Schools represent spaces in which normative gender regimes are produced and reproduced. As such, schools facilitate a “contest for hegemony” between rival versions of masculinity” in which masculine differentiation emerges from a “collective process, something that happens at the level of the institution and in the organization of peer-group relationships” (Connell, 1989, p. 295; italics original). Institutionally, schools are a “prime mover” in shaping gender culture, with “tough” or “hard” forms of masculinity symbolically rewarded by teachers who act as “cultural accomplices” in perpetuating hegemonic discourses (Smith, 2007, p. 188). Young men “who do not measure up, the effeminate, the overweight, and the un-

Keywords: masculinities, body image, adolescents, heteronormativity, physical education

Drawing on two separate studies, one in the U.S. and one in Canada, we address subordinated and marginalized masculinities by examining the tensions and contradictions in school cultures that claim to support all students but actually perpetuate a singular and dominant heteronormative masculinity. Particularly salient to this research is the body as a location for the negotiation of meanings that converge with and diverge from dominant masculine discourses. Our work advocates for and provides a voice to a group of young men who have felt marginalized and silenced in schools, and we hope to provoke critical reflection on heteronormative practices that permeate curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture.

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** The University of Western Ontario, Canada.

The second author acknowledges the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as well as the support of the Canadian Institute of Health Research. The second author also acknowledges his research collaborators M. Atkinson (University of Toronto) and K. Wamsley (University of Western Ontario). Both authors appreciate the careful reading and feedback Michael Messner provided of an earlier draft of this paper presented at the American Education Research Association, Vancouver, Canada, April 2012.

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underweight and who do not compensate for this by engaging in other masculine activities ... are usually made to suffer the consequences of their lack of ‘masculinity’” (Mills, 2001, p. 26). School physical education curricula and sport culture reinforce gendered values associated with competitive team sport, which privilege certain masculinities over others (Connell, 1996; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Pascoe, 2003). In essence, we learn our bodies in that “we are taught how to think about our bodies and how to experience our bodies” (McLaren, 1991, p. 156). Physical education classes serve as informative locations through which to understand how young men negotiate gender through bodily practice.

METHODS

The work is based on two studies, one conducted in the Washington, DC, and the other in three provinces across Canada. The American study represents the first author’s dissertation research, an interpretive phenomenological study of how six young men experience and understand their masculinities. Data collection consisted of phenomenological conversations (Seidman, 2006) and positionality, analytical, and integrative memos (Maxwell, 2005; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Participatory visual methods—auto-photography and photo-elicitation—were also used to reduce researcher/co-researcher hierarchy, empower co-researchers in telling their own stories, as an additional form of data to ensure validity, and as analytical prompts (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Although the study did not focus on body image, the theme emerged during data analysis. Table 1 presents the profiles of the young men.

Study II was a three-year Canadian funded study conducted in three provinces (Ontario, British Columbia, Nova Scotia). The researchers examined the reluctance of some adolescent young men to participate in grade nine PE. Grounded in qualitative research traditions (Patton, 2002), the authors conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of young men who self-identified as reluctant participants in their first year of PE. Participants were invited to participate through journaling via a secure weblog. This process allowed for participants to provide immediate day-by-day accounts of their experiences. Finally, the participants allowed the researchers to conduct field observations for one week while the participants were in their health and physical education class. A total of

Table 1
Study One Co-Researchers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseud.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joël</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>High school graduate; working; undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>High school graduate; working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Palestinian &amp; Filipino</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High school graduate; full-time college student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>White, gay</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High school senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High school senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White, gay</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High school graduate; full-time college student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
77 young men voluntarily participated in this study. The findings included in this paper reflect common recurring themes expressed across participants.

This research centered on conducting “cultural interviews” thus allowing the researchers to better understand the norms, values, and taken for granted rules of interaction for this group of boys (see Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The semi-structured interviews provide opportunity for these young men to articulate and describe convergent and divergent understandings of a cultural context of PE classrooms across provinces. Patton (2002) argues that “because all social systems involve routines, participants in those routines may take them so much for granted that they cease to be aware of the important nuances” (p. 263). Our aim was to allow for a more textured understanding of their participation in PE to emerge both from the interviews as well as our field observations that allowed us to observe and record the cultural setting of PE classrooms.

**Body Imagery as Hegemonic Gender Discourse**

The visibility and marketization of men’s bodies through media imagery has proliferated over the last twenty years, particularly in North America (see Ricciardelli, Clow & White, 2010). Research highlights the degree to which we appear to embrace an ideology purporting that gender emerges from and is defined by the body, with true masculinity inherent in the male body and the body both driving action and setting limits to action (Connell, 1995). Increasingly, cultural messages, transmitted through imagery and school culture, are contributing to shifting attitudes about male body image even among very young boys (Azzarito, 2009; Birbeck & Drummond, 2006; Grogan, 1999; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Murray, Rieger, Karlov, & Touyz, 2013). The importance of the body as a location of gender coherence renders physical attributes and displays, such as achievement in sport and heterosexual conquest, essential in the socially acceptable performance and expression of one’s masculinity (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Light & Kirk, 2000). Messages conveyed through imagery profoundly influence how body image impacts young men’s self-image, self-confidence, and self-worth, and can result in eating disorders and muscle dysmorphia (Murray et al., 2013; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004) as well as “affect the likelihood that we will engage in, or avoid exercise” (Grogan, 2006, p. 525). The lack of physicality results in some individuals being “almost automatically excluded and outcast” (Frost, 2003, p. 65). Drummond (2001) finds a link between body image and boys’ self-concept and masculine identifications, with young men who fail to meet body image expectations suffering feelings of guilt, self-consciousness, and poor body image.

Whereas the idealized, eroticized, and objectified female body has historically dominated media images, the idealized male body is now gaining visibility (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). What has changed is the manner in which “the male (body) has become an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look” with men’s bodies having “gone from near invisibility to hypervisibility,” which contributes to boys and men increasingly defining themselves through their bodies (Gill et al., 2005, p. 39). Images of lean muscular men contribute to body dissatisfaction among men and boys, yet the relatively hidden nature of the problem of male body image dissatisfaction may emanate from “the existence of a social prohibition among boys admitting to body dissatisfaction” (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006, p. 569).
Further complicating men’s complex relationship with body image, Olivardia et al. (2004) found that young men erroneously believe that young women desire males significantly more muscular than young women’s actual ideal male body. Men desire a large ideal body both to “gain respect from other men,” and “muscle belittlement” has been associated with depression, eating disorders, and negative self-esteem (Olivardia et al., 2004, p. 117). The conflation of masculinity with normative body imagery contributes to boys’ dissatisfaction with their own bodies if they fail widely promulgated, but unrealistic, litmus testing. Many boys and men labor “under increased societal and media pressures to meet an ever more unrealistic body ideal” (Olivardia et al., 2004, p. 118). Body imagery thus perpetuates hegemonic discourses, which manufacture and market desire among boys and men for bodies that few can actually achieve.

Beliefs driving boys to fulfill unrealistic expectations find further expression beyond school spaces. Coaching practices, for example, reflect a limited and restricted view of boys. The assumption that all boys possess a natural affinity for sports is articulated by coaches and often supported by parents, whose views of boys, unlike girls, remain relatively unreconstructed (Messner, 2011). Pascoe (2003, p. 1426) notes a hierarchy of masculinities inherent in school culture in which “jocks,” who participate in the “right” sports, such as football, basketball, soccer, wrestling, or baseball, sit at the top, dominate others, and display “an emphasized heterosexuality in which girls function as status symbols or sexual objects.” Our co-researchers expressed awareness of oppressive normative masculine discourses. Their stories relate a sense of surveillance and judgment in a framework of normative body imagery, and they express feelings of fear, marginalization, and diminished sense of self.

**Heteronormative Masculinity as Animating Fear**

If gender is viewed as performative, culture assumes a logic by which “gender is achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positioning, and where threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself” (Butler, 1997, pp. 135-136). Homophobia defines a binary gender regime that defines one gender in opposition to an Other with the socially prescribed traits of the opposite gender foreclosed. Kimmel (2008, p. 47) characterizes masculinity as “a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men” animated by homophobia, which positions homosexuality as unmanly. Homophobia consolidates “sexuality and gender through the traducing of femininity, and its association with homosexuality” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 214). The practices associated with homophobia draw “social boundaries, defining ‘real’ masculinity by its distance from the rejected” (Connell, 1995, p. 40). Pascoe (2005) and Mac an Ghaill (1994, 1996) characterize the “fag” discourse as gendered homophobia because the epithet is aimed primarily at boys by other boys as a way to enforce normative masculinity. The word “fag” can carry both explicit sexual meaning and the derision of one’s masculinity by denoting a lack of guts, femininity, weakness, softness, and inferiority with the fag position cast as abject Other “outside masculinity that actually constructs masculinity” (Pascoe, 2005, p. 342; Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

The “fag” discourse also acts as a technology of disciplinary surveillance, “a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, con-
versely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visi-
ble” (Foucault, 1995, pp. 170-171; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Performance
of normative masculinity requires public repudiation and counter-performance of
feminized masculinities because feminine qualities are loathsome in hegemonic
masculine culture (Mac an Ghaill, 1996). Body stylization through what one wears
and how one looks, is “central to the performance of masculinity, where there is al-
ways the threat of being labeled as gay,” and boys are “encouraged to perform their
gendered identities in particular ways to survive the prospect of homophobic
abuse” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 216).

Chris, one of our American co-researchers, commented extensively on the im-
egery he has seen, specifically in media representations that communicate mes-
geasures about how bodies should look and what they should do from, in his words,
a "straight perspective." During one of our conversations, Chris showed me a mag-
zine advertisement, which he described as portraying the woman as more “deli-
cate” whereas the man was “more clothed” and “taking care of her.” To Chris, the
image illustrated the perpetuation of heteronormativity through sanctioning spe-
cific socio-cultural gender roles, behaviors, and relationships. Masculinity is de-
efined by what one does, how one looks, and who dominates whom. Chris
concluded: “It was always from a straight perspective, too, like everything I saw.”
Imagery of muscularity, athletic performance, and heterosexual relationships and
displays of affection represent aspects of body stylization that convey narratives
of proper gender performance. The failure to perform hegemonic masculine nar-
ratives represents one’s own masculine failure through association with a feminine
opposite. Thus, the deprecation of certain men and boys through masculine hier-
archies in which “inferior” masculinities are associated with femininity suggests
that homophobia essentially emerges from misogyny.

STORIES

Reflecting on our conversations with our co-researchers and making meaning of
their stories and photographs about their relationships with their bodies, we dis-
cerned three major themes that wove through their experiences: Negotiating the
Masculine Ideal; Acting Tough: Physical Affirmation; and Masculine Differentia-
tion Through Peer Interaction.

Negotiating the Masculine Ideal

Connell (1995, p. 77) notes: “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is
some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power.” In both stud-
ies, our co-researchers articulated their struggle to negotiate expectations related to
physical appearance and performance. School culture, curriculum, and pedagogy
reify these physical expectations expressed in imagery and cultural discourses. Our
co-researchers described both a desire to achieve an idealized masculinity and a
fear of failure to conform. Oliver derided these expectations as “the masculinity
thing.” Chris, who self-identified as gay, characterized the idealized masculine
body image portrayed through the magazines he reads as “the masculine male.”
Sitting with Chris as he flipped through the pages of one of the “gay magazines”
he reads, he discussed a photo spread that portrayed a group of handsome, mus-
cular men. The photos alternate between scenes of the men laughing and pushing
each other into the pool and photos of the men staring pensively into the camera. Chris characterized the image of the “masculine males” portrayed in the photos as “muscular” and “cool.”

The masculine male is still idealized in gay magazines. Like it’s not going to be a guy wearing makeup and stuff. It’s gonna be, like, he’s muscular, and, I don’t know, they’re still kind of cool.

Chris talked about the many ways in which gay men perform their masculinities, but he interprets the images he sees of the “masculine male” to conflate masculinity with a muscular body. Yet Chris may also be expressing the re-appropriation of imagery by gay men in response to cultural marginalization rooted in homophobia and heteronormativity. Re-appropriation of the “masculine male” image thus contributes to a counter-hegemonic narrative. The “masculine male” image represents an object of desire for our co-researchers as well as a source of discomfort as they attempt to be physically fit while fearing to participate in physical education classes predicated on normative masculine imagery and hyper-competitiveness. They feel a contradiction between “being in good shape” and the ways boys participate in typically aggressive and competitive sports. Mythic explains:

I want to be in good shape. It’s just a lot of the ways people stay in good shape doesn’t really appeal to me, like team sports and competitiveness. I’m not really into that.

Rod also expresses the tension between a highly valued sporty masculinity and a ridiculed weaker masculinity. He desires to develop athletic skill, but he characterizes athletic skill as a defense mechanism to protect himself from embarrassment:

Well, I need to improve more on lifting weights, but other than that, I have good skills. I like basketball or soccer. You just have to know how the game goes, and you have to know what strategies you can do to take the ball away from the other person…. I don’t want anybody to really embarrass me at all. Like, say they called me fat...

When asked about the importance of lifting weights in physical education class, Rod equates health and fitness with muscularity: “Well, you just seem more healthier and more muscular. I don’t know, I guess it just impresses their friends.” Rod equates fitness with muscularity and views muscularity as the currency of normative masculinity, which can be exchanged for popularity and safety from embarrassment. Bob echoes Rod’s feelings, noting that muscularity allows boys to “show off” in the masculine hierarchy:

They might also like it just because they can lift heavier weights. They can show off. Like running faster than the other guys, it’s an achievement.

The experiences of Mythic, Rod, and Bob illustrate Kimmel’s (2008) description of masculinity as a homosocial experience in which men perform under the sur-
veillance of other men. Masculine positioning impacts how these boys understand their bodies, and connections between sport, health, muscularity, and normative masculinity suggest that bodily production represents their masculine expression (Robertson, 2003). Discourses around the masculine ideal are alarming because achieving such an idealized body is “neither achievable by most men nor required for optimum health” (Labre, 2002, p. 235). Masculine positioning is produced and facilitated by the rationalizing nature of social institutions, including schools, which perpetuate a hierarchical ranking system for the “subjects” therein (Foucault, 1995). Joey describes masculine positioning as the tension between his desire to participate in physical education class and the exclusionary power exercised by other boys:

I want to know that I’m at least doing good and not just okay, and I try and participate as much as possible, but it’s hard to do when nobody passes you the ball in games and stuff, so it kind of brings down my participation mark a little bit.

Joey describes a hypercompetitive hegemonic contest in which alliances form based on physical power dynamics. Hegemony emerges through inclusion and exclusion resulting in winners and losers in the battle for the currency increasingly prized by schools: grades, or, as Joey notes, his “participation mark.” Hegemonic competition as pedagogy raises the question of how we can encourage young men to participate in physical education classes to promote healthy life practices while simultaneously perpetuating normative masculinity by promoting some at the expense of others. Our co-researchers are acutely aware of their masculine locations relative to other young men in their physical education classes. They perceive their bodies as inadequate and as requiring development to navigate forms of muscular, sporty masculinities valued and dominant in physical education classes—survival—rather than in the pursuit of lifelong health. Spike judges himself as not “built” for athletics and conveys a sense of diminished physical self-concept:

I mean I’m not built for athletics. Like I said before, I’m not built for gym class, and I don’t excel at sports because I can’t run fast, or I can’t play basketball, and the other people will be faster than me and stuff like that, and I’ll just be a bench warmer basically, and I’ll be last picked for everything.

Spike notes the dichotomy between “academic guys” and the “jocks” to whom physical education classes actually cater. Willis (1977), Mac an Ghaill (1994), and Frosh et al. (2002) analyze masculine taxonomies related to class positions, which differentiate “hard” forms of physical masculinity from feminized masculinities associated with academic achievement. Spike explains a similar dynamic in his experience:

The ones who are doing worse are the little or big academic guys who would much rather probably be writing an essay than doing gym and the guys who maybe have a better vocabulary, a better understanding of the academic portion of school, they’re not doing as well in gym because that’s not who it’s geared towards. It’s geared towards the jocks whose vocabulary mainly consists of “Yo man what’s up? How ya doing?” Stuff like that.
Our work makes visible our co-researchers’ stories of a masculine hierarchy in the context of physical education dominated by an idealized muscular body type. The ability to publically perform and embody an idealized masculinity under the gaze of other young men underscored how our co-researchers negotiate their school spaces, particularly their physical education classes. The inability to perform physically, in our co-researchers’ experience, positions boys to occupy an inferior masculinity.

**Acting Tough: Physical Affirmation**

Physical education classes provide spaces in which young men showcase their bodies through subjection to a process of “surveillance and regulation of the gendered body or rather the disciplining of the gendered body inscribed with certain hegemonic traits of masculinity” (Martino & Beckett, 2004, p. 245). Hegemony is institutionalized and maintained through a gender regime predicated on coercion and fear ubiquitous in school spaces:

> The pressure on young guys to conform, first to the Boy Code and then to the Guy Code, is so intense and unforgiving and that the fear of failure … is what leaves so many young guys with a knot in their stomach every time they eat in the cafeteria, go to the bathroom, walk out onto the playground, change their clothes in the locker room, or even walk between one class and the next. (Kimmel, 2009, p. 186)

Our co-researchers described a process of locating the dominant masculine boys as actively striving to position themselves as more powerful than other young men through “show[ing] up others” through physical “strength.” Mythic explains:

> [I]t’s to show people what they can do, like show up their physical strength and they can’t think of any other ways to do that so the only way would be gym and that’s one noticeable way … so I think that’s why they really enjoy gym just so they can use their strength and physical stuff so people will notice.

Mythic further explains that boys’ “showing off” is actually a masquerade to hide vulnerabilities lurking in “parts of them that aren’t strong.” Mythic reports that many boys “show off” their bodies to receive masculine affirmation and develop their bodies to hide their perceived vulnerabilities. Our co-researchers expressed awareness of social constructions of the “ideal body” and how muscularity and body size and shape are perceived and popularized in the configurations of masculinities in schools (Azzarito, 2009). Body negotiations in specific school spaces such as locker rooms and various parts of school hallways support strategies for masculine affirmation and territorialism through physical displays that become emblematic as markers of heteronormative masculinity and zones of systematic violence and bullying (Atkinson & Kehler, 2012). The masculinizing practices and discourses described by our co-researchers signal a disturbing trend, particularly in schools that purportedly supported acceptance, non-conformity, and inclusion. Keddie and Mills (2008) describe all male environments related to boys’ investments in and exertions of power as an expression of their masculinity through
which boys routinely demonstrate specific “understandings where constructions of successful masculinity are associated with power and control over verbal and physical space” (p. 5).

Our co-researchers critiqued physical education classes as failing to provide safe spaces in which they could explore, develop, and gain confidence in healthy lifestyle practices. Rather, they serve as arenas in which to showcase dominant practices based on physical strength and muscul arity. Rod explains:

People sometimes like to tease you because people try and tend to act tougher when they’re older and they’re bigger and they want to kind of just pick on the other person… They just do that to show, I don’t know, that they’re cool … they’d say rude stuff about other people that are not good in gym class.

Rod describes an environment characterized by physical and verbal intimidation and abuse. Santiago, who self-identified as gay, also comments extensively on the bullying he experienced, which to him was inherent in school cultures that actively established and perpetuated gender hierarchies:

You have this big divide between all the jocks and everyone else … it was a little emasculating even at that age to be separated from the other males in that grade … it did cause self-esteem issues later in life I think, kind of that early rejection from other males.

Even in elementary school, Santiago confronted a masculine hierarchy in which he describes feeling rejected, separated, and even emasculated. He felt “kind of discriminated against early in life” because of the rejection he experienced, and bullying prompted him to change schools:

People are bullied all through elementary school, and then they get into middle school, and in middle school, that’s where everyone learns the curse words, that’s where everyone learned to say, you know, like fag and stuff like that … if you brought up bullying to the administration they’d say, “Oh you’re fine.”

Santiago describes the experience as “devastating,” feeling “less than,” and “seeking approval from a group of people that you knew wouldn’t accept you.” He concluded by commenting on the resultant anger, of which he continues to try and make sense: “It wasn’t self-hate cuz it wasn’t ‘Why am I this way?’ It was more of ‘God damn I hate them!’”

Santiago describes how school culture facilitated the marginalization of non-hegemonic masculinities through hyper-competitive masculine positioning, which results in clear winners and losers. Mike explains how the masculine positioning endemic in physical education classes and sports appear in other institutional contexts by relating an incident in which one of his rugby teammates nearly got into a fight with one of the “cool guys” after accidentally bumping into him in the cafeteria:
And, so he [Mike’s friend] was like, you know, “It was an accident I’m sorry.” He [the “cool guy”] was like “No, no. Say I’m sorry sir.” He’s like, he’s like, “Uh, no.” So, I mean all the, you know, rugby guys got up and, you know, we were just like standing behind [Mike’s friend]. It was like, “Do you have something to say to us?” They were like “Oh no, no, we don’t have anything.” So, you know, they just walked away and got back into their little corner of the cafeteria and just started, you know, talking trash again.

Mike describes physical affirmation as a marker of masculinity and how a seemingly insignificant event escalated into an “us versus them” conflict, which carried an explicit threat of physical violence in order to maintain a specific masculine position. By backing down, the “cool guy” and his group occupied an inferior masculine position. Thus, talk is cheap compared to the hard currency of physical ability and dominance. Similar to Swain (2003), our co-researchers are “embodied social agents for they do not merely have a passive body that is inscribed and acted upon, but they are actively involved in the development of their bodies” (p. 300).

Mike explains that schools actually encourage a tough masculinity through the development of hard bodies:

I got into martial arts club with my friend where we got a chance to just punch each other and just knock each other out, and it would be OK…. It was safe since there was a teacher there just watching us beat the crap out of each other.

Mike’s story brings to mind the saying “boys will be boys” because aggression and violence are so culturally associated with boyhood. In cases such as this and school spaces that are male exclusive, there is an intense process of gender marking or what Connell (2003) describes as a “masculinity vortex.” Boys assume positions, for example in school sports, as opportunities to demonstrate what it means to be a man through body-reflexive practices that confirm and affirm heteronormative masculinity. Mike’s account provides an example of the process by which schools legitimate aggressive masculinities as naturally occurring through an implicit, if not explicit, expectation that boys “just punch each other and just be guys.” Spike confirms this shared understanding that “boys will be boys” and that in this climate young men are expected to “get over it.” He describes an institutionalized, taken-for-granted masculinity in which guys are expected to be “loud and rude and making fun of each other:”

What it means to be a boy in grade 9 is you’re definitely going to be picked on or discriminated against if you’re not this image of a man that society has…. I think my view of a man is somebody who’s just … it’s a male human being really, when it comes down to it and it’s a guy who’s not afraid to be himself and doesn’t care what other people think of him. That’s a real man, and I think in grade 9 gym, not a lot of people think that. They have more the “you’re guys, get over it” point of view.

The masculine body is one means by which boys actively, intentionally, and purposefully display evidence of heteronormative masculinity. Frost (2003, p. 67) notes the evaluative standards by which boys are judged in order to prove they are not
feminine while seeking the “approval and respect from other men … [which] may be withheld if a boy cannot produce a body worked to a lean and muscular form.” Our co-researchers understand idealized physical expectations, but they find those expectations unachievable and contradictory to their lived experiences. Their stories make visible a regime of institutional peer disciplining through humiliation and exclusion through which they have felt marginalized and stigmatized.

Masculine Differentiation Through Peer Interaction

Young men are often involuntary participants in a process that subjects them to the normative gaze of others and presents them with narrowly-defined parameters within which to “do” something with their bodies (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Boys portray themselves as truly masculine at the expense of other boys to enforce normative masculinity and attribute femininity to the victim (Smith, 2007). The policing of masculinities results in self-regulating behavior “governed by particular norms for proscribing the limits of a publicly validated form of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity” (Martino, 1999, p. 255). Our co-researchers’ peer interactions often represent narratives of fear in which they self-censor and regulate their masculine behaviors. They describe an emerging awareness about what they “know their body can do.” Knowledge of the body as a signifier of masculinity is captured in the connections our co-researchers make with more public displays of physical dominance. Mythic explains:

I think it’s because they’ve gone into puberty and so their bodies are developing and becoming stronger and they’ve been physical for a long time, but I think now that they know their body can do more, that they’re starting to take it even more seriously because I think they just want to show what they can do.

Domination and regulation of young men’s practices in physical education classes contributes to a form of “hyper-masculinity characterized by the preparedness to expunge weakness and exploit vulnerability” (Hickey, 2008, p. 155). Lines of demarcation emerge where insiders and outsiders operate on fields of play. Our co-researchers illustrate how young men appear to be participating in physical education classes, but they actually remain disengaged from physical activity because their participation carries the risk of harassment and ridicule. Joey and Bob explain how adolescent males physically display and impose their dominance over others in physical education classes:

JOEY: I have seen a few people flex their muscles in class and stuff and then ask one of the senior people to flex their muscles and then say that they’re doing really good, but you can kind of sense some sarcasm in their voice.

BOB: Maybe they look at other people and say, “oh I’m better than them. I have the bigger muscles” or something like that. “I can run faster than them.” The way they perform in certain activities make them surpass other people. So it’s kind of like comparing themselves to other people because if everybody’s the same, you can’t really say you’re better than them.
Asserting dominance over others through performative comparison is striking. Negotiating bodily spaces fuses with sporty athleticism in which bodies are judged, evaluated, and ranked through peer interactions with the establishment of a hierarchy of masculinities. Spike explains the effect of bodily surveillance in his experience:

Somebody would make a rude comment to me about my weight, and I just wouldn’t retaliate because there’s just no point. I’m not sinking to their level…. It doesn’t really affect me, but, well, evidently it does because years of it has led to my poor body image, but at the moment it doesn’t affect me, and there have been a few times where … people have smacked my fat and laughed at it because it jiggled, and I’ve been smacked right across, well, my boobs.

Spike further elaborates on the long-term impact his experiences in such a hostile environment are having on his knowledge and acceptance of his body image and the fear he feels about his body weight:

Last time I weighed myself I was around 260. I hope I’m not really any more than that now because I wasn’t comfortable with that weight, and so my weight has always been a big concern, not just because of the health problems,. I’m afraid of what I look like and how other people perceive me, and I know … it’s kind of a grey area because I’m not sure what a healthy body weight for my height would be…. So what I’m really trying to do is lose the fat and build muscle. So I may weigh the same. I may end up weighing more, but weight isn’t really as important to me as physique.

Spike fears other males’ perceptions of him based solely on his body. His confusion about a healthy body weight is complicated by a desire to “build muscle.” Joël also expresses his discomfort in physical education spaces marked by normative surveillance, competition, and his embarrassment over the inability to do a pull-up:

When people did pull-ups, it was just really uncomfortable because there were the couple of kids who could actually do pull-ups, and they did them pretty easily, and then everyone else. So, I felt really uncomfortable because, like, there would also be girls in the class, so obviously it [felt] really embarrassing not to be one of the kids who could actually do pull-ups. And for girls it didn’t really matter that much cuz they would literally go up there, um, give it their best shot, and pretty much none of them got a pull-up. But then there were the guys, and that’s when everyone really paid attention cuz, like, as a guy you were supposed to be, I guess stronger than a woman, so, I don’t know, I guess it was pretty embarrassing when I couldn’t do a pull-up. Not my best moment.

Joël illustrates the differential physical expectations of males and females, which equate a lack of physical strength with femininity. Physicality separates boys and girls and hierarchically ranks boys as well, so Joël’s physical “lack” resulted in his occupation of an inferior masculine position. In our co-researchers’ experiences, physical education classes have facilitated peer interactions in which they have ex-
experienced discomfort and feelings of failure and inferiority under performative gender surveillance driven by normative gender precepts. School spaces including locker rooms, physical education classes, and other sites, have perpetuated a toxic environment for young men like Spike and Joël whose acceptance was based on building and displaying an idealized masculine physique.

**CONCLUSION**

We have explored the intersection of masculinity, health, and physical education in school spaces, which has produced a normative discourse that has reduced health to the singular measure of one’s body mass index (Evans, Davies, & Rich, 2008). This discourse has defined masculinity through forging a muscular body in an environment of hyper-competitive heteronormative positioning—a body unattainable by most young men and not required for a healthy life. Our work contributes to developing an understanding of the interactive processes that produce and reproduce normative masculinity in health education. This context is particularly striking because of the underlying contradictions inherent in the promotion of health on the one hand and the unhealthy competitive negotiation of bodies among boys on the other. We also contribute to the theorization of masculinities in the context of physical education through deeper exploration of school cultures of masculinity, health, and harassment that silence young men’s anxieties about body image. Our findings suggest the need for continued critical dialogue about the impact of normative masculine discourses on school spaces, health education, and wider curriculum and pedagogy.

Our work further contributes to the dialogue on the evolution of the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Our co-researchers’ stories, contextualized in health and physical education, affirm the fundamental premise associated with hegemonic masculinity, both in theory and in practice: a plurality and hierarchy of masculinities exist, produced by patterns of hegemony that are culturally produced and institutionalized, and hegemony represents an ideal that few men and boys can attain (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The construction of masculinities, contextualized in idealized body imagery, represents a significant area of further inquiry, particularly in relation to critical discourses on globalization.

Our work also contributes to dialogues on the social embodiment of masculinities, because it illustrates bodies as objects and agents of social practice and the “circuits of social practice linking bodily processes and social structures” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 851). Our work illustrates that schools are intimately associated with bodily practices, and it supports the contention that among “dominant groups of men, the circuits of social embodiment constantly involve the institutions on which their privileges rest” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 852). Our co-researchers feel marginalized in their school spaces as a result of the enactment of bodily practices in physical education classes. Yet our work also demonstrates that inherent in the masculine hierarchy described by our co-researchers lies their recognition that they possess the agency to critique and even refuse to participate in it. Their stories convey the tension inherent in gender dynamics and illuminate the ways in which hegemonic masculinity subordinates young men who fail the litmus test. Yet they also suggest that living in such a climate of fear is just as damaging to those young men who pass the test and operate from a privileged masculine position. The maintenance of such privilege can be very tenuous indeed.
Bodies matter in gender expression, and focus on the body requires closer examination because of the routine ways in which young men are “physically positioned within a repertoire of masculine codes that are read off and enacted by the body” (Kehler, Davison, & Frank, 2005, p. 64). To dismiss the complex intersection between young men, their bodies, and school spaces ignores a normalizing gendering process extant in social institutions such as schools. Kehler and Martino (2007, p. 92) identify ways in which boys routinely problematize and interrogate masculinizing practices, but the difficulty for many young men, particularly those marginalized by these practices, is the “institutionalization of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in schools that denies and silences such critical discourses.” Our work advocates for young men marginalized by a normative masculine discourse by bringing their voices, stories, experiences, and perspectives to a discourse that has actively sought to exclude and disenfranchise them. Mac an Ghaill (1994, p. 9) envisions the re-conceptualization of schools as “makers of a range of femininities and masculinities” by functioning as public sites in which students might develop non-traditional gender identifications. Only through a sensitive dialogue in which we acknowledge young men’s concerns and feelings can we address their anxieties about body image and negotiate the feelings of intimidation and inadequacy often communicated by young men reluctant to participate in physical education so that their experiences do not contribute to lasting poor self-concepts. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 853) note that “the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity should explicitly acknowledge the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy.” Rather than serving as normalizing institutions, schools might serve as spaces in which taken-for-granted notions of gender can be explored, hegemonic practices problematized, and non-traditional gender identifications and ways of being embraced and celebrated.

REFERENCES


