were not playing with any conscious desire to gain masculine status, but they simply enjoyed rugby and its associated social life. They were also aware that adult rugby was played with a greater intensity and likelihood of sustaining significant injury. Yet these men had long been disciplined to accept that injury and pain were normal aspects of rugby. This injury normalization process (see Curry, 1993) appeared so entrenched that many believed they had been lucky to escape permanent disability from rugby:

I actually had a pretty good run with injuries. You know I got winded and bruised at times, and the odd groin strain—those types of things, but nothing really major. . . . Oh yes, I did get concussed once. I ended up banging my head into someone’s knee in the tackle. A knee came up and just got me in the side of the head. I don’t think I went completely out, just a bit dazed, and didn’t know where I was for a bit, and I needed some help to get off the field. . . . My Dad took me to the hospital after the game, and I stayed overnight, just for observation. But I was fine . . . so I guess I was quite lucky on the injury front. (James)

Despite the players’ apparent acceptance of pain and injury as relatively normal, the men’s relationships with rugby were typically subject to ongoing negotiation, and the fear of future pain and/or disability played a significant role in these negotiations. Willy, who was still playing rugby at the time of his interview, reported, “Every season since my last year in high school I have thought about quitting; I get sick of putting up with the pain. But I like the game too much to quit.” Even Colin, as a professional player in his 10th season of lucrative rugby, stated that he was thinking seriously of retiring because of injuries:

I probably won’t play next year because I’m sick of dealing with all this shit, I’m sick of icing my legs and wondering if I’m going to wake up today and be able to walk okay or if it’s going to give me a bit of stick. I mean you’re always going to have problems with joints and muscles if you’ve damaged them. I’m sort of getting to the end of my rugby career.

Although the players appeared to accept pain and injury as relatively normal, they were not necessarily naive or uncritical about corporeal damage. In fact, the men simultaneously normalized and problematized injury. Moreover, as they aged, many retired from rugby citing concern with injuries, pain, and health. James, for example, reported that a “dirty tackle” that produced a “compound fracture of the tibia and fibula” helped end his rugby playing days. “At the senior level there was always the possibility of getting seriously hurt . . . I was concerned about that. So I was already thinking that it would be my last season before I broke my leg.” In contrast to Young et al. (1994), who found that elite male athletes were “generally
unreflexive . . . to past disablement” and held “a relatively unquestioning posture toward the possibility of future injury” (p. 191), the interview participants in this study were clearly concerned with bodily well-being and the threat of future injury. These concerns influenced their withdrawal from rugby.

The complex social processes associated with aging, as noted by de Garis (2000), appeared to be a prime factor influencing the interviewee’s understandings of masculinities and rugby. As the men aged, for example, the discourses of masculinity that dominated in the teenage years—which celebrated aggression, toughness, and pain tolerance—lost their exalted status and were no longer typically thought of as masculinizing. These discursive changes had an impact on the adult men’s relationships with rugby. Darryl for example reflected:

Rugby for me had been about meeting those (physical) challenges that were put in front of you. But I’m quite willing to now walk away from a challenge like that, but I wasn’t when I was a kid or a young man. Now I’m quite happy to say look, you know, that’s beyond me, or that’s not worth it. I’m no longer interested in trying to prove myself in that manner.

Darryl suggested that as an adult he no longer had the desire to prove his masculinity through meeting the physical and often painful challenges of rugby; in fact, he implied that he had outgrown this particular mode of masculinity. In association with the rugby players’ more complex understandings of masculinities, rugby was discursively repositioned from a man’s sport to a young man’s/boy’s sport. This repositioning was reflected in the men’s knowledge that participation in rugby was less suitable for adult men. James, for example, reported, “It is a good sport for boys and teenagers, but as men get bigger and stronger and faster, the risk of injury increases and some serious damage can be done.” The interview participants who had quit playing rugby during or before their teenage years also typically suggested that rugby was a boy’s sport, although this sentiment was often asserted with a degree of disdain. Sebastian, for example, reported, “I’ve had friends that have told me about what they got up to on tour in rugby teams and they’re pretty horrendous stories, you know, lots of drinking, having fights, and stuff, it’s pretty boyish.” In a similar derogatory manner, Edgar reported, “The rugby players at university acted in an immature way; it seemed a bit like a boy’s club, a boy’s thing.” Some of these men, however, suggested that rugby culture was not just the culture of young males but also the product of an older and more problematic time:

The culture that helped fuel the rugby of the 1950s and the 1960s has softened. They were times where men were impressed with the “physical” and the toughness, although I’m not sure that we’re completely out of it yet . . . it has definitely changed. The old idea of “she’ll be right” and ignoring pain, that’s the old macho stupid image, which was much more typical of the Kiwi male 20 years ago than it is today. The Kiwi image of men being nonemotional, humble, big, strong, tough; that’s all changed. (Derek)

The critical comments about boyish and/or old-fashioned masculinities were reflected in the interview participants’ select concerns about rugby violence. Lionel, for example, stated, “Punching on the field is never warranted. The mongrel stuff in rugby, where someone can charge into you in a maul and knock you out, that
sort of stuff needs to be removed from the game—it’s never acceptable.” Tom added further: “I don’t like the idea of people going and rucking the crap out of someone, because I’ve experienced that and it hurts, it’s stupid.” Yet not all of the men were particularly concerned with displays of violence in rugby. George, for example, somewhat reluctantly confessed, “I don’t mind seeing the fights in rugby. Yes, it is gladiatorial stuff, seeing these big men slug it out—of course there is a problem with it—but it’s also strangely entertaining.” George was reluctant to admit he gained a certain masochistic pleasure in watching men fight, which further suggested that the once supportive discursive link between masculinity and violence was under threat.

The interview participants were, however, relatively united that the denial of pain when seriously injured was problematic. This sentiment was revealed through comments about a professional player, Norm Hewitt, who had played with a broken bone: “He’s a bloody idiot” (Lionel), “He’s stupid and irresponsible” (Edgar), and “He’s downright foolish” (Finn). Only Willy (aged 21), the youngest of the interviewees, viewed Hewitt’s actions favorably: “He’s the man! That’s what you have to do in rugby, suck it in. It only hurts when you stop anyhow.”

Although many of the men were critical of select aspects of rugby, they rarely discussed their rugby concerns. The men’s reluctance to publicly voice rugby concerns related, in part, to their recognition of the social dominance of rugby. Seamus, for example, informed us: “Rugby is very much in our culture; New Zealanders are still very involved with it. It’s almost bred into us. And it’s hard to ignore or rebel against.” The dominating discourses that celebrated rugby as “our national sport” and as a “male sport” helped silence public concerns about rugby. Rugby’s articulations with discourses of nationalism and masculinism, therefore, made resistance against rugby a formidable task: the male critic of rugby, given the workings of these rugby discourses, risks being positioned as unpatriotic and feminine. Hence, although these adult men, in comparison with their boyhood and teenage years, appeared considerably less subject to the technologies of domination associated with rugby, they could not escape rugby’s sociocultural influence. The state of domination of rugby limited the men’s margins of liberty to express discontent towards rugby and dominant masculinities. Yet this discontent existed.

Despite the general silencing of public criticism of rugby, many of the interview participants did exercise some power against rugby’s social–cultural dominance, primarily by discouraging their sons (and daughters) from participating in rugby and/or by actively encouraging them to participate in sports that presented less risk of injury. These microlevel forms of resistance, although clearly not revolutionary or tactically organized, have possibly contributed to the decreased male participation rates in rugby in recent years. More speculatively, these actions might signal that the transformations that have occurred in dominating masculinities over the last three or four decades are now having an impact on the cultural dominance of rugby in New Zealand.

**Conclusion**

Our research findings offer relatively different readings of the relationships between sport and masculinities when compared with previous research of sportsmen’s experiences in culturally dominant, aggressive, and highly institutionalized
team sports (e.g., Light & Kirk, 2000; Messner, 1992; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; Schacht, 1996; Young et al., 1994). This previous research, which has typically examined elite sportmen’s experiences through a lens filtered by hegemony theory, has predominantly concluded that although the sport–hegemonic masculinity relationships are not produced simplistically, the cultural dominance of heavy-contact sports primarily encourages males to relationally distance themselves from practices deemed feminine and to believe in the values of toughness, competition, pain tolerance, and physical dominance. Our research findings, in contrast, support the judgment that sport does not unambiguously produce culturally dominant conceptions of masculinities, but “acts as a contradictory and complex medium for masculinity making” (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001, p. 118). Thus, although rugby provided an influential context in which the interview participants negotiated formative understandings of masculinities and self, these negotiations did not result in the clear affirmation and reproduction of dominating discourses of masculinity. In contrast, these negotiation processes were often undertaken with varying degrees of tension, particularly in relation to the fear of injury and an amalgam of multiple and, at times, competing discourses, including discourses of ethics, health, violence, and feminism. These complex negotiation processes resulted in the constitution of diverse, complex, and at times seemingly paradoxical understandings of masculinities and rugby. Many of the interview participants, for example, performed an inconsistent range of practices in relation to rugby that simultaneously disturbed and supported dominating discourses of masculinity.

A somewhat general trend was evident that suggested that as the interview participants grew into adulthood, their understandings of what it meant to be manly increased in complexity and tended, for want of less value-laden adjectives, to soften or mature. These men subsequently questioned the appropriateness of links between masculinities and performances of risk, pain tolerance, and violence and were cautiously critical of select aspects of rugby culture, such as cavalier attitudes about bodily well-being.

Our results question whether popular heavy-contact sports played predominantly by males, such as rugby, should be primarily represented as producers of dominant and problematic masculinities. Although this finding could be regarded as a more optimistic reading of sport–masculinity relationships, the interview accounts suggest that concern about rugby’s position of social significance is still clearly warranted. The state of domination of rugby and its discursive links to masculinities, particularly during teenage years, indirectly acted to limit alternative resources for the construction of respected masculine subjectivities while also limiting margins of liberty to express discontent towards rugby and dominant masculinities. Moreover, although rugby’s position of cultural importance resulted in numerous points of resistance, these microlevel forms of resistant appeared unlikely to support a reversal in the near future, to the current states of dominance: the games of truth surrounding rugby and masculinities were not played with a “minimum of domination” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 18).

In such states of domination, in which resistance is evident but unlikely to alter problematic relations of power, Foucault (1988c) suggested, “The problem is in fact to find out where resistance is going to organise” (p. 12). In light of this viewpoint, we suggest that rugby or rugby players should not be reductively considered as the social problem, but critical concern be directed toward the discursive articulations that help constitute rugby’s current state of dominance, particular masculinities,
and gendered relations of power. The social problems associated with rugby, for example, stem primarily from the discourses that position rugby as New Zealand’s national sport and as a sport specifically for males. These dominating discourses indirectly help rugby act as a technology of dominance that encourages males into a set of normalizing practices, practices that many males might be critical of but, nevertheless, find difficult to resist publicly and disentangle themselves from. We suggest, more specifically, that a potential strategy to help organize the existing concern about and/or resistance to rugby could stem from Foucault’s (1977) contentions that the body is enmeshed in “a political field” (p. 25), that power is exercised by and through bodies, and “that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (p. 27). The implications of these premises suggest that, in order to help lessen the effects of problematic discourses, it is desirable to change our field of knowledge or ways of knowing, our means of communicating, and ultimately ourselves.

A strategy of social transformation, without guarantees of outcome, could accordingly revolve around publicizing and promoting narratives of men’s rugby experiences to help illustrate how the dominance of rugby can, at times, problematically constrain the shape of men’s lives. These rugby stories would sit in contrast to the prevailing and publicly celebrated ways of knowing rugby and could act as an educational forum for revealing discourses of rugby and masculinities that have been marginalized, discredited, and silenced. These are discourses, for example, that act to position rugby as a dangerous sport of pain; rugby players who take pride in denying pain or in performing cavalier risks as foolish; and adult men who care for their well-being and the wellbeing of others as worthy of respect. This strategy, based on the resurrection of discredited knowledges, would not selectively aim to demonize rugby but to help raise critical awareness of the complex relationships between rugby and masculinities while simultaneously promoting circulation of alternative discursive resources that could allow for the (re)storying of lives, social practices, and relations. The success of this strategy ultimately rests, however, on the ability of people to cultivate a new sense of self—a notoriously difficult challenge.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dixie Dolejs Pringle, Jim Denison, Bevan Grant, and Doug Booth for their help in researching and writing this article. We also want to thank Ellen Staurowsky and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments regarding this article.

References


