The Penalty That’s Never Called: Sexism in Men’s Hockey Culture

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During the summer of 2022, Hockey Canada faced a reckoning regarding its outright denial of the ways in which gender-based violence is a part of hockey culture. This paper shares data from a study that involved qualitative interviews with semi/professional men’s ice hockey players regarding their resistance to the expectations of hypermasculinity in hockey culture. Hypermasculinity is the elevated status of traits that promote violence, stoicism, and aggression and that privileges the locker-room code of silence. Participants spoke about the dangers of playing through pain as well as the precarity of their roles on their teams due to policing strategies that put the team before anything else. The participants were less direct about the ways sexism and misogyny are used as a means to improve team bonding and performance, yet stories of sexism and misogyny were riddled throughout the data. Our analysis brings together Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition to gain understanding as to why sexism remains/ed silent and Freire’s conscientization to promote more dialogic encounters to clear the air of sexism in men’s ice hockey.

The consensus among researchers is that men’s ice hockey is a white¹ cis-male-dominated sphere that attempts to socialize young boys and men into traditional hegemonic masculine ideals (Adams, 2006; Allain, 2008, 2010; MacDonald, 2014; Robidoux, 2001). The socialization process encourages young boys and men to embody certain traits of hegemonic masculinities that manifest in homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, and heteronormativity (Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014). To promote and ensure athletes embrace certain masculine ideals, hockey players are frequently subjected to policing tactics that ensure the adoption and enactment of preferred masculine characteristics (Messner, 1990, 2000, 2007; Pringle & Hickey, 2011). As players progress in the game to elite-levels, these behaviors are expected, reinforced, and rewarded. However, attaining dominant masculine traits does not necessarily translate into fulfilling and satisfying experiences in life (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Despite personifying these desired masculine ideals, many former competitive ice hockey players are now publicly revealing their struggles with addiction and with the impacts of injuries connected to a lifetime of embodying hyperaggressive and overly competitive qualities of masculinity (Messner, 1990; see Fraser, 2020; Hirsch, 2018; Wilson, 2020). Importantly, the calls for change are coming from inside the rink.

In May of 2020, Akim Aliu challenged the slogan “Hockey is for Everyone” and spoke of the “racism, misogyny, bullying, and homophobia that permeates the culture of hockey” (Aliu, 2020). Aliu was not the first player to publicly oppose hockey culture. Corey Hirsch broke his silence regarding the mental health struggles he encountered while playing with the New York Rangers (see Hirsch, 2017, 2018, 2020). Brock McGillis has also spoken on many platforms about hypermasculinity and homophobia in hockey culture. In The Sports Networks (TSNs), The Problem of Pain, Ryan Kesler spoke openly about the pressure to play through pain and the resulting consequences to his health and wellbeing. The common thread of these players’ challenges is the hypermasculine ideals that are entrenched and promoted in hockey culture including aggression, domination, stoicism, bravado, and violence (Allain, 2008; Fowler, 2021; Miele, 2020; Robidoux, 2001; Young, 2000). These voices add to scholarship in the field regarding sexism in hockey culture; however, we posit that the pervasiveness of sexism, misogyny, and the ideal identity of the hypermasculine men’s ice hockey player remains due to players not recognizing the deep layers of sexism or their consequences.

Aliu, Hirsch, McGillis, and Kesler rebuke hockey culture by revealing the human and societal consequences. These players have been rightly celebrated for sharing their personal narratives and for raising issues about hockey culture from within the culture itself. Active player participant voices are especially important to challenging hockey culture as often people who are currently playing do not speak out publicly, and academics (like us) are often dismissed. Yet, we wonder, if player critique is necessary, what aspects of hockey culture will remain unscathed. Aliu, Hirsch, McGillis, and Kesler are largely speaking about elements of hockey culture that impact them personally, and these critiques are powerful because of this personal connection to the topic. However, none of these critiques substantively engage with the objectification of women and the oppression of femininities in hockey culture, despite the fact that sexism and misogyny are foundational elements of hockey culture/masculinities.

Sexism and Misogyny in Hockey Culture

Sexism arises from both the structure of the institution and individual acts (Maldonado & Draeger, 2017). Sexism within hockey culture manifests in many forms including the way male hockey is centered in our national narratives, thus making men the protagonists and heroes of our national story (Allain, 2010, 2016, 2019; Robidoux, 2002, Ryan, 2021). Our national identity is so deeply entangled with men’s ice hockey that it drives Canada’s funding and sport policies (Thibault & Harvey, 1997) and fictionalizes a “homogenous national us” (Allain, 2020, p. 512). Hockey masculinity glorifies white colonial violence and positions white men as stewards of a projected national identity (Sailofsky, 2022). Binary notions of sex are upheld through the division of the sport into men’s and women’s—a division that is based on natural assumptions/stereotypes of athleticism and strength (Messner, 2002). This projects discriminatory assumptions about women and girls and upholds notions of natural male athleticism, strength, and
superiority. Hockey masculinity requires the subjugation of varied expressions of masculinity, particularly those perceived as feminine (Allain, 2008). Within male hockey, there is no space for females, or for any player who embraces and performs femininities.

Beyond sexist barriers within the sport, there are misogynist ideas engrained that position women as objects and conquests within hockey culture (MacDonald, 2018; Pappas et al., 2004; Robinson, 1998). Within hockey, men secure their masculinity by debasing and degrading women, as hockey masculinity is achieved through performances of violence, sexual coercion, objectification, and misogyny (Sailofsky, 2022). Misogyny was undeniably evidenced in the alleged gang-sexual assault committed by members of Canada’s 2018 World Junior team, in the subsequent cover-up, and in the revelation that Hockey Canada had a fund that was used consistently and covertly to protect players (Moore et al., 2022).

The deeply entrenched sexism and misogyny within hockey culture contribute to these brutal acts of dehumanization. Yet, these connections remain unrecognized because people are unable to confront the culture that permeates their existence. In addition, as this does not directly impact players, such as the consequences of playing through pain, the calls to confront sexism/misogyny are largely not coming from male players. Unfortunately, there is more impact when people within hockey resist the harmful impacts of the culture as people are more inclined to listen to and empathize with the protagonists in our national narrative and because status is used to legitimize particular perspectives. If current player’s voices are needed, and yet they cannot recognize the objectification of girls and women, how will sexism and misogyny ever be recognized and meaningfully challenged if it remains unrecognized to those within the culture? Yet, as recent current events have revealed, this resistance is entirely necessary.

*(En)Countering the Same Brand of Resistance*

In the Winter and Spring of 2021, we conducted semistructured interviews with 21 elite-level ice hockey players who were either currently playing at elite-levels or have left the game due to age or personal choices. The interviews took place online ranging from 45 min to over 2 hr. Participants range in age from 20 to 60 years, two are racialized, and one identified as gay (not while playing). These demographics are important as the ages span decades of experiences with hockey culture, thus, challenging the common myth that sexism is a thing of the past. Despite the span in age, sexism and misogyny were a common thread with little distinction over decades. In addition, the demographics are reflective of those currently playing professional men’s ice hockey—typically cis-white-heteronormative (Dean & Fischer, 2019). Through this research, we sought to understand the way male ice hockey players resist hypermasculinity in hockey culture. Participants were recruited through social media and snowball sampling, and our participants self-identified as resistors, as part of the selection for this study was that players have at some point in their careers resisted, in some way, the impact of hypermasculinity. Through these interviews, we heard players speak out against the exploitation of their bodies, their feelings of disposability within a commercialized sport, and the long-term consequences on their physical and mental health. However, like Aliu, Hirsch, and Kesler, our participants only superficially challenged sexism and misogyny and until sexism is responded to and resisted, varied performances of gender will remain marginalized in the sport (MacDonald & McGillis, 2021).

Our participants acknowledged that sexism is entrenched in hockey culture; however, it was not their main focus of resistance to hockey culture. That is, they often did not elaborate beyond acknowledgment, while they did elaborate on other issues connected to hockey culture, such as player commodification, playing through pain, hierarchies, silencing, and hazing. We noticed that the bulk of the participants’ disclosures about sexism and misogyny occurred within general hockey stories rather than in response to questions specifically about sexism and misogyny.

An unforgiving response to this interview data might be that players within a sexist culture do not recognize sexism because they are in fact sexist. Or, players do not resist sexism and misogyny in hockey because it does not impact them personally. Admittedly, there were times throughout the data analysis that this response surfaced. Yet, when we approached the data with more complexity and empathy, we wondered how the culture of hockey constrained players’ recognition, consciousness, and resistance. As two of us are women, we also wondered how our positionality influenced the read of the data. For example, in our transcripts where Tim was the interviewer, players often responded with bravado and used nicknames for Tim like “Timmy,” whereas for Teresa and Shannon, there was no bravado and more apologies for when participants would swear or use sexist language. Like Allain (2014), we noted discrepancies in gender roles in the research process, in particular the dial of masculinity dependent on our gender. This offers a window into some level of recognition participants had with respect to gender roles. The hierarchical nature of gender roles in hockey culture directly impacts participants. Yet, the participants’ inability to recognize the way women, femininities, and varied expressions of masculinities are harmed by this hierarchy challenged us to consider the ways this lack of recognition impedes any meaningful resistance to sexism and misogyny.

Through this paper, we consider the role of misrecognition in the participant’s inability to substantively challenge sexism and misogyny in semi/professional men’s ice hockey through an interdisciplinary lens. As previously stated, sexism arises in many forms with multiple actors and yet, we noticed in our data that sexism was not substantively or overtly engaged by the participants. This invokes Bourdieu’s (2013) concept of cultural reproduction and misrecognition. Bourdieu’s (1990, 2013) work primarily focuses on cultural reproduction and the ways in which social structures and systems perpetuate forms of inequality. An individuals’ position in society is influenced by their access to different forms of capital, such as economic, social, and cultural capital within social institutions. Misrecognition arises through Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence which is the unconscious rendering and internalization of the dominant culture’s imposition of certain values, beliefs, and norms on others, leading individuals to accept and reproduce their own subordination or acts of oppression. Within this framework, misrecognition can be seen as a form of symbolic violence as individuals fail to fully recognize or understand the underlying mechanisms of social inequality and accept their own objectification or role as oppressor as natural or legitimate. Sexism is not recognized, as the sexist actions in hockey are never cognized through this lens. There are also broader cultural elements that contribute to misrecognition.

Additionally, we draw on the work of Paulo Freire, who offers an archaeology of consciousness to extend our analysis as a means to offer a point of disruption, of elevated recognition of the pervasiveness of sex pollution within hockey culture. Pollution comes in various forms and can be detrimental to a person’s health...
even though many pollutants are invisible. Sexism in hockey culture has been rendered invisible contributing to the participant’s lack of conscious awareness as demonstrated in their differing responses based on the interviewer, and yet, it pollutes hockey culture—on and off the ice. Although the constraints of hypermasculine ideals make recognition and resistance difficult, following Freire, consciousness (awareness) is not an impossibility. Freire (1974) contends that every human being, no matter how ignorant or enconced in the culture of silence, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. The challenge within hockey culture is that the culture is intentionally narrowed in order to have a homogenous environment that is predominantly cis, straight, white, and socioeconomically privileged. Thus, within hockey culture, the struggle for what it means to recognize sex pollution needs to emerge through heterogeneous encounters to expose cycles of privilege and oppression. In this case, men’s ice hockey players are both oppressors, and we contend, oppressed as they are denied heterogeneous experiences within hockey culture which may disrupt players from seeing masculinities and femininities beyond a static natural binary. There is no room for a view of what it means to be otherwise. By placing these theorists in conversation/with our data, we hope to offer a more complex analysis of the participants’ responses to sexism and misogyny within hockey culture. An interdisciplinary understanding opens up possibilities of intervention to disrupt the normalized hypermasculine culture that is pervasive in men’s ice hockey (Lorenz & Osborne, 2006; Messner, 2002; Pappas et al., 2004; Pfeffer et al., 2016). This analysis is not meant to let our participants off the hook, so to speak, rather it is intended to invite nuanced understandings of how sexism and misogyny persist. We posit that the Bourdieusian concept of misrecognition reveals why change in hockey culture is elusive, and how we might encourage an understanding of misrecognition to create systemic change. This will require a critical pedagogic response to raise awareness of the normalization of sexism and misogyny among men’s ice hockey players as a means to disrupt the dehumanization and objectification of women, to invite femininities and varied performances of masculinities, and to end off-ice gender-based violence.

Miss Recognition

Bourdieu’s oeuvre examines how forms of domination reproduce and questions why masculine domination persists despite social movement toward more equity (Bourdieu, 2001; Chambers, 2005). The concept of misrecognition is evoked when we consider the institutional presence of sexism in a heteronormative environment. Bourdieu posits that people operate in various fields, and the positions people occupy, or agents for Bourdieu, are determined by their status or capital accrued in the field. Within hockey culture, agents are placed in hierarchies based on their position of status and power. These hierarchies are reinforced by policing strategies. When players abide by the rules in the field, they are rewarded with maintaining or elevating their status. However, this system entrenches “collective denial” of the ways in which sexism undergirds hockey culture (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 196). What gets reproduced within hockey culture are the “mechanisms responsible for reproducing the appropriate habitus,” an agent’s disposition that aligns with preserving a cis/white/heteronormative field of hierarchical power rife with sex pollution (p. 196). The policing of agents in hockey culture upholds hypermasculine traits and allows the field to remain intact and impermeable.

Following Bourdieu (2000), misrecognition emerges because something was not previously cognized. One cannot recognize sexism and misogyny within hockey culture because acts are never framed or cognized within those terms. Instead, the sex division of hockey is presented as tradition. The required masculinity is understood as natural. The objectification of women is team building. Whereas, violence, stoicism, and commodification become recognizable through personal encounters, sexism and misogyny lack the necessary encounter to invite recognition. Structures of power are made visible through the process of othering.

Othering is only recognized when others speak out. In hockey, cost combined with the privileging of whiteness, heteronormativity, and particular performances of masculinity fosters a homogenous, insular, and isolated environment (Robidoux, 2001). The lack of women or diverse expressions of masculinity within elite men’s ice hockey contributes to the pervasive discourses of sexism and misogyny, as it ensures that there is no other to speak out, to recognize (Curry, 1991). The players in our study did not confront the othering and could; therefore, not recognize the ways that sexism and misogyny are entrenched in hockey culture. Sexism is so ingrained in hockey culture that it is an invisibilized norm, part of the institutional culture. It is maintained through rituals such as hazing, locker-room banter, hockey parties, commentators’ descriptions, and coaching. It is a form of sex pollution.

The constant barrage of sexist tones in hockey causes sexist pollution. The accumulation of small sexist acts builds to the point where women are continuously objectified leading to a moral compass that transcends the rink. Without naming sexism as a problem in hockey culture by those currently enmeshed in men’s ice hockey, it remains a lingering force which moves with ease from the ice to off-ice behaviors and perspectives. Here, we name sexism as a lingering problem in hockey culture, which has been left to pollute hockey culture, and the ways in which men’s ice hockey players are socialized to think about and relate to women off the ice. In order to disrupt sexist thinking within hockey culture, it needs first to be recognized as sex pollution.

Sex Pollution

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP; n.d.) notes that air pollution arises from a variety of sources, human and natural sources. In order to determine the amount of air pollution, sensors measure the predetermined pollutants that impact our air quality and ability to breathe healthy air. Monitoring sex pollution within hockey culture has yet to begin despite warning signs. Media reports which provide us with clues that sex pollution is a problem offer us insights with respect to the quality of air being breathed within hockey culture. As noted in Figure 1, journalists have been placing before us some of the outcomes of sex pollution. However, reporting on the outcomes of sex pollution without speaking to the broader cultural factors in hockey that contribute to these outcomes is akin to media reports on air pollution that fail to recognize the cause or acknowledge a climate crisis (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017).

Long before the recent highly publicized reports about sexual violence and silencing in hockey culture stemming from the alleged gang-sexual assaults by members of the Canadian team at the 2018 and 2003 International Ice Hockey Federation’s World Junior Championships (Leijon, 2022), journalists and academics were sounding the alarm (Curry, 1991; Donnelly & Coakley, 1999; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Pappas et al., 2004; Robinson, 1998). However, these cultural warnings have been ignored, individualized, or rejected.
They have not been recognized as a consequence of hockey culture, as they are rarely framed as sexism/misogyny. And yet, there was sexism/misogyny all over our data. Participant responses in our interviews were analyzed following Messner’s framing of gender analysis in sport which considers the performance, structure, and culture of how particular ideals are reproduced (Allain, 2008; Messner, 2002). The performance of hypermasculine ideals is supported through their deep-rootedness in hockey culture, and as we share participant voices, we seek to raise awareness of how sexism is not recognized by participants, causing them to not resist. To be clear, the participants admitted that sexism is a core element of hockey culture and told stories that were riddled with sexism, but they did not connect this admission or these stories to institutional and systemic elements within hockey. Recognition requires we move beyond superficial admission.

Party (Pollutants) Points

Many of the player participants in our study were expected to win points by using women and girls as props, conquests, and trophies. As participant Alex² explained, this could involve rookies finding women to bring to hockey parties as “we had to do that, we had to try to find girls to come to rookie parties” (Alex Smith). At times, this also involved gaining points by engaging in a specific action with a specific woman: “You had to try and kiss another female [university] athlete and get a picture of it” (Alex Smith). Alex’s responses are emblematic of two themes in the data in that women and girls are seen as conquests in hockey hazing rituals and sexism and misogyny are misrecognized as players perform a hypermasculine identity. Within our research, stories of sexism and misogyny were often offered when we were asking about something else. That is, when asked directly about sexism, participants often did not offer specific examples or engage with this concept in any meaningful way. However, when we were talking about other aspects of hockey culture, hazing and partying, for example, sexism and misogyny were revealed. This pattern in our data made us wonder about framing and recognition. The participants may have understood the particularity of a practice to/in hockey culture. Meaning, they can recognize that the practice of gaining points for finding women is exclusive to hockey culture, but they are framing this practice through discussions of hazing rather than sexism/misogyny. They recognize the particularity (and peculiarity) of the practice to hockey but do not fully recognize or offer it as an example of sexism/misogyny.

Misrecognition grows from players’ ability to “play along with the game of points accumulation” as they establish themselves in the field, and the misrecognition of sexism is established as a truth (Thomson, 2012, p. 91). This inherent truth, an outcome of the “collective work of euphemization,” which nullifies sexism as a silent majority in hockey culture, establishes what is “acceptable behavior” by the group to reinforce positions of power in the field (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 196). Thus, sexism is allowed to breed within hockey culture as it reproduces at the expense of men’s ice hockey players elevating and holding on to power. Misrecognition legitimates sexism through its insertion into the culture of men’s ice hockey, authorized by the group who lack the ability to say otherwise, as the rules of the field in hockey culture have normalized sexism on the ice, with off-ice implications (Chambers, 2005).

Speaking of Pollution

In addition to hazing and rookie initiation, sexist/misogynistic language is used to motivate or more accurately regulate and police masculinities and heteronormativity. Following Prettyman (2003), coaches and players use misogynistic slurs for motivation as there is a threat in being called a woman (a pussy), or becoming someone’s woman (a bitch), or being perceived as feminine (weak). The locker room, as Curry (1991) points out, is a space...
where fraternal bonds are fostered through objectification of women and distancing from femininity. As the participants in our study revealed, players and coaches used language to encourage feelings of power and domination in players. For example, one participant stated that he “had a coach draw pubic hair around a net on a board and say, you know, you need to crash the net hard, as if it was your girlfriend” (Greg Smith). This comment employs women as dehumanized props, encourages a particular type of play on the ice, and implies that aggressive play should be paralleled off the ice with one’s girlfriend. Coaches also used gendered language to reinforce expectations of masculinity as participant Greg Smith shared one such example from a coach: “look at him. He’s one of the biggest guys on the team. But fucking pussy won’t even drop his gloves.” The idea here is that players are expected to fight, and if they refuse, they are deemed pussies—women. There is no potential for otherwise. You fight, or you are a pussy. Within this brand of masculinity, there is no space for femininity (aka weakness) or an alternate expression of masculinity:

And it’s just this whole idea of, of, you can’t show weakness, you belittle your opponents. And that’s what we’re taught to be like, that’s the manly thing, because otherwise, if we don’t do that, our coaches tell us that we’re playing like a bunch of girls. So, to be a man in that way is hard. (Greg Smith)

While the objectification and denigration of women may not always be recognized, in the absence of the other, there is potential for recognition surrounding sexist assumptions about masculinity. When players confront policing of their expressions of gender, they can recognize the sexist/essentialist assumptions. In this case, they are the other that makes recognition possible.

Dressing for the Weather

Several participants in our study spoke of hazing/rookie rituals that were anchored to the objectification of women and the denigration of femininities. For example, participants referenced rookie initiation that involved wearing women’s clothing. Participant, James, stated that they “had to dress up in a dress and go to the mall and do like a scavenger hunt kind of thing. It was meant to be harmless” (James Gordon). James offers this example but also undermines its impact by declaring the intent as harmless. There is no other present to say otherwise. Yet, a male athlete in a dress is a form of mockery. It is a joke, and trans/women are the punchline. Beyond the mockery of trans/women, dressing like a woman is also laughable because a male is performing femininities. But James’s declaration, that it was meant to be harmless, a statement surrounding intention that was echoed in many of our interview transcripts, demonstrates that he is unable to see, to recognize, the harm. The statement that it is meant to be harmless also undermines anyone’s offense. Interestingly, James does recognize that a dress holds negative connotations believing that “the intention of it was supposed to be in a negative light, like it was supposed to make you inferior because now you’re wearing a dress” (James Gordon), but his understanding of harm is focused on the players. He asserted that “for me personally, [wearing a dress to a mall] honestly made me like become more confident, and become very secure with my sexuality and everything like that” (James Gordon). There is no recognition of sexism as there is no other considered. There is no person in the dress, other than the hockey players participating in a ritual. And yet, there is a residue of recognition in the very act of retelling this story to the other. James was speaking to a female interviewee about an unfortunately common hazing ritual, and his addition of “it was meant to be harmless” was potentially uttered as he encountered the other. Certainly, this could be understood as a male hockey player overwhelming feminist interpretations of the ritual, but, this catch, the additional offering of, “it was meant to be harmless” could also be understood as initial recognition. It was meant to be. There is an admission that while the intent was harmless (a distinction we wholly disagree with) the impact may not have been. James’s disclaimer may reveal the potential of speaking to an other, when no others exist.

Catching a Whif of Pollution

Participants often caught/recognized sex pollution when they were explaining normal practices within hockey culture to an other, the interviewer. Locker rooms are heightened sights of pollution generation due to the codes of silence and the mantra that what is said in the locker room, stays in the locker room, including continued performances of hypermasculinity (Curry, 1991; Kane & Disch, 1993; Moore et al., 2022). During the interviews, the participants caught themselves in moments of recognition, realizing what had become normal for them was reprehensible behavior. Tom Clark recounted a story where his coach took them to the strippers, stating that he was an older player at the time but a younger player on the team wouldn’t want to see that coming in. That would have a negative impact on him because he might feel later that he needs to be the guy that does that. (Tom Clark)

Certainly, Tom recognizes the impact of a coach, a supposed role model, taking the team to pay to see woman perform sexual acts. He has already recognized the messaging of this behavior. The catch, in this interview came in the follow-up question: “When you say “older player at the time,” how old were you” (Interviewer)? Tom responded that he was 19 years at the time. Nineteen. The question was intended to challenge Tom’s framing of the team outing, to catch him in a moment of recognition. Yet, he was neither old nor immune to the messaging of his coach.

When participant Greg Smith was recounting the behavior of coaches that parted with their team, he stated he “had a coach do body shots off a 15-year old girl at a rookie party” (Greg Smith). There is recognition in this telling that is revealed in stating the age of the girl, the act on her body, and the role of a coach. We do not know how Greg processed or reported this at the time of the event. We only know that he has carried this particular story, like Tom carried the story of going to see female dancers. This event stuck, and struck.

James Gordon shared an example that demonstrated how his processing of a hockey “team-building” activity changed over time. This change occurred once James encountered the other:

There was an incident one time where we did like a secret Santa gift for people. And somebody had impregnated somebody, and I think it was a girlfriend or somebody at the time. And the girl ended up getting an abortion. And his secret Santa gift, somebody gave him a coat hanger. And it was like, at the time everybody was laughing, and like I definitely participated in laughing. I thought as an 18 or 17-year-old, I see all these 20-year-olds laughing like oh yeah that’s a good joke. And now I’m like, I’ve had friends that have had abortions and things like that, and I’m like that’s just disgusting honestly. I . . . yeah, like, kind of speechless. Like it’s a bad, bad, cake. (James Gordon)
For James, within the insular world of hockey, this was a good joke. However, after encountering friends who have had abortions, he can see the girl. The woman. There is a person placed in relation to the coat hanger, to “the joke.” He did not recognize this event as disgusting until he could see through the pollution and see the other.

I Cannot Smell Anything

While participants most often raised examples of sexism/misogyny within hockey stories, and not directly in response to questions about sexism, some participants did make systemic connections. That is, they recognized the way that these practices are part of the culture: “that’s a huge part of it, whether it’s off the ice in the dressing room, or at parties with girls there, and all the guys are trying to see which girl they can take home, or how many girls they can sleep with in one night kind of thing. And yeah, that’s a big part of the culture, I think that’s the cool thing to do” (Tom Clark). Tom is importantly recognizing how these practices are expected and connected to hockey culture. And yet, this admission does not necessarily equate to recognition. The other, the girls are not understood in relation to these cultural expectations. Instead, these actions were often only understood in relation to their impact on players. The tendency to empathize (hlp)athize with the white, hockey-playing boys is reflected and reinforced in the legal courts and courts of public opinion (Sailofsky, 2022). Rather than considering the impact on the women and girls who are made trophies, conquests, and points, the focus remains on the players. Recognition is blocked as one cannot see the other. As a result, the impulse is to center oneself (and that oneself is all hockey players) and this centering, empathy, and protection of male hockey players are most exemplified in locker-room culture. The expectation is that players protect other players:

There’s stuff that happens in the dressing room, obviously, talking about girls, parties, whatever is the case. That happens in there, that sort of stays in there for the most part. Well, on good teams it stays in there, but I think definitely, talking about girls happens quite a lot. Whether it’s who you’re hooking up with, if you got sent pictures from some girl, everyone sees them, type thing. That for sure happens in a hockey dressing room. (Chris Roberts)

Chris’s discussion of the insular and guarded space of the locker room was not unique to his interview. The participants often revealed the ways that comradery, acceptance, and status are derived from telling sexist stories about women. Masculinity is achieved in the telling of the stories, and the expectation that nobody will talk about the stories due to the bro-locker-room code. The idea that “good teams” maintain a code of silence demonstrates how recognition is impeded by insularity. Again, the hockey player is centered. It is their protection that is of the utmost importance. It would be a betrayal to consider the other. The other is in the dressing room, but only as an object, a photo, a pair of “ta tas” (Curry, 1991). There is no space for consciousness, as there is no encounter with the other, with a counternarrative, or with a possibility to make the familiar unfamiliar. It’s just part of the game.

The other is just “some girl,” whereas the person beside them in the dressing room is their teammate, their brother, comrade. They recognize the impact on their teammate, and they center them in their response, their silence. As a coach, Chris speaks to his players about the legal ramifications of sharing photos stating to his players: “I understand that you think it is great that she sent that to you, [but] if you show someone, all of a sudden you could be sued or charged or stuff, because of that action” (Chris Roberts). Certainly, it is important for coaches to talk to players about issues of consent and privacy, but it was not framed as such. The issue is not cognized as sexism or misogyny as it is framed as a legal issue for the players as it may have a negative impact on their team and their careers. There is no recognition of the harm it will cause to the person in the photo, the other.

Outright Denial

Participants asserted that sexism and misogyny were being reproduced within hockey culture, but that it was not unique to hockey, much like former Hockey Canada Board Chair, Andrea Skinner’s, defense at the standing committee hearings (Canadian Press, 2022). In her opening statement, she defends Hockey Canada stating that “toxic behavior exists throughout society. No segment of society is immune. Suggesting that toxic behavior is somehow a specific hockey problem or to scapegoat hockey as a centerpiece for toxic culture is, in my opinion, counterproductive to finding solutions” (Strange & Mendes, 2022). Skinner’s tenure was short, having resigned from the position in October 2022; however, her denial is emblematic of the collective denial from within hockey culture. These denials manifest in individualizing systemic issues. That is, people will employ a one bad apple rhetoric in order to deflect from broader systemic and cultural issue. In addition, they will point to issues in other sports rather than reflecting on their own. For example, when our participants were asked about the misogynistic social media posts from Brendan Leipsic,³ they suggested it was not reflective of the broader culture, isolated his actions, and endorsed the team’s response:

But people tend to dwell on the negatives and not necessarily the positives. Yeah, there are a lot of great positive stories, but the negatives like that Brendan Leipsic situation and I’m not saying that that’s right at all because I totally agree with what happened there and the punishment whatnot. But it’s just, it’s a shame that that it’s a small number of players can let the other greater population get dragged through the mud kind of thing. (Charlie Lang)

This response is anchored to the belief that if Leipsic is removed the problem will be gone, because the problem was Leipsic not the broader culture. Participants named sexism as an element of hockey culture, and told stories that included sexist/misogynist actions, but still suggested that these misogynistic tweets reflected the actions of a small number. These responses are incongruous. Leipsic’s crime was getting caught. His actions reflected poorly on the image of hockey, and so hockey needed to reject him rather than consider how Leipsic is a product of hockey culture.

This distancing and denial also emerged when we used particular language in the interviews. For example, participant Phil swapped out the word “lack of respect” for “playboy mentality”:

Um, I wouldn’t say lack of respect. It’d be more just like I guess you could say like a really a word to describe it be more like a, like a playboy mentality, I guess you’d say. (Phil Gordon)

Again, the participants overtly recognized that there was sexism in hockey culture, but when terms were used to elaborate and name elements of sexism, they were reframed into more
positive understandings. In this, we see two lines of thought, players are comfortable superficially recognizing the concept of sexism but not the specific consequences or systemic connections. Hockey culture is premised on image and brand, and disrespecting women does not fit the brand. But, being a “playboy” does.

Finally, denial of the issue manifest in the way the onus is placed on the disenfranchised. As Cody states, everyone is welcome in hockey, but you will need to make space for yourself:

Hopefully one day we don’t have to hear about this hazing stuff. Or like the gruesome part of that, obviously. And obviously I think obviously if you believe in this goal inside of your head if you want to make the NHL, if you want to make the National Women’s Hockey League, or if you want to be, if you’re a person of color and you want to make the NHL, or if you are part of the LGBTQ community and you wanted to obviously make the NHL, I think you should just always stick to it. And there will be obstacles in the way, like any other person. But you know, the goal, if you really want it that bad, you have to go for it whether there is obstacles or not. (Cody Williams)

Cody’s statement, “like any other person” reveals a lack of understanding of the institutional and systemic barriers that some players face. While all players need to work hard, not all players are institutionally and systemically disadvantaged. Some are privileged by the system. This response does not place expectation on hockey to change; rather, it suggests that individuals need to make space for themselves.

Each of these fragments, although seemingly disparate, reveals that people within hockey culture are unable to challenge or change broader cultural elements. Instead, they distance, rebrand, and individualize. These denials manifest in individualizing systemic issues, as was done in many cases when we asked participants about the misogynistic social media posts from Brendan Leipsic. This reframing was done when participants refused to consider sexist and misogynistic actions as disrespectful or harmful. Instead, there was an imposition on the victim to change, not the culture. The bad apple argument is rife in hockey culture. As Andrea Skinner stated, this toxic culture is not precious to ice hockey. Certainly, expectations of masculinity exist outside of hockey, and undeniably, other sports have issues with harmful impositions of masculinity. But the elevated and privileged status of hockey in Canada, the homogenous and insular culture, and the increasing commodification of players raise unique questions. Hockey cannot finger point its way out of a culture that normalized a fund to pay for sexual assault allegations.

When You Say It Like That It Sounds Bad

As researchers and educators, expecting hockey players to account for sexism may not be the right pedagogical tact. Instead, by inviting participants to share their experiences more broadly, we can listen for the moments where the narrator/the player/the participant catches themselves, becomes awakened to, and has a chance to reckon with their normal, their taken for granted understandings of the world and the role of women and girls within hockey culture. Participants often caught/recognized sex pollution when they were explaining normal practices within hockey culture in a dialogical encounter with an other. During the interviews, the participants caught themselves in moments of recognition, realizing what had become normal for them was reprehensible. It is through this encounter with others, that we may garner a more profound understanding of self, other, and the world. The superficial engagement with sexism in our data, and in the larger cultural context, may reveal why sexual assaults continue to happen, why cover-ups continue that center saving the team and the men involved, rather than the victims, and why substantive change is elusive.

The national love of men’s ice hockey generates a dangerously populist view of what it means to be Canadian that transcends the ice. Thus, the blinding effect accumulates not only with the participants in our study, making them immune to sex pollution, but also those of us who identify with the national pride of men’s ice hockey. The consequences of this are ever-present and contribute to the actions of, and protection of, players on and off the ice as noted in Andrea Skinner’s comments. However, Andrea Skinner and men’s ice hockey players do not reside only in the field of hockey culture, and movements such as #MeToo have awoken men from the collective denial that women are dying from sex pollution (literally and figuratively). Men’s ice hockey players’ awareness of the presence of sexism within hockey culture may be naive, but it is a result of the acceptance of the objectification of women in the name of preserving power in the field.

Conscientization

Freire (1974) discusses how everyday social and political forces shape the lives of those living in the world and that the learner needs to have critical consciousness, conscientization, about how these imposing forces are shaping their lives and the lives of others. In looking at the theoretical considerations of Freire’s (1974) approach, he contends every human being, no matter how ignorant or ensconced in the culture of silence, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. The challenge within hockey culture is that the culture is intentionally narrowed to have a homogenous environment, and there is subsequently no impulse for dialog on sexism or misogyny. Without the ability to speak or engage with actors other than white/cis/hetero men, the awareness of sex pollution in hockey culture remains at a naive level of consciousness, as an “established fact” in hockey culture (Freire 2013, p. 41). Thus, Freire’s conscientization offers a frame to which we can consider the levels of knowledge participants in this study had concerning plural understandings of masculinity, as well, the media offers us clues with respect to conscientization. For example, when the private chats of Brendan Leipsic, referenced previously, were outed, those involved saw the exposure as bad luck or someone who violated the locker-room code, as Chris noted in our study. The issue is not that players do/say misogynistic things, it is that they betray the team by getting caught. Moreover, the bad apple argument continues to deny accountability with a system that uses sexism and misogyny to get a rise out of players as a means to increase their ability to play and win. At the naive level, those involved may blame themselves for engaging in the conversation or a player may be at a magical level of consciousness and instead blame a violation of the bro code as the problem as at the magical level of consciousness sexism is “characterized by fatalism” as it is inevitable (Freire, 2013, p. 41). At the highest level of consciousness, the critical stage, those involved may look at hockey culture and the institution’s structure as having a role in how women are objectified within hockey culture and push back against it to clear the air.

The challenge for men’s ice hockey in the wake of the #MeToo movement is eliminating sexism from a field that is dominated by
men. Some may be inclined to argue, if women are not in the space, does it matter that men’s ice hockey is contaminated with sex pollution? Yet, men’s ice hockey players do not only dwell on the ice, but move between fields. Their socialization, or grooming, into hockey culture needs a critical lens, such as Freire’s conscientization, as a means to discern the level of awareness players have concerning sexism. Being critically conscious of sexism offers a means to begin to eliminate gender-based violence off the ice such as Brendan Leipsic’s engagement with misogynistic comments, Slava Voynov being suspended from the National Hockey League due to a 2014 domestic abuse conviction, and the more recent allegations (and at the time of this writing still unanswered) of gang-sexual assault against members of both the 2003 and 2018 Canadian World Junior teams (Chidley-Hill, 2022; Whyno, 2019). These performances of hypermasculinity are now conversations around the dinner table and have caused governmental agencies, corporate sponsors, and parents to begin to develop an awareness of the dark side of hockey culture. However, as sport overall faces a reckoning for forms of oppression and discrimination, there remains a lack of understanding of how systemic and deep sexism is within hockey culture as players, government officials, parents, and fans grapple with understanding how sexism can be a systemic problem within men’s ice hockey and not solely a societal problem or just a bunch of bad apples. Again, Freire’s conscientization provides further insight as sport undergoes a reckoning. Sexism has become lost as the narrative moved to power and privilege, such as seen in Canada with the collective push for new leadership in Hockey Canada while the alleged gang-sexual assaults have been pushed back into the collective denial (Brant & Sadler, 2022).

Clearing the Air

Within hockey culture, the struggle for what it means to be human needs to emerge through heterogeneous encounters to expose cycles of privilege and oppression. In the case of sex pollution, men’s ice hockey players are both oppressors, and we contend, oppressed as they are denied a view of what it means to be otherwise and are continually exposed to sex pollution. Participants in our study began their journey to becoming hockey players at young ages, some before they could walk, and have learned what it means to be a man through their interactions within hockey culture. What they did not learn was how to resist the ideals of hypermasculinity. To become critically conscious of equity and reduce gender-based violence, men and boys need to move beyond a “single dimension” of what it means to be a boy and man (Freire, 1974, p. 3). Within our study, while participants did not recognize sexism within the air, sexism and misogyny polluted their environment. For players still professionally active, we saw a mix between the magical and naïve level of consciousness. At the magical level, many could not even conceptualize that sexism and misogyny were being reproduced within hockey culture. At the naïve level, our data fragments above demonstrate that they could see how hockey culture perpetuated sexism and misogyny but not that both were ingrained within the structure of hockey culture. However, those who have stopped playing altogether were at critical levels of consciousness as they looked back on their careers and saw the ways in which hockey culture moved them to becoming men they did not like and these men had to work with their partners and therapists to breathe clean air again.

At the intersection of on and off ice, women and girls are in a liminal space that is stuck within “sexist practices of representation and gender-based inequalities” (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 3). Within white supremacist cultures, rape is “both right and rite of the male dominating group” (hooks, 2014, p. 57) and the ability to objectify women with ease and little resistance results in violence against women that remains “unrecognized” (Freire, 2000, p. 55). The violence as noted in the data fragments is used as a means to energize the team to perform at their highest level to win the game, championships, and Olympic medals. As players still breathing in sex pollution did not have high levels of critical consciousness with respect to sexism, this begs the question: Are players who acquiesce to hypermasculinity oppressors or are they an objectified subject? To be clear, this does not condone any acts of gender-based violence or forms of violence; however, if society is to embrace the #MeToo movement begun in 2006 by Tarana Burke, we need to ask hard questions that inquired into the socialization process (grooming) such as in men’s ice hockey. As athletes speak out and news media continues to report gender-based violence stemming from hockey culture, we can no longer be complicit with a national identity or sport that uses women and girls as props or points in team-building events. And this means asking hard questions about hockey culture, masculinity, commodification of athletes, and their precarity.

The Objectified Subject

The oppressed do not initiate violence, as it is enacted by agents who “oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons” (Freire, 2000, p. 55). Violence within men’s ice hockey is an expected part of the game, and violence becomes equated with understandings of masculinity (Dennie & Millar, 2019; Messner, 2002; Plassche, et al., 2022; Robinson, 1998; Young, 1993). The physical nature of ice hockey requires players to display a certain form of aggression and bravado that they would not require in everyday life (Adams, 2006; Allain, 2010; Colburn, 1985; Robidoux, 2001; Young, 2000). British sport sociologist Kevin Young (2000) notes that although sport violence in Canada and the United States often technically qualifies as criminal assault, athletes are usually excused from such crimes during games. In addition, Jamieson and Orr (2009) and Whannel (2002) list hockey violence as an issue both on and off the ice in Canada. Violent episodes can break out between players, fans, parents, and others involved with the sport. This is akin to hooliganism and soccer riots in Europe. Jamieson and Orr (2009) attribute these problems to poor management on the part of those in charge of hockey leagues and venues.

As elite-level players often learn how to skate while learning how to walk, the socialization process through the experiences of belonging to a national pastime turned nationalist identity presents with barriers that allow for sex pollution to continue to accumulate. Clearing the air implied risk. Participants in our study overwhelmingly spoke about their precarity within ice hockey. While codes of silence restricted players from speaking up against sexism and misogyny, players were policed into silence by established narratives that placed winning at all costs, above humanity. Elite-level players in our study felt insecure with their position on their team stating that they were lucky to be there and that they had to work very hard to stay, and this implied playing through injuries and breathing in air filled with sex pollution. Participants felt that they needed to sacrifice not only their identities but their bodies as they were a part of a form of nationalism, particularly in Canada as ice hockey is one of our national sports (Allain, 2008, 2010; MacDonald, 2014). As mentioned, if players did not acquire or actively “repress” counterstories to sexism and misogyny, their
positions on the team were at risk of disappearing (Giroux, 2001, p. 91). One participant stated that

  if you’re not going to do exactly what we’re asking, if you’re not going to give everything you have, if you’re not going to stand up for your team, then you’re going to show up one day, and your equipment’s going to be in a garbage bag in a shopping cart out back. And that’s how they cut people. (Greg Smith)

Participants also spoke of being traded as teenagers—one referring to himself as a suitcase. Others outright stated that their coaches did not care about them as people and only saw them as “money.” They referred to hockey as a cutthroat industry, and they knew they were the product.

Being an object implies you lack humanity as “objects do not have agency or the ability to control how they are seen by people” (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 1). While men’s ice hockey players act as agents in the field of hockey culture, without a critical conscious awareness of the ways in which they are objectifying women and girls through the haze of sex pollution, they themselves become an objectified subject. Participants in our study were unable to overtly resist hypermasculinity and were unable (or unwilling) to raise their levels of consciousness to be aware of the impact of sex pollution on their dispositions. Men had to acquiesce to the destructive environment in order to fulfill childhood dreams and national pride. Participants in our study were unable, or unwilling, due to the policing tactics and precarity of their positions of power to make changes that push against sexism and misogyny. Off the ice, men’s ice hockey players are able to move through the world with levels of freedom that others do not share. Participants in our study spoke of their “status” in their communities and that this status opened doors and opportunities that they may not have had otherwise. On the ice, however, the precarity of their positions was palpable. Thus, the paradox of being a men’s ice hockey player moves men’s ice hockey players into the role of an objectified subject. Freire (2013) considers the influences of the environment on the status of human beings through their having to adapt or integrate into their surroundings. Within the field of men’s ice hockey, this movement emerges in the paradox of the objectified subject.

Integration into a field is according to Freire (2013) a “human activity”; however, when one needs to adapt to a field, their humanity is lost and they become an object (p. 4). As players in our study could not demonstrate high levels of awareness of sex pollution, their misrecognition caused them to adapt, leaving them as objects. When participants were learning how to skate, they spoke fondly of appealing their fathers and as they grew into the game, the camaraderie and bonding of brothers became an organic family. However, through the rituals associated with successful hockey teams, sexism, and misogyny continued to frame a view of women as one that was less than human and without participants’ ability to recognize the ways in which they perpetuate sexism, they become the objectified subject, a paradox. Men’s ice hockey players become subjects of a dominant narrative that objectifies women and girls to improve a team’s ability to win, but also they become objectified as they must adapt to this field through their misrecognition of sex pollution. Without the ability to question, discuss, dialog about hockey culture and its perpetuation of sexism and misogyny, the objectified subject has unknowingly adapted to a culture that has taken away their ability to choose something different. Women are used within hockey culture as props, and this reinforces masculine dominance on and off the ice, naturalizing the roles of the hypermasculine man and submissive woman, and gender binaries (Bourdieu, 2001). Men move between fields within this paradox of the objectified subject as they need to adapt in order to preserve their socialized idea of status, maintaining masculine domination. However, as they misrecognize sex pollution, they are also ignoring the impact on their disposition.

Participants in our study who moved to critical levels of consciousness also described the impact of this contradiction between the love of the game of ice hockey and hockey culture stating that:

  I just didn’t feel a part of it anymore. I loved the portion where I was on the ice where I could skate around and the skilled portion of playing the game, I love playing the game. I hate everything else about hockey now. And that’s come from just years of educating myself and learning and not personally feeling a part of it. And I hate it. The second I got to the bench, until I could get back onto the ice again. I hated the second I entered the dressing room until I could get onto the ice again. And I hated the second the buzzer went, and I had to go back into the dressing room. Because in those spots, it was all about how much you could drink. It was all about what funny racist jokes you could tell. How could you talk about someone’s daughter or wife or sisters’ bodily features and compare them to each other? (Greg Smith)

However, the fear of breathing clean air within remains due to the policing strategies. Mark Scott, while playing, was speaking out openly about social justice issues but at the same time felt the looming implications on his career: “as for what I am doing right now, I’m scared everyday a little bit, I’m not scared at the end of the day, because I don’t care, but I’m doing a lot of speaking out on issues.” However, he considered how his advocacy was viewed by his team, them perhaps thinking he was only going to profit off of his status rather than his attempting to raise awareness with his brothers (team). His perceptions of their views on his social justice advocacy caused him to wonder that they thought he was “just here for I think for a short time, so I’m just here to get my content popping and my Instagram popping and then I’ll be out of here, or am I really in it for the right reasons.” As of this writing, his premonitions were correct. Silence is rewarded. Activism is not.

Conclusions

The policing tactics and feelings of precarity continue to give space for men’s elite ice hockey players to misrecognize they are breathing in sex pollution. As young boys yearn to become an elite-level men’s ice hockey player, they begin their journeys of learning to become men in the image of men who win at all costs and use women as a means to propel them forward. The lack of a critical consciousness is not only a means for masculine domination to perpetuate but continues to teach men that women are passive and meant to support men in upward mobility. This narrative is even more dangerous in a country like Canada that bases its national identity and heritage on men’s ice hockey which is a sport dominated by cis-white-hetero men who have become objectified subjects through their “paradoxical submission” into hockey culture (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 1). This paradox offers a window into the ways in which sex pollution dominates men’s ice hockey but also how it lingers off the ice. Gaining insights into the ways in which hypermasculinity is rewarded, expected, and policed within a petri dish of power that is men’s elite ice hockey offers a means to disrupt
sexism and misogyny within a field that is currently predominately empty of women but one that greatly influences the ways in which women and girls are objectified. Giving men’s ice hockey players space to move through the process of conscientization while playing offers a point of disruption. Participants who left hockey culture gained critical consciousness and recognized sex pollution and their role allowing it to bloom as they had time and space to work through outcomes of hypermasculinity in dialog with others, and their dialogs were not policed. Through dialogical relationships, there is potential for a disruption.

Notes
1. We intentionally use lowercase for the “w” when referring to white people as a means of decentring whiteness and its inherent privileges.
2. All participant names are pseudonyms.
3. Former Washington Capital Brendan Leipsic was reported to have made misogynistic comments about women in a group chat (Bengel, 2020).

References