LEARNING MASCULINITIES: YOUTH, THE MEDIA, AND PHYSICAL
EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite the common claim in media studies that audiences bring well-developed interpretive strategies to media texts, young people are frequently cast as passive, or unreflexive, media consumers (Miles, 2000). This discourse is especially prominent with media that normalize physically powerful masculine personas (often called hegemonic masculinities). Studies abound that *describe* the gendered nature of contemporary media, but surprisingly little is known about how young people perceive and 'use' their media interpretations in their everyday lives (Messner, 2002a). Similarly, key studies have characterized physical education (PE) as a setting that is connected to the mass media in its tendency to reinforce dominant ideas about masculinity and the male body (Kirk, 2002; Kirk & Tinning, 1994), but there remains a dearth of ethnographic research that examines how PE class works to oppose and/or reinforce prevailing gender ideologies that circulate in the media.

With the aim of addressing these gaps in the literature, a three-month case study of three PE classes at a Vancouver-area high school was undertaken. This research examined how young males (n=36) conceptualize the hegemonic masculinities that are frequently shown in the media, and the extent to which PE either perpetuates or counteracts their media interpretations. Employing focus group, observation, and interview methods, three key findings emerged with this research: 1) that the boys understand the media in complex, often contradictory ways, but have a tendency to be critical of hegemonic masculinities; 2) that physical education, while offering the potential for various masculinities, often promotes hegemonic gender identities as 'normal'; and 3) that the participants tended to leave their critical media skills 'unused' in PE class, and thus displayed what can best be described as context-specific masculinities. These findings lead to a discussion of *why* the students' media criticisms were not reflected in their daily PE experiences. Specifically, I suggest that the constructed environment of physical education, the students' lingering hegemonic beliefs, and their failure to recognize dominant masculinities in their 'real' lives limited their potentially powerful media critiques. This analysis concludes with suggestions for future research, the most important of which involves continued ethnographic work with youth audiences.

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1 OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Young people inhabit a complex, often contradictory position in North American culture. Portraits of youth in the media, in law, in political practice, and in academia represent these individuals as simultaneously 'cool', destructive, apathetic, determined, misdirected, and impressionable, among other things (Wilson, 2006). The category 'youth' is one that is therefore flexible and often over-determined by its affiliations with other 'categories' such as class, race, and gender. As Giroux (1997) suggests, these complex intersections permit youth to be concurrently cast as "a symbol of hope for the future" and "a threat to the existing social order" (p. 36).

In spite of this ambiguity in describing/explaining young people's beliefs and behaviours, there is one theme that seemingly prevails: that youth are 'at-risk'. Giroux (2000) speaks to this discourse in describing 'the myth of childhood innocence', where young people are "marked as innately pure and passive" and are "ascribed the right of protection but are, at the same time, denied a sense of agency and autonomy" (p. 2). This assertion is perhaps most applicable in the relationship that young people have (or are perceived to have) with the media. Here I refer mainly to the ways in which youth understand the diverse images and storylines they encounter on TV, in movies and magazines, on the Internet, and in video games. The thread that runs through many reports on media 'effects' and youth leaves the unmistakable impression that these consumers are uncritical cultural 'dupes'. At times this is done by implication, as in the case of warning labels for parents on CDs and video games. At other times it is more pronounced, for example in recent governmental proceedings where media violence and

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youth behaviour are perceived in a cause-and-effect dialectic (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2006; also see Media Awareness Network, 2006). Despite the claims of authors like Miles (2000, c.f. Buckingham, 1993), who argue that young people have a strong familiarity and dexterity with media forms, these individuals have nonetheless been characterized as passive viewers across society. This is especially true for media productions that are laden with stereotypical ideas about men and masculinity. Consider the moral panic (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; c.f. Cohen, 1972), for example, that surrounds the effects of violent movies, TV shows, and video games that came to a crescendo following the recent Columbine High School shootings (Katz & Jhally, 2002). These taken-for-granted notions of vulnerability are surprising considering contemporary media studies have emphasized the variability with which media images can be interpreted, and the diverse interpretive strategies audience members bring to media texts (see Hall, 1980).

The idea that young people – especially boys - are vulnerable to media messages that promote violent forms of masculinity does not stem solely from the popular press. For example, academics that highlight the gendered contents of media but fail to consider how young people interpret these messages (especially those targeted at youth themselves) implicitly render the viewer as passive. Of course, this is not to suggest that the media have no bearing on the actions of young people. Certainly, the prevalence of masculinities that are steeped in toughness, aggression, and competitiveness – often called hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995) – on TV and in movies works to normalize these gender identities for everyone, including young males. Hegemonic masculinities in the media may indeed *contribute* to the rise in social statistics that link

young males to dangerous, risk-taking behavioural patterns (and hence, are connected to 'real' hegemonic masculinities – see Sabo, 2004), but gendered behaviour is developed in accordance with other social institutions, such as the school, the family, and the law.

The difficult issue at hand, then, is to discern how young people develop gender identities without reducing these individuals to passive observers in the process. It is particularly important to consider how masculinities are learned by adolescents since, as Willis (1990) contends, this is an especially formative period,

> The teenage and early adult years are important from a cultural perspective and in special need of close 'qualitative' attention because it is here ... where they form symbolic moulds through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of their lives. It is also the stage where people begin to construct themselves through nuance and complexity, through difference as well as similarity (p. 7-8).

Although theorists such as Giroux have called for youth agency to be considered in these research processes, the voices of young people themselves are heard far too infrequently. This 'gap' in the literature serves as the departure point for the current research.

The specific goal of this study was to examine what and how young males learn about masculinity in their relationships with the media and physical education class. With the notable exceptions of work by Kirk (2002) and Kirk and Tinning (1994), there have been few developed attempts to examine how these institutions work together as gender socializing forces for young males. This comes in spite of a profusion of literature describing how the media and PE class are similarly marked by a tendency to promote very narrow and stereotypical definitions of masculinity (i.e., the hegemonic masculinities referred to above) as 'normal'. This has been suggested already for media studies, where, despite the abundance of textual analyses that have revealed the prevalence of hegemonic images of men in popular media (for example, McKay *et al.*,

2005; Messner, 2002a), there remains a relative paucity of research designed to uncover how youth audiences interpret these images. Likewise, although physical education has widely been considered a discipline that allows for hegemonic male identities to flourish (Brown & Evans, 2004; Parker, 1996), and has thus been viewed as intrinsically connected to the mass media (Kirk, 2002; 1997), few ethnographic studies have sought to thoroughly uncover how this school subject works together with the media to shape the ways that young males understand masculinity.

With these gaps in mind, the current study sought to investigate the importance of popular media and physical education in the making of gendered identities for young males by considering the opinions and experiences of these individuals themselves. Specifically, the following study questions were addressed: **How do young males interpret media messages that provide narrow and stereotypical (or hegemonic) depictions of masculinity?** In what ways do they perceive 'alternate' or 'counter-hegemonic' masculinities? Since gender is a relational construct, how do these individuals understand media representations of femininity? **How is masculinity 'enacted' in physical education class? Does this serve to reaffirm or counteract popular depictions of masculinity (in media)?** How do popular representations of male identities (that is, male bodies and embodied practices) inform the everyday activities and experiences of youth 'audiences' in physical education class, if at all? How are the (gendered) experiences of youth in physical education intersected by other markers of difference, like race and class?

Research Outline

There are five main sections to this document: 1) the **literature review** highlights the key works in gender/masculinity, media, audience reception, and physical education studies that informed the conceptual approach taken in this research. Notable 'gaps' in these literatures are identified at this time; 2) the **method section** outlines the details of the three-month ethnography that was undertaken in a Vancouver-area high school to investigate how young people understand the media and experience physical education. Included in this overview is a description of the research techniques utilized in this study (focus groups, interviews, and observations) and a rationale for each of these methodological strategies; 3) the **findings section** summarizes the key findings on media, physical education, and masculinity that emerged in my work with the 'Vancouver High boys'; 4) the **discussion** explores links between these findings and existing literature; and finally, 5) the **conclusion** provides a summary of the above sections and offers suggestions for future research.

1.2 Literature Review

Hegemonic Masculinity

The use of hegemony theory to explain gender relations has recently become a dominant theme across the social sciences. For Raewyn Connell, who played a central role in pioneering the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (see Connell, 1995; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985) gender, like race and class, is "a way in which social practice is ordered" (1995, p. 71). This idea of gender 'ordering' is imbricated with notions of power and hierarchy, but first implies the variability of gender identities. Rather than tying masculinity and femininity to respective sets of 'natural' characteristics, Connell's work mirrors post-structuralist thought in that she takes up an anti-essentialist and anti-determinist perspective. Masculinities and femininities are forever in flux as they are intersected by multiple and often competing discourses at any time. This theoretical assertion is propelled by the visibility of different gender forms in popular culture, as well as the documenting of various masculinities and femininities through ethnographic practice (see Connell, 2000a; 2000b). This point granted the task becomes to consider the relations between differing gender forms. As Connell writes on masculinity, "[t]o recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only the first step. We have to examine the relations between them" (1995, p. 76).

It is in studying the relations between masculinities – the 'ordering' of gender – that Gramsci's (1973) hegemony is relevant. Initially a concept used to explain how capitalism remained the dominant mode of production in industrialized societies despite its supposed contradictions (as prescribed by Marxism – see Weedon, 1997), hegemony

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is applicable in other contexts because of its emphasis on the manner in which certain groups garner and maintain social power over others. Rather than relying exclusively on force and/or suppression to achieve social power, hegemony is a *process* whereby some attain a leading position by winning the consent of 'the masses' (1973; c.f. Lull, 2000).

In *Masculinities* (1995), Connell puts the hegemony paradigm to work in a gender context. Remaining true to Gramsci's principles, Connell argues that it is the consent of those who do not fulfill a hegemonic societal position – labeled 'complicit' in her analysis – that authorizes an elevated status to select masculinities. Ironically, the hegemonic position, whatever it may be at a particular historical juncture, is wholly unattainable to most men. Instead its power is normative, standing as an ideal that is constantly sought but rarely grasped (Connell, 1995, p. 79). The professional male athlete is a contemporary exemplar of hegemonic masculinity. Embodying 'masculine' traits like dogged competitiveness and physical strength, the male athlete acts as a model for a great number of men to mimic in their daily lives. Considering the limited openings into professional sport, however, as well as the difficulty most men have in attaining sustained competitiveness or bodily strength, the hegemonic status of the sportsman can only be supported and never met in full by most individuals (Whannel, 2002).

While complicity is important in normalizing dominant gender forms, hegemonic masculinities draw their greatest force through the subordination and/or marginalization of both femininities and 'alternate' masculinities. Here the power dynamic imbued within gender hierarchies is most visible, as is the relational character of gender constructs. With respect to women and femininity, Connell's earlier writing suggests a pattern of 'global dominance' of men over women (1995, p. 74; 1987, p. 183), on par with the feminist

construct of patriarchy. While this concept can be viewed as too broad to capture the particularities and contradictions innate to gender relations, it remains useful for the accompanying concept of the 'patriarchal dividend' where men have the potential to accumulate benefits in certain situations because of their privileged gender status. At a more condensed level, the privileging of men's interests over those of women is a common and often taken-for-granted reality of everyday life, and exists, if not always visibly, both personally and institutionally (Connell, 2005).

The 'patriarchal dividend' available to men should not obscure the fact that many men suffer great pains – both physically and emotionally – from the inequitable gender order. Connell speaks of 'subordination' to describe the oppression of masculinities that are antithetical to a dominant or hegemonic masculine paradigm - most notably homosexual masculinities - and 'marginalization' as a more specific form of gender inequality arising from class and race distinctions (1995, p. 78-81). Whatever terminology is used, the point remains that, similar to its relation to women and femininity, hegemonic masculinity is both defined and perpetuated by its relation to other less accepted masculinities. As has been documented in the extensive gender literature, the subordination/marginalization of non-hegemonic masculinities can come in a variety of ways - most disconcertingly through physical violence (Messerschmidt, 2000) - and in virtually any social setting (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity, then, can broadly be described as a distinct manifestation of masculine behaviour that sits atop a gender hierarchy of power and influence – a position that is sustained through the oppression of femininity and alternate masculinities. Of course, as gender identities are always in flux, the particular type of masculinity that is

considered 'hegemonic' is by no means immutable. Nonetheless, some authors have described the prevalence of a hegemonic version of masculinity that currently has pervaded popular culture, and has normalized violent and aggressive embodied practices for young males (Sabo, 2004; Messner, 2002a; White and Gillett, 1994). This identity expression carries with it potential social problems and health consequences which some authors have shown to include: violence between men (Sabo, 2004; Messner, 2002b; Connell, 1995); violence against women (Bordo, 1999; Messner, 2002b); and dangerous, risk-taking behaviour, often leading to injury or death (Sabo, 2004; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994; Messner, 1992). Acknowledging the multiplicity of hegemonic masculini*ties*, for simplicity the term 'hegemonic masculinity' will henceforth be employed to refer to this one particular gender identity.

Hegemonic Masculinity: Criticisms and Reformulation

The flexibility of the hegemonic masculinity framework has permitted its adoption in fields like social psychology (Wetherall & Edley, 1999), criminology (Messerschmidt, 2000), and health studies (Gerschick & Miller, 1994). The concept's popularity has also led to heightened scrutiny, as the original tenets of 'hegemonic masculinity', along with its application across various fields of research, have been critiqued from multiple perspectives. Although an extensive review of recent criticisms is not possible here (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 for an overview; also Hearn, 2004; Clatterbaugh, 1998), three key concerns deserve mention because of their particular relevance to the current project.

The first critique concerns the conflation of hegemonic masculinities with certain 'masculine' traits or patterns of male behaviour. In studies of gender and sport especially, the values that are believed to *make up* hegemonic masculinity - usually those alluded to above, strength, toughness, aggression – are simultaneously considered the *result* of dominant gender identities. This tautology provides little help in explaining identity formation and/or patterns of behaviour, and often reduces masculinity to a stale set of essential characteristics (Hearn, 2004; MacInnes, 1998). Fortunately, this critique applies more to recent applications of the hegemony framework than it does its initial formulation. Bound to the Gramscian principles of hegemony, hegemonic masculinity speaks to the *process* whereby social power is attained. It may be true that this involves the glamorizing and normalizing of specific traits, but it does not imply that these traits are constant. Indeed, the various contemporary masculinities that can be viewed as hegemonic – for example, business masculinities (Connell & Wood, 2005), athletic masculinities (Whannel, 2002), 'mock-macho' masculinities (Hanke, 1998), among others – illustrate the mutable character of dominant gender forms.

A related critique of hegemonic masculinity highlights the trouble in pinpointing those individuals who stand as 'appropriate' or 'ideal' possessors of hegemonic identities. Whitehead communicates this quarrel when he asks, "Is it John Wayne or Leonardo DiCaprio; Mike Tyson or Pele? Or maybe, at different times, all of them?" (2002, p. 93; as quoted in Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838). Here I would suggest that Whitehead's criticism actually works to reinforce the strength of Connell's initial theoretical formulation. Instead of cementing a particular character type as dominant or universally hegemonic, the idea that gender forms are constructed according to context

and history means that individuals can embrace a dominant position in some settings while not in others (for example, Donald Trump might be a hegemonic figure in a business setting but not in an athletic one). The diversity of human experience allows multiple individuals to be regarded as hegemonic even if they share as few similarities as John Wayne and Pele. This notion relates very much to the post-structuralist construct of the 'floating signifier' (Jhally, 1997) an analytical tool that has been used to explain how Michael Jordan's masculinity is at certain times lauded and at others demonized in the popular media (Andrews, 1996).

While the above critique concerns iconic figures that embody 'ideal' masculine forms, a similar point has been made regarding the ability of the hegemony paradigm to explain the 'everyday' behaviours of individuals studied in ethnographic practice. Wetherall and Edley (1999), for example, suggest that Connell's account of discursive/ideological field is "too neat," and that researchers "need to consider the multiple and inconsistent discursive resources available for constructing hegemonic gender identities" (1999, p. 352). Such an approach would explain how individuals can at times act in 'hegemonic' ways, at times in a 'complicit' manner, and at other moments can even be subordinated by or resistant to hegemonic discourses. This critique once again relates to recent applications of Connell's work, as opposed to the author's initial offerings, but it remains a crucial theoretical point nonetheless. Researchers should take precautions in applying the hegemony framework; 'categories' such as 'hegemonic' or 'complicit' are only valid for their flexible character, and should not be reduced to static typologies that are universal across social contexts. Indeed, contextual variability makes it possible for individuals to skip between different gender 'positions' in different social

contexts (Wetherall and Edley, 1999). This critique, along with those outlined above, are key theoretical points that will be revisited in the analysis of the current study.

Hegemonic 'Apparatuses': The Media and Education

If hegemony is a method for accruing social power, as opposed to a stabilized set of social relations, then the manner in which hegemony is won is of vital concern. As noted above, it is the routinized distribution of certain ideologies to the point that they become self-evident that serves to legitimize the authority of the dominant group/class. Often viewed as central to this is the work of colluding 'ideological state apparatuses' that reiterate common themes through language, tacitly 'manufacturing' consent (Althusser, 1971; c.f. Weedon, 1997). These apparatuses include the law, the family, the political system, the church, and, of importance to this study, the media and education. When it comes to gender, it can equally be said that these institutions are essential in supporting hegemonic masculinities – consider the patriarchal character of contemporary politics for example (Jeffords, 1994). Indeed, the extent to which hegemonic masculinities have been supported in both the media and education has been well documented. The gendered nature of these institutions - or in Althusserian terms, 'apparatuses' – are discussed, in turn, below.

Masculinity in the Media

Popular media are certainly capable of offering multiple representations of masculinity (Whitehead, 2002, p. 16). For the most part, however, television, film, magazines, and the Internet provide narrow depictions of men and boys. Indeed, as James

Lull (1995) contends, the ability of the media to sustain certain ideologies – often dominant, or hegemonic ideologies – is one of its defining features. Hegemonic imagery of men's bodies and behaviour is rampant in popular texts, both in North America and in other parts of the world. McKay *et al.* (2005), for example, suggest that British and Australian popular culture is filled with depictions of the 'new lad', a masculine identity that has "… come to signify hedonism, risk-taking, consumerism, and voyeurism as well as what it is to be a young man in Australian culture" (p. 282). In North American media it is Hollywood films - usually the action genre of movies - and TV shows that have most vehemently reasserted the cultural currency of hegemonic male bodies and practices. These productions work to normalize very narrow definitions of masculinity based on traits such as toughness and physical strength (Donald, 2001; Jeffords, 1994). What's more, the spectacle of iconographic male figures like Arnold Schwarzenegger trivializes the consequences that often accompany these kinds of violent and dangerous behaviour (as described by Sabo, 2004; Messner, 1992).

The sports media have been scrutinized in recent literature for its contribution to hegemonic gender discourse as well. Successful participation in sport has long been associated with the 'proper' enactment of masculinity (Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998; Young & White, 1995), and contemporary sports media have been complicit in reinforcing this connection. In their textual analysis of advertisements in men's bodybuilding magazines, White and Gillett (1994) came to the conclusion that "[a]dvertisements directed at male readers of popular magazines constitute an influential part of this discourse on the male body in consumer culture because they use muscles as signs of dominance, control, authority, physical strength, and power" (p. 20; also see

Stibbe, 2004). Similarly, following content and textual analyses of the most popular televised sports programmes available to young (American) boys, Messner *et al.,* (2002a) suggest that an oft-invoked Televised Sports Manhood Formula provides "a remarkably stable and concrete view of masculinity as grounded in bravery, risk taking, violence, bodily strength, and heterosexuality" (p. 392) to young viewers.

Although action films and the sport media are perhaps the two most conspicuous professors of dominant masculinities, the prevalence of hegemonic narratives in other media has been underscored in academic literature as well. A few examples of this include: radio, and in particular sports talk radio (Nylund, 2004; Goldberg, 1998); magazines (McKay *et al.,* 2005; Stibbe, 2004; Duncan, 1990); the Internet (Kendall, 2000); video games (Dietz, 1998); Hollywood dramas (Pomerance, 2005; hooks, 2004); foreign cinema (Creekmur, 2005); and television commercials (Strate, 2004). Indeed, considering this evidence, it is reasonable to suggest that hegemonic representations of men – that is, those that promulgate strong, aggressive, and violent male identities – have become omnipresent in popular culture, and are thus easily accessible to young male consumers. Ralph Donald (2001) echoes this sentiment,

> Increasingly in our television-centered culture, boys find that male heroes in our popular media are among the most accessible, frequently encountered, and publicly approved models for manly socialization ... There are many kinds of simplistic examples of stereotypical manhood readily available to children and young adults on television ... (pp. 170-171).

Media Production: Gendered Processes

Stuart Hall (1980) suggests that, in the same way that media messages can be 'decoded' in variable ways according to audience 'referent systems', so too are media forms 'encoded' with meanings at the production end. With this in mind, it is important

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to consider how media productions that promote hegemonic masculinities are constructed to intentionally highlight these themes for specific audiences.

The production of sport media has been the subject of much investigation in the literature. Researchers have documented how 'the invisible apparatus of presentation' (i.e., commentary, editing, camera angles, and so forth - Clarke and Clarke, 1982, p. 73; c.f. Silk, 1999, p. 113) is utilized to reiterate dominant themes, usually those that privilege men's pursuits – and, concomitantly, dominant masculinities – over the interests of women (see MacNeill, 1996; Duncan, 1990; Gruneau, 1989). At times, the making of gendered media is an intentional process, as shown in Silk's (1999) and Sparks' (1992) studies of the Canadian television company TSN. At other moments, it is a procedure that results more from the taken-for-grantedness of gender ideologies, as Duncan (1990) explains with respect to photographs,

> [P]hotographs, like other mass media images, are politically motivated. Photography is a signifying system that works to legitimate interests of hegemonic groups. While those who produce photography (i.e., photographers, photo editors) are often unaware of the ideological significations of photographs, photos nonetheless serve to shape consensus, that is, consent to existing social arrangements (p. 22).

Of greatest importance in this matter is that gendered messages are often directed at specific viewing audiences – usually young males. This point has been touched upon already with respect to Messner's (2002a) 'Televised Sports Manhood Formula' that is intended for this very demographic. In his work on the sports channel TSN, Sparks (1992) considers the political economic value of male youth audiences that can influence media content. Rather than portraying the masculinist programming of TSN solely as a "naïve celebration of masculinity" (Sparks, 1992, Discussion section, para. 2), Sparks considers the manner in which corporate interests, government regulations, and the

pursuit of specific *audience commodities* (i.e., demographics that are ascribed numerical values and then sold to advertisers, the most 'precious' being young males) work together with the masculinist culture of sports to impact media presentations.

For the purposes of this research, then, the manner in which stereotypical gender ideologies and profit-seeking motives influence the production of media that are laden with hegemonic depictions of masculinity is of significance. Moreover, the fact that these media are directed at young male viewers raises concerns of how these audiences understand the media in their daily lives.

Audience Interpretations: Consuming Popular Media

In his summary of contemporary audience/reception theories, Pertti Alasuutari (1999) suggests that three overlapping phases of research can retrospectively be mapped out. The 'first generation' of reception research, according to Alasuutari, is notable in that it formed a break with both 'effects research' (that characterized the audience as entirely passive) and 'uses and gratifications' studies (that oversimplified the idea of the 'active viewer' - see Lewis, 1991).

Stuart Hall's 'Encoding/Decoding' model (1980) was the seminal contribution of this period, as Hall deftly inserted the elements of viewer agency, semiotics, and power relations into his analysis (Gray 1999). As Wilson and Sparks (1996) note, Hall's framework is notable in that he considers both production and consumption in the communicative process, "with the moment of program making at one end of a continuum and the moment of audience interpretation at the other" (p. 401). In this model, both the producer and consumer approach the text according to their specific referent systems, and

it is thus possible for the viewer to extract understandings unintended by the original producer. In fact, Hall suggests that interpretations of media texts could range from dominant (that is, in line with the creator's intentions), to oppositional (or counter-hegemonic), with the possibility of 'negotiated' readings falling somewhere in between (McGuigan, 1992). While the shortcomings of Hall's model have been highlighted in subsequent audience studies, his encoding/decoding theory remains important for its novel approach to the active viewer (see Gray, 1999 for a summary of the lasting impacts of Hall's work).

In terms of empirical sociological work, the study that in many ways defined the first generation of reception research was David Morley's famous study *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980). Morley, putting Hall's encoding/decoding model to the test, "attempted to sketch a provisional map of different interpretive strategies of his audiences by conducting interviews with groups from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds" (Wilson & Sparks, 1996, p. 401). Influenced by this work, the 'second generation' of reception studies was grounded in traditional ethnographic methods, and there was an increasing emphasis placed on both identity politics (and, in particular, questions of gender), and the significance of the medium itself (Alasuutari, 1999, p. 5). Essentially, researchers moved away from some of the shortcomings of the encoding/decoding model, including the inability of Hall's framework to account for the *context* of media consumption (Lewis, 1993), and the fact that a supposedly universal 'preferred' reading may actually merely be the reading garnered by the researcher according to her or his specific 'referent system' (and is thus not 'preferred' for the audience - Lewis, 1983; cf. Wilson & Sparks, 1996).

Much literature in this period investigated the role of soap operas in the lives of female consumers - for example, Ang's (1985), and Katz and Liebes (1986) look at the television programme *Dallas* (see McGuigan, 1992 for a discussion). Also important to this era of reception work was Janice Radway's (1984; also see 2003; 1991) use of 'interpretive communities' as an analytical tool. Radway, who conducted "ethnographic-like interviews with a group of compulsive romance readers" (2003, p. 67), campaigned for in-depth research into the leisure worlds of media consumers in "specific localities and communities" (McGuigan, 1992, p. 139). The notion of interpretive communities was useful in that it provided insight into how people from similar localities have the capability to interpret media messages in comparable ways. Essentially, these individuals bring common "reading strategies and interpretive codes" (Radway, 1991, p. 8, as quoted in Wilson & Sparks, 1996, p. 402) that allow for a degree of agency in decoding a particular text. Importantly, the social position of the reader also *constrains*, or delimits, the extent to which multiple interpretations are possible (Moores, 1993).

Alasuutari (1999) argues that it was authors like Radway (along with, for example, Fiske, 1990; and Lull, 1988) who questioned the basic premises of audience ethnography, and thus facilitated a move to what he considers the 'third generation' of reception studies. While this (current) period has not entirely excised ethnographic case studies from analysis, the focus of reception work is not solely tied to the specific 'reading' or interpretation of a particular audience. Instead, as Alasuutari (1999) explains:

> [t]he objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary 'media culture', particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life, both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourses within which it is discussed (p. 6).

The goal has thus become to place the media within the everyday lives of consumers, and to get a sense of 'media culture' in general. Some key texts of this sort include: Shaun Moores' (1993) work on satellite television in suburban neighborhoods; Ann Gray's (1992) book on VCR usage; Wilson and Sparks' (1999; 1996) research on youth consumption of sports commercials; and Jhally and Lewis' (1992) ethnographic work with audiences of *The Cosby Show*.

Yet while audience ethnographies have slowly transformed to the point where they now often comprise holistic analyses of the media in everyday life, there remains a relative paucity of these types of studies (see Gray, 1999). Moreover, debates on viewer agency remain lively within this realm, as seemingly little has been resolved since Stuart Hall (1980) infused the consumer with a significant amount of power in his encoding/decoding model. Although theorists such as Morley (1986) and Radway (1991) have suggested that structure and agency work in a concurrent manner – that is, audiences express a degree of agency but are also constrained by their particular structural location – certain authors have also given primacy to the role of agency (for example, De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Willis, 1990; or Miles, 2000) or structure alone (Seaman, 1992).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, while textual analyses focused on the gendered contents of particular media abound, the topic of masculinity remains relatively understudied in terms of ethnographic audience work. Furthermore, the extent to which (youth) audiences critically approach (i.e., express agency in consuming) media texts laden with masculine imagery remains largely unknown, as does the role of social structures (for example, physical education) in constraining or enabling critical opinions.

Considering the extent to which the media produces hegemonic narratives surrounding men and masculinity, it is reasonable to suggest that this sort of audience-driven work is necessary. **Addressing these gaps in the extant masculinity/audience literature is therefore a key rationale for the current study.** A quotation from Messner *et al.* (2002a) regarding their aforementioned textual analysis of popular sports media speaks to the necessity for this research:

> It is not possible, based merely on our textual analysis of sports programs, to explicate precisely what kinds of impacts these shows, and the Televised Sports Manhood Formula, have on their young male audiences ... Audience research with boys who watch sports would shed fascinating light on how they decode and interpret these more complex, mixed and paradoxical gender images against the dominant, hegemonic images of the Televised Sports Manhood Formula (2002, pp. 392-393).

Masculinity and (Physical) Education

While the popular media has (re)affirmed the currency of hegemonic masculinities, Kimmel (2004) argues that the education system has had a similar function in Western societies:

> Schools are like old-fashioned factories, and what they produce is gendered individuals. Both in the official curriculum – textbooks and the like – and in the parallel, 'hidden curriculum' of our informal interactions with both teachers and other students, we become gendered (2004: 159).

Investigative research located within secondary schools has for the most part supported Kimmel's claims, as researchers have found both official school practices (Epstein *et al.* 2001; Connell 2000; Humbert 1995) and the unofficial 'hidden curriculum' – described as "all pupil learning that does not match, or is not expressed in, the school's explicitly stated aims" (Kirk, 1992, p. 37; also see Skelton 2002; Willis, 1977) – to generally reinforce dominant gender ideologies. Notably, researchers have focused specifically on

physical education and its role in influencing the making of masculinities and femininities.

Brown and Evans (2004) note the manner in which (male) physical education has been depicted in recent studies:

> Research has consistently reported that male physical education and school sport is a culture that legitimates a certain type of 'maleness' that both draws from and feeds ideologies of what it is to be a successful heterosexual male in Western physical culture (p. 49).

Often, gender relations in physical education are merely representative of the wider school culture, as hegemonic masculinities are reinforced through the curriculum, and through peer relations and teacher/student interactions (i.e., the hidden curriculum). For example, Humbert (1995) conducted ethnographic work in a British Columbia co-ed physical education class, and found the curriculum to be laden with competition-based, androcentric activities. Similarly, Brown and Evans (2004) describe all-male physical education as a 'top dog' culture driven by competition-based sports and games. These results were reinforced in the provincial government's 2001 curriculum review, where it was suggested that many parts of the physical education curriculum including dance and gymnastics are being passed over during instruction (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001; also see Singleton, 2003).

Peer relations have also been shown as problematic in physical education. Humbert's (1995) ethnography of a Canadian co-educational PE class uncovered that many girls were relegated to the periphery of physical activity sites, and that these individuals often faced harassment and denigration from their male counterparts. While Humbert's analysis speaks to divisions that can be formed along gender lines in PE class, others have suggested that race, class, and sexuality also have the potential to impact peer

interactions. For example, the young boys in Epstein *et al.*'s (2001) study separated according to racial/ethnic differences when altercations arose in football contests, even if this meant taking opposition to members of their own team. Andrew Parker (1996) also discusses the significance of race in physical education, and suggests that sexuality and class are important factors to consider as well. As Parker's ethnographic work suggests, it is those boys who most often fail at competitive physical education activities that generally are victimized by their peers:

> Finding themselves the academic failures of a competition grading system, many boys (and indeed girls), it seems, may experience status problems in relation to issues of gender, ethnicity and/or class culture (1996, p. 7; also see Connell 1996).

Finally, the role of instructors in fostering gendered identities in PE has been considered. Harrison *et al.* (2004), discussing the reproduction of racial stereotypes in daily physical education classes, argue that teaching positions within this discipline are often held by male instructors who also serve as competitive coaches. It is therefore not difficult, these authors suggest, for certain attitudes and actions from the athletic realm to "spill over into physical education classes" (p. 158). Similarly, Brown and Evans (2004), using life history methods, contend that the physical education teacher recruitment/training process influences future PE instructors to act as 'cultural conduits' for (hegemonic) gender ideologies. Of course, this is not to suggest that male physical education teachers unanimously contribute to the transferring of hegemonic knowledge and behaviour; indeed, as Connell writes, "some men do become involved in counter-sexist work with boys. The teaching profession too contains a diversity of masculinities" (1996, p. 16; also see Wedgwood, 2005; Skelton, 1993).

The portrait of physical education provided in the literature is therefore one of a school subject that unilaterally encourages hegemonic masculine identities for young males. Rarely in studies on PE is the potential for this setting to influence 'alternate' masculinities considered (see Gibbons *et al*, 1999 for a discussion of this kind regarding girls' physical education). In this research, the manner in which hegemonic masculinities are facilitated in the school environment will certainly be contemplated, but the potential for 'alternate' gender identities will also be evaluated.

Physical Education, the Body, and Popular Culture

A small portion of the literature has analyzed the extent to which physical education practices are in tune with hegemonic representations of the body in popular culture. David Kirk has directly addressed the unwillingness of physical educators to consider "The cult of slenderness and the commodification and commercialization of the body" (1992, p. 53), arguing that by ignoring such issues, physical education teachers, "may well be in the business of reproducing oppressive social conditions in the process of teaching students how to get fit, how to play games and sports, and how to recreate" (1992, p. 56). Kirk and Richard Tinning (1994) have studied the link between popular culture and physical education, rationalizing this connection by noting that "[i]n physical education classes physical culture is instantiated in a most immediate, visible and visceral fashion" (1994, p. 607). Following focus group research with male and female students, these authors argued that both popular cultural representations of the body, as well as experiences in physical education facilitate 'disembodiment' for some students, whereby

a chasm is created between the actual physical forms young men and women embody and their understandings of what are 'appropriate' body types (p. 606).

Kirk (2002) has recently continued to promote the need for further research into the intrinsic connection between (popular) cultural representations of the male body and physical education practices where the body is unfailingly foregrounded. PE classes, he argues, have traditionally impressed naturalistic (or biologically-driven) understandings of the human body on young students, and have thus ignored the *cultural* meanings tied to the body. Drawing on the work of Marcel Mauss (1973), Kirk contends that these cultural connotations are formed through repetitive representations of particular body types in contexts that are familiar to many people – the media and physical education being two such contexts (2002, pp. 84, 87). Consequently, physical education has a significant function in developing healthy understandings of the body:

> School physical education has a key role to play in empowering young people with the skills and knowledge to deconstruct dangerous or misleading media representations of bodies ... In the process, physical education can assist young people to learn that diverse forms of embodiment are normal and acceptable, including ways of being masculine and feminine (Kirk, 2002, p. 88).

Despite the theoretical suggestions of authors like Kirk and Tinning, there remains a dearth of *empirical* evidence regarding the link between media consumption on the part of youth and the experiences of these individuals in physical education class. Moreover, much of the above cited work concerns the experiences of young males outside a Canadian context, and in an era pre-dating the rise of Internet technology in Western culture. **Thus, another central rationale for the current study involves addressing some of these existing gaps in the physical education literature, particularly as they relate to high school-aged youth in a mass-mediated culture.** Although the connection between mass culture and physical education may be dismissed

as trivial and without practical application on the surface, research from Tinning and Fitzclarence suggests otherwise:

> The images presented in (Coke, Reebok) and many other TV ads and in video song clips on shows like MTV are part of the visual world of adolescents. It is a stimulating world in which the body (a slim, muscular body) is a dominant icon of desirability. It is a world in which physical activity is unproblematically associated with desirable bodies and a lifestyle of consumption, fun, and entertainment. It is a world of images into which school physical education is projected (1992: 293).

In sum, although contemporary gender and media research have gone far in highlighting the propensity for media texts to espouse hegemonic narratives and imagery of men and masculinity, empirical research exploring how young men *interpret* what they consume is relatively scarce. Furthermore, while some scholars have suggested a theoretical link between physical education, gender identity, and the popular media, few studies have sought to rigorously investigate this connection. It was with these gaps in the extant gender, media/audience, and PE literature in mind that the current study developed.

2 METHODS

Three separate methodological strategies were adopted for data collection in this study: 1) focus groups with physical education students (two sessions); 2) naturalistic observation of PE classes; and 3) interviews with physical education instructors. Following a short description of the research setting, a summary and rationale for each of these techniques is provided.

The Setting

Vancouver High is a secondary school set in an affluent neighbourhood in Vancouver's lower mainland. Compared to most regions in the province, this school's district has elevated average levels of family income and education (BC Stats, 2001). These demographic statistics were reflected with the participants in the study (see Figure 1 at the conclusion of this chapter). Academically, in addition to regular classes, the school houses an Enriched degree program. The teachers did not view Vancouver High as an athletic 'powerhouse', but they do offer a number of competitive teams that have been successful to varying degrees.

Teachers at Vancouver High believe the physical education program at this school has become increasingly successful over the past decade. According to the staff members with whom I spoke, credit for this is largely due to a recent paradigm shift that emphasizes fun and physical activity in the classroom, as opposed to rigorous fitness testing (to be discussed in the 'Findings' section). Grade ten students at the school partake in one of three different physical education classes: 1) the Enriched class, a coed

class for the students in this program; 2) the Advanced class, where most students are hand-selected for their strong athletic ability (non-Enriched); 3) and the General classes, for the remainder of the student population (also non-Enriched). Mr. F., a teacher at the school, believes these class divisions have also enhanced enrolment in physical education in recent years. One of each of these classes was involved in the current project.

Class Selection

Consulting three different 'types' of classes – Advanced, General, and Enriched – was beneficial in that it provided greater diversity in the research 'sample'. Rather than dealing with a homogenous group, students differed according to race, media interests, experiences in PE, opinions on masculinity, athletic ability, and so forth. While the intention was not to have a group of students representative of the public in a traditional scientific sense, the larger group did facilitate broader thinking about how young males interpret the media and experience PE. In this regard, following Richardson (1998) I sought a 'crystalized', or "… deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic" (p. 358), while also considering how this research can compliment other literature to provide a broader account of the subject matter.

Grade ten classes were at the center of the study as in British Columbia this is the final year in which physical education is mandatory for all students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1999). Choosing students from a required PE class was intended to allow for a range of participant opinions on this discipline, as opposed to commentary only from students who wilfully enrolled in, and therefore likely enjoy, this subject (i.e., those in optional grade 11 or 12 classes).

One coeducational and two all male physical education classes took part in this study (only boys were interviewed in the coed class). The isolated all-male settings provided an adequate space to examine how gender hierarchies manifest. However, masculinity is a relational construct that is inexistent without femininity. As such, it was important to provide some depth into how boys and girls relate in physical education, and to consider how this is significant in the process of gender construction. As the focus group guides illustrate (Appendices 2 and 3), this point was also addressed in asking the boys how they interpret femininity and female characters in the media. I also interviewed a female teacher at Vancouver High who had many years of experience teaching girls at the school, and enquired about the coed teaching experiences of the other teacher interviewees. Research aimed at further understanding the gender dynamics between male and female students in physical education is certainly necessary, and would add to the existing work on this topic (Skelton, 2002; Renold, 2001; Humbert, 1995). This being said, my primary interest throughout remained on how boys perceive masculinities in the media and how these interpretations relate to their physical education experiences. Below I outline the methods utilized in this research to investigate these complex relationships.

Focus Groups

Students participating in the project each took part in two separate focus group sessions. **Session One** was intended to take place near the beginning of the study, however, because of logistical problems (e.g., students taking time to return consent forms, teachers requiring everyone to participate in class on certain days) some focus

groups were slightly delayed. Fortunately, delays were seldom problematic as time could be filled with class observations.

Session One discussions focused on the students' perceptions of the media they regularly encounter. Each focus group began with a brief (3-5 minute) video montage constructed by the researcher. The video-viewing component was designed to demonstrate various media representations of masculinity - with an emphasis on hegemonic masculinities - in order to facilitate conversation on this topic. Selection of the video clips was done according to literature that has described hegemonic masculinities in the media (for example, McKay *et al*, 2005; Whitehead, 2002; Messner, 2002; Donald, 2001). This practice is potentially problematic in that video clips that are unfamiliar to the students could be selected. Having some prior information regarding the viewing habits of the participants may have been beneficial, but this data was deemed too difficult to gather considering the class time already afforded by the instructors. Regardless, most of the students were familiar with the images presented, and they were able to react to clips that were alien to them. Instigating discussion by way of media viewing is not unprecedented, and has been successful in previous focus group studies (for example, Wilson & Sparks, 1999; 1996; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; also see Kitzinger, 2000, p. 26). A summary of the clips provided during the video viewing session is available in Appendix 5.

Following the video, each participant was asked to complete a short questionnaire regarding their personal characteristics (race, parents' income and education, age), their perceptions of the video, the extent to which they see similar images through the various

media outlets they consult, and whether or not they witness comparable expressions of masculinity in their everyday lives. A sample questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

Focus group discussion was the final component of Session One. At this time, the goal was to excavate the participants' perceptions of both the video montage and of masculinity and femininity in the media in general. Respondents were encouraged to refer to their questionnaires in order to promote individual opinions, however expanding upon the thoughts of others during conversation was certainly not dissuaded. Following Wilson and Sparks (1996), the group interview sessions were facilitated in a 'relatively structured' manner – that is, they had a definite goal, they involved a media-viewing element and questionnaire, and they were informed by (but not tied to) a pre-set interview guide. The focus group interview guide for Session One is available in Appendix 2. All together, Session One provided an enhanced understanding of how young males interpret media versions of masculinity. The Vancouver High boys' experiences in and perceptions of physical education were left for the observation period and the second round of focus groups.

Subsequent to the naturalistic observation phase of the study (described below) were **Session Two** focus groups. At this time, I met once again with each of the students, although some groups were re-shuffled in order to provide for better group chemistry. The purpose of Session Two was to provide an opportunity to discuss the participants' general perceptions of physical education, as well as specific incidents that arose during the observation period. As Morgan (1997) suggests, post-observation focus groups are beneficial in that they provide the researcher the opportunity to assess whether her/his opinions of particular incidents are congruent with those of the participants (p. 24). In

addition, Session Two focus groups allowed for exploration into the links between the participants' perceptions of media images and their experiences in PE. A sample Session Two interview guide is provided in Appendix 3.

Focus Group Rationale

David Morgan (1997) emphasizes the value of employing focus group methods in qualitative research. Morgan suggests that the primary benefit of focus groups is that they allow the researcher to "observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time" (1997, p. 8). This was of particular importance to the current study as, despite the considerable time spent with each class, there was limited face-to-face interaction with small groups. Morgan adds that focus groups are valuable in that the researcher is able to withdraw not only spoken information, but also data from participant interactions on a particular topic (1997, p. 10; also see Hollander, 2004; Kitzinger, 2000). These findings were echoed in the current study, as the focus groups provided a suitable environment for the students to comfortably discuss a range of topics.

Combining focus group and questionnaire methodologies has also proven successful in previous research (Wilson & Sparks, 1999; 1996). Although the Vancouver High students rarely consulted them once they were completed, the questionnaires were nonetheless helpful in providing additional individual information. This was beneficial in post hoc analyses in that it permitted cross-group comparisons (Morgan, 1997).

Focus Group Participants

All told, 36 students participated in the project: nine from the Advanced class, 13 Enriched students (coed class), and 14 General students. All participants, save for two students who did not attend class frequently, took part in both focus group sessions. This allowed for 11 focus groups of two to four respondents (times two sessions). This number of focus groups exceeds Morgan's (1997) recommendation of 4-6 groups for any study, however there were fewer participants in each group than Morgan deems optimal (6-10 in his opinion). Rather than meeting the specificities supposedly required for qualitative research, the goal was instead to provide a number of students with a comfortable environment to discuss the topic matter, even if this meant speaking with only two students at a time. The focus groups were intended to be 30-45 minutes in length; however because of some constraints during Session Two interviews, this was not always the case[1]. Discussions were recorded on audio cassettes (school administration prohibited video) and were transcribed by the interviewer.

The teachers for each class were consulted when determining the makeup of individual focus groups (as recommended by Gibbons *et al.,* 1999). 'Friendship groups' were assembled with the intention of mitigating the possibility for 'dominant' masculine identities to trump 'subordinated' ones in collective discussions (see Renold, 1998; Morgan, 1997; Knodel, 1993). Furthermore, students who have close relationships potentially share media and physical education experiences, and can therefore exchange

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[1] The time constraints referred to here concern my belief that the class teachers wished for me to complete the final focus groups as quickly as possible. This was never conferred directly to me – indeed, the teachers were very helpful and supportive – but I felt I was interfering with classes towards the end of the study. Additionally, students were absent more frequently near the end of the school year, usually for sporting events or class trips that are suited for dry weather conditions. This made it imperative to speak with as many students as possible when they were present.

ideas on these topics more freely. Of course, identifying friends in the classroom is not always a simple task. The difficulties that arose in this process will be discussed in the 'Challenges' section below.

Racial and ethnic classification did not factor into focus group selection, nor did socio-economic standing. As will be shown in the 'Findings' section, this does not preclude the inclusion of such issues in the analysis of research data. The questionnaires completed by participants prior to focus group sessions allowed respondents to confer their age, race, and social class (parents' income and education) in open-ended fashion (At the conclusion of this section, see Figure 1 for information on social class as it relates to the study participants, and Table 1 for information of self-defined 'race/ethnicity). Matters of race and class are undoubtedly imperative to gender analyses, for as Connell (1995, p. 7) notes, the subordination of certain masculinities can often be reduced to separations along these axes of differentiation. Existing research has either emphasized the role of race/ethnicity and/or class in the educational setting (that is, sought to investigate issues of race and/or class from the outset - see Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Vertinsky *et al.,* 1996; Halas, 1996; Alladin, 1996), or has considered race and class separations in the context of a broader analysis (Epstein *et al.,* 2001; Parker, 1996). The current study will address these matters in the latter fashion.

Naturalistic Observation

The naturalistic observation period essentially began on my first day at the school. As indicated by previous ethnographic work, there is no universal time frame for conducting observational analysis in qualitative research. For example, the amount of

time spent 'in field' in some of the works cited earlier ranges from 14 individual classes (Fenton *et al.,* 1996) to three years (Willis, 1977). Following Humbert (1995), I spent approximately three months with the Vancouver High classes, some days involved in focus groups or interviews, others simply observing the classes. The term 'data saturation', which refers to the point where the researcher's observations are duplicated (Morgan, 1997), is often used as an indicator of when to exit the research setting. From a gender perspective, this term is problematic in that it implies predictability when gender relations are in fact constantly in flux. Nonetheless, there were patterns that arose in the students' behaviours and opinions at Vancouver High, and, without extending the analysis too far into broad generalizations, three months was deemed a sufficient period to comment on the media and PE experiences of the students.

During the observation period, fieldnotes were kept in order to capture pertinent data. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest, in order to provide "relatively concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts" (p. 175), a fairly wide focus is generally required during this process. While the larger context of the class setting was certainly taken into account, particular attention was paid to the general themes outlined in the literature above, and also to the themes discussed in the focus groups. That is to say, during observation, a focus was placed on: the role of the body in the performance of the curriculum (for example, the types of tasks that are performed, whether 'natural' and/or 'cultural' understandings of the body are put forward); any visible similarities and differences between the media opinions of students and their daily (inter)actions (for example, the reproduction or contesting of hegemonic masculinity); and finally, the verbal and physical relationships that manifest between students, and between instructors

and students. Fieldnotes were made by hand and were transcribed following each class. This process was favourable in that it accounted for both my immediate reactions as well as retrospective thought on daily occurrences. I also took reflexive notes throughout the study that considered my potential influences as a researcher in 'the field'.

Observation Rationale

Naturalistic observations formed a key component of the study. Focus group sessions allowed for observations as to how respondents interacted with one another, however such observations were limited to the dynamics *within* the assembled group. Although inter-group relations can be investigated in a verbal manner during the focus group talks, a more in-depth examination into the daily (and more covert) interactions between groups, and between students and teachers, can be attained with the addition of naturalistic observation (Morgan, 1997). This method provided insight into the characteristics (or culture) of different groups, and helped in explaining the complex relationship between what is 'said' and what is 'done' – in this case, how gender is perceived and how it is enacted. This latter point relates to the links between the various methods utilized in this study, and will be addressed in detail below. Like focus groups and questionnaires, previous ethnographic research has endorsed the use of observation techniques in qualitative research (Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Fenton *et al.,* 1999; Parker, 1996). Mac an Ghaill (1995), writing reflexively on his observations in an all-male school, speaks to the effectiveness of this method, as he suggests that "participant observation enabled me to explore the specific dynamics of the cultural production of different versions of masculinity" (p. 173).

Interviews

Three interviews were conducted with PE teachers over the course of the study. The interviewees were: Mr. R., who instructs the General and Enriched classes; Mr. F., the Advanced teacher; and Ms. G., who has taught a variety of classes at the school and has a great deal of experience with girls' PE classes. Each of these respondents was tremendously generous with her/his time, and provided thoughtful and insightful responses. In addition to these interviews, I also had numerous informal conversations with the teachers, especially the two male instructors who were responsible for the students in the study. These informal chats usually took place as the students were active in class, and always proved extremely illuminating. The only disadvantage to the daily conversations was that they could not be recorded. As a result, I made notes immediately following these discussions, recalling as best I could what was said. The formal interviews were recorded on audio cassette and transcribed by the interviewer. Themes discussed in these conversations (both formal and informal) included: the teacher's personal history (especially as it relates to her/his interest in PE); her/his perceptions of both the subject curriculum and the (gender) dynamics at the school (that is, teacher-student and student-student relations); and her/his impressions of popular media and its effects on physical education. See Appendix 4 for a sample interview guide.

Interview Rationale

Interviews with teachers and administrators were considered beneficial for two central reasons. First, these individuals spend a considerable amount of time with the

student participants, and thus had the ability to convey information regarding the common daily behaviours and characteristics of these individuals. Second, teachers themselves form a significant part of physical education culture. Their personal histories, ideologies, and pedagogic practices can potentially reinforce or counteract certain behaviours on the part of the students (Brown & Evans' 2004).

Focus Groups, Observation and Interviews: A Multi-Method Approach

The 'third wave' of reception studies, as described by Alasuutari (1999), promotes the need for research into the ways media interpretations impact and are impacted by 'real life' events. In essence, this is a response to audience studies that are over-determined by techniques that only elicit spoken information and ignore the everyday experiences of media consumers. This is an important development, but should not cause a reactionary over-emphasis on observation techniques. In a contrary manner, in much classical sociological literature, it is participant observation that has been relied upon too heavily, as it has stood as the standard (or 'truth') against which other methods are compared (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003). Following their review of work by Becker and Geer (1957), Atkinson and Coffey (2003) discuss this tendency in classic studies,

> For a long time, ethnographers and other qualitative researchers have relied on the ironic contrast between 'what people do' and 'what people say they do.' That contrast is – as we have suggested – based on some further differences. It assumes that what people do is unproblematic and is amenable to direct observation and description; what people say, on the other hand, is treated as a much more unstable category (p. 120).

Rather than promoting this perspective, Atkinson and Coffey (2003) suggest a performative approach that nullifies the convenient distinction between what is 'done'

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and what is 'said' – "distinction between talk and action are erroneous and irrelevant when one recognizes that talk is action" (p. 121).

Although this study stops shorts of invoking a poststructuralist perspective concerned with the performative nature of gender (as described by Butler, 1990), the suggestions rendered by Atkinson and Coffey (2003) and Alasuutari (1999) have been considered. That is to say, rather than synthesizing various perspectives to form a triangulated account of the truth, the methods utilized in this study provide various *accounts* of 'reality' that need to be approached sceptically. These accounts are clouded by personal vantage points, opinions, biases and so forth, that can not (and need not) be overcome. The multiple methods utilized in this study essentially form a series of checks and balances, each prohibiting the other from allowing for an over-determined account of the research setting.

Data Analysis

The current study was intended to explore and contrast the diversity of opinions and experiences young males have with respect to both PE and popular media. Information elicited during interviews and observations was therefore coded to address these themes. Multiple detailed reads of all transcripts and fieldnotes rendered during data collection were completed in the analysis process, with consideration provided to both 'observer identified' themes (i.e., those generated in consultation with existing literature – see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 221) as well as themes unanticipated prior to analysis (see Marvasti, 2004 and Strauss and Corbin, 1990 for a discussion of this kind of inductive approach). Focus group transcripts were coded to identify 'hegemonic'

and 'critical/counter-hegemonic' opinions about how masculinity is constructed in the media, and how it is (or how it should be) enacted in physical education class. Views considered 'hegemonic' included: those that valued traits associated in the literature with hegemonic masculinities (e.g., physical strength, toughness, necessary heterosexuality), or the individuals who embody these characteristics; those that were dismissive of 'alternate' versions of masculinity; or those that offered narrow and stereotypical ideas about women and femininity. Counter-hegemonic opinions were identified as those critical of traditional or hegemonic representations of masculinity and femininity in the media or physical education, or those that were critical of the motives that underlie the production of (gendered) media. Fieldnotes were coded in much the same way, with an initial coding separating hegemonic from counter-hegemonic behavioural patterns, followed by subsequent coding in each category to uncover sub-themes. Data coding was conducted exclusively by the researcher, however, Dr. Brian Wilson (graduate supervisor) provided additional analysis and commentary regarding the manner in which the data was interpreted. All collected information was transcribed into and organized with MS Word files.

There are multiple challenges that are unique to the interpretation of focus group data. Krueger (1993, p. 20) notes that "[f]ocus group analysis combines many different elements of qualitative research and, in addition, adds the complexity of group interaction." Furthermore, he suggests that, "[t]he actions and behaviors of focus group participants may tell you a great deal about your interpretation. The analyst should observe all factors in the communications: body language, gestures, and tones of voice" (1993, p. 23). Morgan contends that distinguishing between what respondents find

interesting in focus group interviews with what they consider *important* is absolutely imperative. Certain topics may be deemed interesting in conversation, and thus demand a significant portion of time, however such issues may not necessarily be germane to the researcher's interests. This was certainly true in this study, as when discussing the media respondents easily digressed into side conversations on various topics. For Morgan, distinguishing "how many groups mentioned the topic, how many people within each of these groups mentioned the topic, and how much energy and enthusiasm the topic generated among the participants" (1997, p. 63) are the three keys to separating important data from information that is simply interesting. These suggestions were taken into account in the analysis process.

Research Challenges

Conducting this research without interfering completely in daily operations in physical education at Vancouver High was a primary challenge throughout the study. I was aware at all times of 'pushing' too far with teachers or students, each of whom was granting me a tremendous favour. This challenge was usually remedied by frequently 'checking in' with the teachers – with whom I had a good relationship – to be sure that I was not interrupting their planned activities. I received permission before removing students from class for focus groups, for example, and made an effort not to waste time in my discussions with the boys (for example, taking a longer period than necessary with the groups). For the Session One focus groups, I felt more at ease occupying almost a whole class with each group. However near the study's conclusion, I had interfered with classes enough that I felt the need to have the participants back in class as soon as

possible. This often rendered these second discussions somewhat brief (usually 15-20 minutes).

This concern over 'asking too much' was dictated as much by students as by teachers. Many of the Vancouver High boys enjoy physical education tremendously, and did not fancy missing class for another academic-type session (although some seemed legitimately enthused to be missing PE). This was most true of the Advanced students, as shown in my conversation with Chad and Gavin of this class,

> Brad -Ok, anyone else [in the video clips that you don't like]? Or anyone else in general you can think of?
> (*Brief pause*)
> B - No?
> [*C makes a popping noise with his mouth. I sense he is getting impatient*].
> B – Alright, I guess that's pretty much it.
> Chad & Gavin together – Sweet.
> C – Can we go? Cause I want to play dodgeball.
> (FG Session 1, Adv. 3).

Chad and Gavin's first focus group was delayed the longest as they continually asked to be moved to a later date, and when finally in this setting they were eager to leave. For the most part, however, students offered only light-hearted protests - once in the focus groups they were thoughtful and attentive. Indeed, like the teachers at Vancouver High, the students were accommodating and a pleasure to work with throughout the study.

Another constraint on the research process was the facilities available in which to conduct the focus groups. Classroom space is precious at Vancouver High, and there was therefore no 'official' space available to have group discussions. This was especially problematic in Session One, when a VCR was needed for the video component. As a result, the equipment rooms that opened onto the gymnasium served as the Session One setting. Not surprisingly, the acoustics in this room are far from ideal, and are made worse by the obtrusive clatter from the nearby gym. This rendered parts of some

conversation recordings inaudible. Moreover, the students were forced to sit on wooden benches brought in from the gym, while I often stacked a pair of inverted milk cartons for my seat. Perhaps worst of all, these rooms were occasionally entered by students and teachers during PE classes when additional equipment was needed. It was thus not uncommon for our discussions to be interrupted on several occasions. While this was certainly not an ideal setting, it was ultimately the only one available. We were thus forced to make due, and once again the students were helpful in this process (for example, repeating their thoughts when asked, speaking loudly, etc.).

Impression management (Goffman, 1959) is another concern for researchers while in 'the field'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) contend that administering one's appearance is especially difficult when multiple 'parties' must be catered to: "There may be different categories of participants, or different social contexts, which demand the construction of different 'selves'" (p. 87). With respect to this research, I sought to identify with both teachers and students without becoming too close too either group. That is to say, I wanted to feel comfortable with the teachers without being seen as an authority figure to the students (which would impact the focus groups), and to form a relationship with the students without alienating the teachers (for example, being involved in disruptive behaviour). Impression management in this regard primarily involved a reflexive use of language and dress. For the former, I occasionally would shift my speech – either words or tone – when dealing with either students or teachers. With students I would speak slightly less formally and joked with them more frequently. As for my comportment, I wore clothes that I felt were not too far removed from the students' dress but were also not too formal (being in physical education classes, where even

teachers are not formally dressed, was helpful in this instance). In spite of these efforts, it was evident from the early stages of the research that I could easily be grouped in with the Vancouver High staff. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) note that this is a common problem in research procedures, as researchers as often unwittingly cast as 'experts' (p. 103). In this project, this stemmed from the manner in which I was regarded by teachers at the school. Very quickly I was asked to perform tasks to 'give a hand' with the classes: carrying equipment, opening doors, even short bursts of supervision. I was happy to offer help in this regard, however these acts had potential consequences in that the students would consider view me as an authority figure. This, of course, could potentially impact focus group discussions where participants are asked to entrust that the dialogue is confidential. To be sure, it is difficult to discern how I was actually perceived by the students, and the manner in which this impacted the focus groups. This remained a point to keep this in mind when interpreting the research data.

A more significant challenge to the research process came in the way my role as interviewer potentially impacted focus group dialogue. Of course, the researcher is an active member in the interview process and thus undoubtedly affects the respondents' demeanour and speech. In the case of research on masculinities, many have pointed to the manner in which male researchers can contribute to a masculinist environment. As Mac an Ghaill (1995) notes, "[m]ale ethnographers of young men's schooling have systematically failed to acknowledge the implicit male knowledges, understandings, and desires that we share with male research participants' schooling biographies" (p. 174; also see Pillow, 2003; Skelton, 1998). The Vancouver High boys often expressed sentiments that can be described as sexist, homophobic, and at times racist, as will be

shown below. In these instances I was left in a difficult position. To denounce their opinions, and expose them as prejudiced would certainly cause any participant to remove himself from the discussion, if not physically then emotionally and mentally. Moreover, it was not my objective to act as a teacher or counselor in these discussions. However, to silently observe these beliefs, or even to follow them with the usual markers of attentiveness – 'yup', 'mm hm', 'right' or 'ok' – was an overt sign of acceptance, especially considering first, my position as a male researcher speaking with male students, and second, that some students may have viewed me as an authority figure, as described above. This is a matter that I struggled with throughout the study, as it is surely impossible (and even undesirable) to entirely mitigate the role of the interviewer. Nonetheless, I did reflexively seek to limit the most loaded terms (especially 'right') when speaking with the boys.

As a final challenge, many students from the General class spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, or Japanese as their first language. Most of these boys were proficient in English as well, and thus were able to easily partake in the focus groups (at least from my perspective). A small number of students (approximately 2 or 3) had a lower level of English and appeared at times to be confused by my questions. These students often coped by simply restating the opinions offered by their peers. I sought to overcome this by occasionally asking these students questions directly before others had a chance to respond. This provided only limited success, as language remained a barrier. As another tactic, I encouraged the other boys to act as translators, something that was possible because of the friendship groups. This was slightly more successful, but still did not allow conversation that was entirely comfortable and uninhibited. Moreover, it placed

an unintended cultural bias on the research that privileged the voices of those more capable in English. Previous research has utilized culturally specific focus group moderators to address issues of racial diversity (for example, Wilson and Sparks, 1996), and this was considered in the current study. Ultimately, retaining a single moderator throughout was decided upon for two reasons: first, although the groups were put together with friendship alliances in mind, no group was 'homogenous' from a racial/ethnic perspective; second, my ability to adequately moderate was enhanced by the familiarity I developed over the extensive time I spent with the students. Like my role in influencing conversation, this was a concern that could not be 'overcome', but instead considered reflexively in data analysis.

Method Summary

The multiple methods utilized in this research provided different vantage points into the role of the media and physical education in the making of masculinities for the Vancouver High boys. Below, I will outline the three key findings that arose from my conversations with the Vancouver High students and teachers, as well as from my observations of PE class.

Figure 1 - Social Class Indicator: Parent's Education
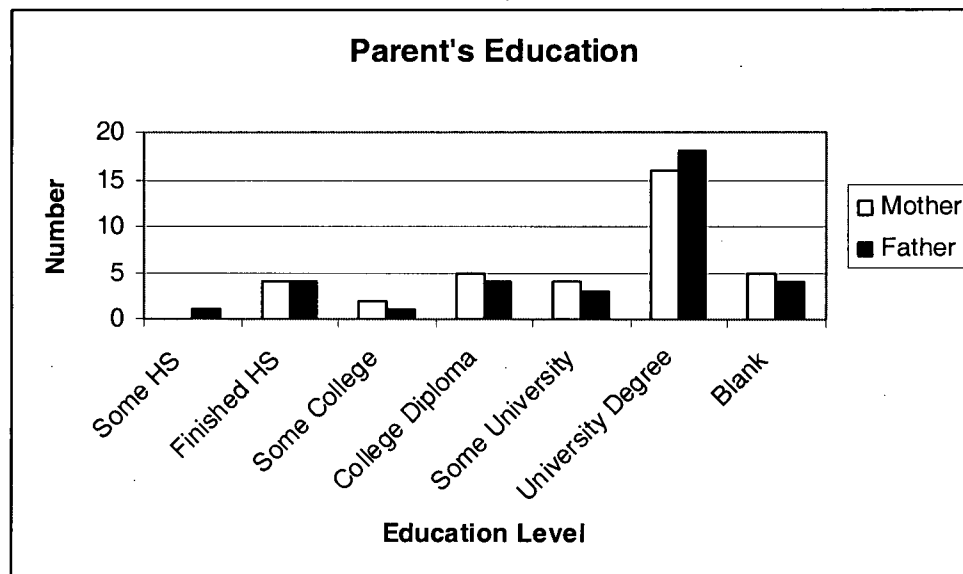
Parent's Education

Figure 1 represents the Vancouver High boys' responses to the questionnaire question "What is your parents' education level?" Students were asked to check boxes for their Mother/Father/Guardian that correspond to the 'Education Level' categories (some high school, finished high school, etc.). These statistics are in accordance with the demographic information provided in the 2001 British Columbia Census, where Vancouver High's district had elevated levels of schooling and income compared to the rest of the province.

Table 1 - Self-Defined Racial/Ethnic Background (By PE Class)

General Class

Racial/Ethnic Background
Asian/Taiwanese
Chinese (5)
Asian (3)
Korean
English
White
No response (2)

Advanced Class

Racial/Ethnic Background
White Canadian
Caucasian Canadian
Caucasian (3)
White/Caucasian
Scottish
Chinese Canadian
No response

Enriched Class

Racial/Ethnic Background
Chinese (5)
White
British/Irish/Canadian
British/Canadian
Dutch/Canadian - White
English Canadian - Caucasian
English
First Nations/Italian
Serbian

Table 1 illustrates the Vancouver High boys' responses to the questionnaire question "Please describe your racial/ethnic background?" Rather than engage in the problematic practice of grouping students who provided similar responses, their answers have been left intact (save for those that were identical, as indicated in the brackets).

3 FINDINGS

Three key findings emerged from my research with the Vancouver High boys. As outlined below, Finding #1 deals exclusively with the variable and complex manner in which the Vancouver High boys spoke about masculinities as depicted in the media. At this time, I will show how the boys displayed an ability to be critical of hegemonic masculinities that are prominent in popular culture, but occasionally valourized dominant masculine figures and values as well. In Finding #2 I turn my attention to physical education class at the school, and suggest that this setting, while offering the potential for 'alternate' masculinities, more often encourages hegemonic gender forms to be accepted as 'normal'. Finally, in Finding #3, I reflect upon these first two findings and consider the relationship between masculinities that are shown in the media and those that are enacted in physical education. In this section, I suggest that gender hierarchies in PE class serve to oppose or limit the media criticisms of dominant masculinities offered by the Vancouver High students. This final point illustrates the context specific nature of gender.

In this analysis, I have employed general terms such as 'often', 'most', 'many', or 'few', in describing the opinions and behavioural patterns of the study participants. This is especially true for sections where the focus group responses of the boys are outlined. The use of these terms was deemed necessary in that the students offered complex, even contradictory views, rendering discrete categorizations difficult (and even undesirable). Opinions that were offered in individual focus groups that were agreed upon or were not contested were deemed 'representative' of the group (examples of dissent within groups are offered below). When speaking at a broader level – that is, across the focus groups –

terms like 'most', 'many', and 'often' speak to viewpoints that were offered in the majority of groups (i.e., at least 6 of 11). Terms such as 'few' or 'some' refer to minority group opinions.

3.1 Media Interpretations

Finding #1: The Vancouver High boys at times interpreted the media in 'hegemonic' ways, but more often displayed a sophisticated *ability* to be critical of media that offer hegemonic depictions of men and masculinity.

Contrary to the common discourse that portrays young people as passive respondents to media texts, my discussions with the Vancouver High boys revealed that these individuals have a well-developed *ability* to be critical of dominant ideas surrounding masculinity and the media. 'Ability' is an important qualifier in this instance for two reasons. First, there is a significant, if somewhat slight, difference between suggesting that audiences are critical when they encounter media, and suggesting they are critical when asked to comment on these same media retrospectively. The nature of this study (i.e., the methods used) insists that only the latter be considered. Second, and of greater importance, I have stressed the critical *abilities* of the Vancouver High students, for, as will be shown below, their penchant for questioning dominant gender logic was tempered by a simultaneous insistence on resuscitating hegemonic masculinities. Rather than internalizing notions of men and masculinity shown in the media in a uniform and uncompromised manner, the focus group participants in this study showed complexities and contradictions in their responses. In this sense, if we locate hegemonic and critical interpretations at opposing ends of a spectrum, the Vancouver High boys can be seen as having a range of understandings of the media. Below, I will pay respect to this diversity of interpretations while focussing primarily on the critical opinions of these students that were offered more frequently than those deemed 'hegemonic'. These criticisms took aim

at two primary elements of the media: media representations and the act of media production.

"You gotta be sensitive and caring at the same time to impress the ladies, but you have to be this butch like, can bench press 250 pounds ... to impress the guys": Criticizing Media Representations

In every focus group, the Vancouver High boys recognized that dominant masculinities are built on physical strength and toughness. At times these masculinities were accepted, but more often they were interpreted as undesirable. Indeed, the boys questioned many media figures who can be read as purveyors of dominant masculinities for their reliance on certain 'masculine' traits. For example, a great number of students perceived the commanding self-confidence of celebrities such as rapper 50 Cent or actor Kiefer Sutherland (star of the action show '24') as excessive. Gavin and Chad illustrate this point:

> Chad – I hate 50 Cent.
> Brad – You hate 50 Cent?
> C – He's such a loser.
> B – Ok.
> Gavin – ... He's conceded.
> C – He's always grabbing his nuts – what the hell is that?
> G – ... [He's] like 'I'm all that and a bag of potato chips', Oooh (*pretending to be frightened*).
> (FG Session 1 – Adv. 3).

Overconfidence, or cockiness, was an undesirable trait seen as rampant in professional sports as well. Peter was turned off by the "attitude" frequently given by star athletes (FG Session 1, Enr. 4), while Ryan similarly was distraught with the arrogance exhibited by soccer players in the media (FG Session 1, Enr. 3).

In addition to this questioning of masculine bravado, in the focus groups many boys were sceptical of how men's bodies are required to fit with the standards

proliferated in popular culture as well. Although the unhealthy consequences that can accompany extreme muscularity and physical strength are usually unspoken in the media, the Vancouver High boys were very much attuned to the 'side effects' – for example, steroid use – that potentially arise with excessive male body types. Allan provides the most stinging critique of 'appropriate' male physiques:

> Brad – Does the media, you find, give you guys real portrayals of men and masculinity?
> Allan – Not often.
> Dylan – (*Quieter*) Not often.
> B – No? How so Allan?
> A – Well, you see like 'Roid Droids like the Strongman pulling trucks …
> Cal – Or like Bowflex ads.
> B – Yeah, Bowflex ads?
> A – … You need the chiselled abs, like yeah it's good to be healthy and workout and stuff like that, but I think that [they're not] healthy [they're strong] … They're saying [inaudible – one word] excess in the portrayal of masculinity.
> B – What do you think, sorry, what do you mean by excess?
> A – Like you need 500 girlfriends and all these steroids … and all this stuff and a huge mansion and stuff like that to be a man.
> B – And that's not something that you think that you think is true necessarily?
> T – Not necessarily no.
> (FG Session 1 – Enr. 2).

The boys' rejection of strong, 'chiselled' bodies was mitigated at times by a simultaneous dismissal of 'scrawny' frames (to be shown below), but in this instance Allan suggests that good health is the only necessary qualifier for an appropriate male physique. Moreover, Allan includes in his critique the stereotypical notions that masculinity is based in heterosexual conquest ("you need 500 girlfriends") and material wealth ("you need … a huge mansion and stuff like that to be a man").

Perhaps of greatest importance in this passage, however, is the manner in which Allan addresses the unrealistic nature of masculinity as proposed in the media. Indeed, his argument stemmed from the question "Does the media, you find, give you guys real portrayals of men and masculinity?" This was a common theme: rather than perceiving

representations of men and masculinities as 'realistic', the boys exposed the artificiality of media stereotypes. Allan's classmate Ryan addresses this point as well, arguing that, save for documentary films, "movies … they're going back to the old stereotypes where the man is the tough guy and he's … doing everything" (FG Session 1 – Enr. 3). An even stronger criticism is given by Chad - a dominant masculine figure himself - and his friend Gavin:

> Brad – Are there characteristics that are necessary for 'a man' to have?
> Gavin – Well like stereotypically it's like, you got to be a strong, manly man …
> Chad – You gotta be strong, you gotta be courageous …
> G –… but you gotta be sensitive and caring at the same time to impress the ladies, but you have to be this butch like, can bench press 250 pounds …
> C – (*Laughs*).
> G – … one arm kind of guy to impress the guys … So you have to multi-task basically.
> C – That's stereotypically though.
> G – Yeah.
> B – So you say stereotypically, what do you mean by that?
> G – Like …
> C – That's what everybody thinks …
> G – (*At about the same time*) Everyone expects you …
> C – That's what you expect of a real, like …
> G – Manly man (*said in a mocking, grizzled voice*) …
> C – Yeah.
> G – Like Arnold Schwarzenegger type of guy.
> C – Yeah.
> B – And you guys agree or disagree with that?
> C – No, no, I think it's stupid.
> (FG Session 1, Adv. 3)

Gavin and Chad not only discredit representations of dominant masculinities that are built on stereotypical traits (the "Arnold Schwarzenegger type"), they point to the contradictory nature of media representations that set impossible standards for men to achieve. These boys essentially form a criticism of the 'new man' who can simultaneously juggle multiple, often competing characteristics: he is sensitive but strong, courageous but modest (McKay *et al.*, 2005). Mark and Peter evoke a similar critique, suggesting "the perfect man" is presented as humorous, athletic, and confident

all at once, and that media productions are "saying that everybody should strive to be that sort of guy" (Peter, FG Session 1, Enr. 4). While these students illustrate a sophisticated and somewhat extra-ordinary ability to critique this portrayal of masculinity, their comments are representative of the scepticism many students expressed towards stereotypical male identities. Indeed, even celebrated male athletes are in some ways unrealistic, for as Kyle says, "I know I can't be like one of [those athletes]; I don't see what's the point of trying to by like them" (FG Session 1, Enr. 1).

The Vancouver High boys did not confine their gender critiques to portrayals of men and masculinity. The students were well aware that images proliferated of women were steeped in derogatory, long-standing stereotypes. Ryan and Terry enjoyed the film *Kill Bill* (2003) in part for its anomalous depiction of a female lead (played by Uma Thurman, who is shown as physically powerful and independent). When asked to comment on this portrayal, Ryan highlighted its opposition to stereotypical versions of 'emphasized femininity' (Connell, 1995):

> Brad – So like you said [Uma Thurman's] kind of like getting revenge in the show. Is that sort of the way you guys think that female characters are often portrayed on TV?
> Ryan – Um, not usually.
> B – No?
> R – This wasn't that normal … But usually they get the stereotype, like they're all prissy and they're all like 'Ooo, what are you doing today' or like … 'Aren't you coming to the party on Saturday night' (*said in a high-pitched, 'feminine' voice*) … But I don't think that's really how a lot of the girls are.
> B – Ok.
> R – I don't think, I don't know anyone that's like that.
> B – Ok, so [media portrayals are] different from Uma Thurman in that you're saying they're sort of more like …
> R – They follow the stereotypes that were set a long time ago.
> (FG Session 1, Enr. 3).

Other boys followed this argument. Steve of the Advanced class, for example, condemns rapper 50 Cent because "his songs and music videos exploit women in bad ways" (FG

Session 1, Adv. 1). Along with his friend Zach, Steve goes on to criticize 'necessary' feminine traits as shown in the media, for example "thin," "big boobs," and "not muscular" (FG Session 1, Adv. 1).

Like masculinity, media representations of femininity were not only deemed inappropriate but also 'unreal'. Returning to Ryan, he views the ideal bodies shown on TV as wholly implausible, noting that "it's almost impossible to be that thin unless you've got the right metabolism and you have to have all these [things that nutritionists have got]." Moments later, his friend Terry joins in this critique:

> Ryan – Look at like the Barbie Doll image, when they made her girl life-sized she's short and she's so thin and her feet are so small …
> Terry – Oh yeah. She wouldn't be able to walk.
> R – (*Cutting back in*) She wouldn't be able to walk.
> Brad – Right.
> R – And she wouldn't be able to eat without dying.
> T – Yeah.
> R – [It's true].
> B – So you're … you mean if you took a Barbie doll and made it to like real, life-sized?
> T – Mm hm.
> R – She would, she would last like 5 minutes.
> (FG Session 1, Enr. 3).

Although Ryan and Terry were especially adamant in their refusal of dominant gender forms, the extent to which similar feelings were expressed across the focus groups should not be understated. Perhaps because they cannot live up to the standards of masculinity set in the media, and perhaps because they know of no one who matches the standards of femininity, in every focus group the Vancouver High boys rebuked the validity of stereotypical media representations on some level. In a similar way, the boys also denounced the very *creation* of masculinities and femininities on TV and in movies, exposing the gendered nature of media production.

***"Most of those music videos or TV shows are just the director living out
his dream"*: Criticizing Media Production**

As was discussed above, media production is a process that is commonly

influenced by hegemonic notions of masculinity. This is especially true for the

production of sporting events, a form of media commonly consumed by the Vancouver

High students. In addition to questioning gendered media representations, the boys

showed a refined ability to critique the initial act of media production. Gendered images

and themes in the media were at times explained through the ulterior motives of media

producers. For some boys, these individuals were seen to be interested only in making

money or enhancing audience ratings.

Chad and Gavin, who formed a piercing critique of 'new man' masculinities

above, are also fairly certain of why men are depicted in this manner. Joined by classmate

Howie, they point to the monetary dividends that result from rapper 50 Cent's gender

performance:

>Brad – Ok let me ask you guys about the guys [in the media] you don't like. So
>we talked about 50 Cent – so Gavin you said, you said you think he's all that ...
>Gavin – He's too conceded, and he's just walking around with his bitches and
>hoes and his candy shop ...
>Chad – And his hands on his nuts.
>G - ... it's so, like, I can't respect people like that ...
>C – (*Laughs*).
>G - ... that think they're so big when ... I don't know, I just don't like that type
>of music ... [I] don't like people like that.
>B – Is that common? Do you see a lot of people like that in the media?
>G – Um, yeah (*said with a short laugh as though this is obvious*).
>C – Yeah (*said laughingly*).
>Howie – ... Well that's how, that's how the producers make them ...
>G – Yeah.
>H - ... cause it makes money.
>B – Hm, right.
>H – And it's all about making money for them, right?
>G – Yeah.
>(FG Session 1, Adv. 3).

Akin to this was the questioning of the music star Usher, shown in the video clips promoting the Make-a-Wish Foundation charity. While some commended Usher for his seeming act of good will, others were sceptical of his motives. Victor suggests that Usher "could have done [the commercial] for publicity" (FG Session 1, Adv. 1), a point resonated - if slightly more vociferously - by Frank, "It's not like Usher was doing it to be a nice guy, he's doing it to sell more records ... he's ridiculously cocky" (FG Session 1, Enr. 2).

For some boys, in congruence with the monetary desires of media producers were the efforts of these individuals to attract viewer attention. Chad, for example, tied the surrealism of TV shows and movies to producers' struggle for viewership, asking rhetorically, "everything's overdramatic and stuff just to ... get viewers right?" (FG Session 1, Adv. 3). Three Advanced students confirm this when asked about representations of women on TV:

> Brad - Ok, so we talked about the male characters, what about the female characters? What do you guys think about the way women are shown on TV?
> Zach – Again, they're either really good looking ... I'd say on TV shows they're either really good-looking or really not good-looking.
> Steve – Yeah.
> B – Right.
> Victor – Like not good looking maybe less ... [They're] really hot, or like ...
> Z – To make you watch the show.
> (FG Session 1, Adv. 1).

Perhaps the sharpest critique of media production, however, was offered once again by Allan's group. Noticing the frequency with which men are provided hegemonic status in the media, as well as the concomitant subordination of women, these students saw media productions as the result of masculine fantasies:

> Brad – Are [female characters] realistic? The way you see women on TV?
> Cal – Not really, no.
> Allan – No.
> B – No?

A – You never see a girl walking around like shorts up to here (*demonstrates very short shorts*) and like a bra, like you know [50 Cent videos].

B – So that's not ... they aren't realistic portrayal of women?

A – Not, not usually.

B – Right. What do you think Chad?

C – Yeah I agree.

Frank – ... Yeah it's pretty far out, like ... like it's not even close.

B – Hm.

A – And plus most of those music videos or TV shows are just the director living out his dream of being like [a real] [inaudible – one word].

F – They're like ... [they build] a fantasy world.

A – A fantasy ... I'm sure 50 Cent doesn't have like 15 girls around him at all times.

F – Like almost like soft core porno or something.

(FG Session 1, Enr. 2).

Hegemonic masculinities and stereotypical (or emphasized) femininities as shown in the media are therefore approached through a keen critical lens by the Vancouver High boys. Although critical media perceptions were at times accompanied by hegemonic interpretations, in every focus group the desirability and 'realness' of hegemonic masculinities were questioned on some level. Moreover, and perhaps even more impressively, the boys also exposed how 'unreal' masculinities are fostered by media producers who seek only financial gains or the attention of a particular audience commodity. A quotation from Zach, an Advanced student who was highly sceptical of the media, illustrates the two-pronged nature of the boys' critique. When asked if "there are certain characteristics that are necessary, or that you should have to be a man," Zach answered confidently, "Personally, I don't think there is, but like, we're just kind of, we're trained ... like being strong or not emotional at all" (FG Session 1, Adv. 1). Representation and production are both highlighted by Zach in this case: "being strong" and "not emotional" are markers of hegemonic masculinity, and are traits Zach sees as inappropriate, if omnipresent. What's more, the notion that "we're trained" implies a steady pattern to media representations, guided by the hand of an unseen 'trainer'

responsible for production. Like many of the Vancouver High boys, these are features of the media of which Zach disapproves.

"I'm sure the guy who pulls the truck around thinks he's being very masculine ... but the guys designing the room might also think that they're being very masculine": Defining Masculinities

The media criticisms of the Vancouver High boys were often accompanied by a questioning of how masculinity and femininity are commonly defined. In these instances, the students' definitions of gender paralleled their critical views on media representations and production. It is important to conceptualize the relationship between media interpretations and gender definitions in this reciprocal manner, rather than proclaiming that one is a precursor (and thus a potential cause) to the other. That is to say, it is impossible to definitively assert that media interpretations *cause* the boys to define masculinity/femininity in a particular way, or vice versa (nor does it seem necessary to do so). Instead, it is more reasonable to suggest that their opinions on these topics are enmeshed, affecting each other in a give-and-take manner.

A number of boys suggested 'counter-hegemonic' masculine traits or values that they deemed appropriate. Due to the nature of our conversations, these students often referred to prominent media figures in defining masculinity. Ian from the Enriched class noted that men should be knowledgeable, have high self-esteem, and "should believe in themselves and what they're doing" (FG Session 1, Enr. 1). In a related way, Lance applauded Usher's benevolence in his work with the Make-a-Wish Foundation, as well as the political activism of singer Bono (FG Session 1, Adv. 2). Ted from the General class also moved away from stereotypical definitions of masculinity, expressing a fondness for

male TV characters who are depicted as brainy (FG Session 1, Gen. 2). These ideas work against masculinities based on physical strength and toughness that are so common in the media. Also using the media to provide alternate definitions of masculinity was Ryan, who found desirable traits in the Designer Guys:

> Brad – You said Designer Guys is maybe kind of like a realistic version of masculinity, what do you think about that Ryan?
> Ryan - ... like a lot of people would say that's gay, but I don't, I don't think that. I think it takes a lot of work, like degrees to get to where they are now ...
> B – Yeah.
> R – And they have to be good ... it's like they've got to know all this math and, I think it's trigonometry, I'm not sure ... I haven't [done it yet]. But just to know that you don't paint a ceiling white, you paint it yellow because [it] casts the light better.
> (FG Session 1, Enr. 3).

Instead of offering alternate traits, some boys also dispelled hegemonic masculinities without supplying alternatives. Despite protests from Cal, Allan maintains that masculinities are unfixed from a universal definition:

> Allan – Um, I don't really think there's a clear definition for masculinity, it's ... interpreted by the person, or, [it's their own] ...
> Brad – Ok. So you don't think there's a clear definition for masculinity?
> A – I'm sure the guy who pulls the truck around thinks he's being very masculine ... but the guys designing the room might also think that they're being very masculine.
> Cal – But I think most people would think that uh, the guy who pulls the truck would be more masculine.
> B – Would be more masculine?
> C – Yeah.
> B – But Allan you're saying that kind of like that there's ... kind of like each person, individual person has their own kind of definition of masculinity?
> A – Yeah.
> B – Interesting. Can I ask you, do you have a definition?
> A – Not really, like masculinity is, I don't think that the guy who's pulling the truck's any more masculine than the people in Brokeback Mountain ... I think that every ... all men are masculine because they're men and that's what being a man is right?
> (FG Session, Enr. 2).

Allan's (non)definition of masculinity is somewhat problematic in that he reaches a tautological end that confines masculinity to the male sex ("all men are masculine

because they're men"), but his assertion that "the guy who pulls the truck" and "the guys designing the room" are both masculine figures is granted. More importantly, Allan's recognition that there is no "clear definition of masculinity" is an anti-essentialist stance. Even if unwittingly, Allan has formed a poststructuralist critique, highlighting the 'floating significance' (Jhally, 1997) of masculinities across contexts. Some boys also doubted the validity of media definitions of *femininity*, as was referred to above. As with masculinity, defining femininity on a small number of occasions meant providing appropriate 'counter-hegemonic' traits – for example, intelligence and good health (FG Session 1, Gen. 3) – but generally it entailed a mere rejection of stereotypical characteristics.

Taken together, the propensity for the Vancouver High students to question the media's dominant masculine logic, and their willingness to offer alternate gender definitions (based largely on their media experiences) illustrates that they possess a refined ability to question stereotypical ideas about masculinity and femininity. These gender perspectives were prevalent with each of the groups involved in the study, but were also accompanied at times by opposing, hegemonic understandings of the media. Notably, many of the students who developed critical or counter-hegemonic opinions were also capable of reproducing hegemonic thoughts on masculinity (a point that speaks to the contextual variability of masculinity and will be developed in Finding #3). Although hegemonic viewpoints were overshadowed by the students' media criticisms in the focus group context, they are nonetheless significant in this analysis in that they demonstrate the complexity with which the boys approach the media.

"It just looks pretty funny, guys doing design": Hegemonic Media Interpretations

In contradiction to their dismissal of prominent hegemonic figures, the boys also frequently accepted and even lionized male celebrities, especially iconic sports stars like Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and UFC (Ultimate Fighting) competitors. In doing so, a connection between these individuals and desirable 'masculine' qualities - muscularity, wealth, athleticism, and toughness, among others – was established. This theme was evident in my discussion with Allan's Enriched class group:

> B – Ok, are there [Ultimate Fighting] characters in particular or people in particular that you guys like on the show?
> F – Chuck Lidell … Jeremy Horn.
> C – … The Iceman.
> F – Tim Silvia.
> B – … what are the characteristics of these guys that appeal to you?
> C – They're like tough.
> A – The UFC guys have …
> C – They're dangerous.
> A – … the UFC guys [are not] like as 'roided up as the other people. Like some of these guys are pretty, well not scrawny …
> F – But they're like lean.
> A - … yeah they're lean.
> B – Right.
> F – They're more realistic …
> A – It's not typical like WWE where they're like walking out like (*mimics a person with large shoulders who can barely move his arms*).
> F – … It's also like the bravery of it too, like going in there and getting beat up.
> C – Yeah.
> A – Also the hockey fight too, that was kind of bravery, like the guy went over and nailed Naslund … and the other guy went over and fought the guy right after he took on Naslund … like it's kind of like helping each other out kind of bravery.
> (FG Session 1 – Enr. 2)

The character traits highlighted by these students – strength, competitiveness, toughness, and so on – are in some ways personality traits but are also suggestive of 'appropriate' male bodies. Although these boys frequently dismissed hyper-masculine

bodies for their harmful consequences (as shown above), they also had the capacity to reject those male physiques deemed 'inappropriate'. Allan brings the 'appropriate' male body to the fore above when he notes that UFC fighters are neither "scrawny" nor "'roided up." Others followed this logic, conjuring notions of a 'bodily spectrum' with 'wimpy' and 'too muscly' at either pole. Appropriate male physiques sit somewhere in between: adequately muscled, fit and athletic, but never to an extreme. Austin, Clayton, and Derek illustrate this point:

> Brad - What do you guys think about men's bodies? Are there, uh, good and bad bodies that men could have?
> Austin – (*Said immediately*) Sure, sure.
> B – Ok. What are some good bodies?
> Clayton – Um, muscular, well, not too muscular.
> A – Yeah, not too muscular, but like hockey players, I think they're pretty athletic.
> C – Yeah.
> B – Yeah. So the hockey players are athletic?
> Derek – They're not too strong, they can still move and stuff.
> A – Yeah … It's not like the Strongman that we saw on the …
> B – Yeah?
> A – … that's just going too far but, um, yeah, like a hockey player.
> C – Yeah, like they work out so it doesn't like affect their appearance, so they're not like "shhh" (*pretends to be wearing a very tight shirt*) …
> (FG Session 1 – Gen. 4).

Lance from the Advanced class raises this issue as well when he is asked what bodies he sees as desirable: "Probably [basketball player] Tracy McGrady … like the Strongman's like strong and everything but he's just like, and like I don't know, I wouldn't really want that. But like Tracy McGrady, you can see that he's like fit … He's not like a massive, like steroid monkey" (FG Session 1 – Adv. 2).

Importantly, bodies must also serve a 'proper' function in order to be considered appropriate. A body that is seemingly shaped correctly can be deemed 'too soft' if not up to a 'masculine' task. This is demonstrated by Kyle - an Enriched student who also

praises basketballer Tracy McGrady's body-type - when he is asked about the Designer Guys (who appear to be fairly physically fit):

> Kyle - ... it just looks pretty funny, guys doing design and [stuff].
> Brad – Right, the guys doing design?
> K – Like they make a show about that, I don't get who would want to watch that.
> B – What do you think about the guys on the show? There's three guys ...·
> K – Yeah, they look like guys who would be doing design (*laughs as he's saying this*).
> B – They look like guys who would be doing design? What do you mean?
> K – I don't [know] why, but like, athletically wise they didn't ... they couldn't do anything else except design houses.
> (FG Session 1 – Enr 1)

For Kyle, it is less the structure of the Designer Guys' bodies and more their function that pushes them from the 'proper' space along the bodily spectrum. A slight variation of this comes from Greg, who dis-identifies with the figure skater shown in the clips not for his physique, but rather for how he is clothed, "Oh, and also like the figure skating guy, I mean like, figure skaters are pretty cool to watch usually, but I don't know that guy's outfit was kind of ... wasn't it kind of tight and revealing kind of?" (FG Session 1 – Enr. 1). Greg's opinion here is suggestive of the manner in which some of the Vancouver High boys questioned, ridiculed, and wholly denounced the male figure skater. This was true for other men who did not match the standards of 'appropriate' masculinity, namely those bearing what the boys deemed feminine or homosexual markers.

"I don't want to sound like homophobic, but like ...": Dismissing 'Inappropriate' Masculinities

In line with Connell's (1995) theoretical work, the strength of hegemonic masculinities was not only achieved through the acceptance of certain 'desirable' traits, but also in their opposition to both femininity and 'alternate' masculine forms.

Contrary to their critical views on femininity in the media, the boys at times deemed women inherently different from men. Whereas masculinity was constructed through stereotypical traits like embodied strength, femininity could be defined by sensitivity, a capacity to show emotions, and a soft yet appropriately shaped body. Returning to Austin, Clayton, and Derek, they view "big boobs," politeness, and an ability to cook as key feminine traits. These views are coherent with their media tastes, as shown in the following dialogue:

> [Continuing from a conversation of the character Meg from the show *The Family Guy*, who was viewed by the students as studious and homely]
> Brad – ... how do you think women are usually shown on TV? Is it like Meg? Is it that sort of unattractive role, or ...
> Derek – No.
> Clayton – No.
> B – No, you don't think so, what do you think Evan?
> D – It's the opposite.
> Austin – Yeah.
> B – Ok, how so?
> D – Um ...
> A – Because guys tend to watch like the hot girls and ... [right?]
> D – (*Picking up in the middle of J's sentence*) Yeah guys watch the ...
> A – .... and like you would rather see a hot girl than an ugly girl ...
> B – When you're watching a show?
> A - ... yeah, and you'd rather see less clothes than more clothes.
> (FG Session1 – Gen. 4).

For boys who characterized femininity in this way, 'acting girly' was viewed as especially inappropriate for men. While behaviour of this kind was, for the most part, ambiguously defined, Greg, Ian and Kyle discuss specific behaviours that need be avoided:

> Brad – Anyone [in the media] you guys don't want to be like?
> (*Brief pause*).
> Kyle – I don't know, like wear like tight clothes and like act really girly.
> (*Greg and Ian laugh as he says this*).
> B – Someone who wears tight clothes, acts girly, that's not desirable?
> Kyle – Nope.
> B – You guys agree, what do you think?
> Greg – Yeah that's true.
> Ian – (*Nods*).

B – Anyone else? Any other people/characteristics you can think of?
(*Brief pause*).
K – Guys who shave themselves, like shave their like legs, that's pretty disgusting.
G – It's really manly (*said sarcastically*).
B – ... Any other things that you can think of that you wouldn't want to do... like traits that people have that you wouldn't want?
G – Guys who cross-dress and stuff like that.
(FG Session 1 – Enr. 1)

Kyle is particularly scornful is his rejection of 'feminine' traits here, seeing body shaving (ironically an act performed by many high-level male athletes) as "disgusting."

Returning to Austin's group, they were more subdued on this matter of 'acting girly', yet nonetheless disapproved of over-investing in fashion and consumerism. As Austin contends, this is antithetical to masculinity, "For example, I do not see a single girl who does not have like Ugg boots, you know? ... And if it was guys, if one guy had on one shoe and like the other guy got another shoe, it would be like 'hey, you fag, you copied me!' you know?" (FG Session1 – Gen. 4). Austin's use of the derogatory 'fag' is especially notable here. Although young males do not always deploy this term as a disparaging synonym for homosexuality (Pascoe, 2005), in Austin's case it illustrates how supposedly feminine markers can be associated with alternate and inappropriate forms of masculinity.

Other boys exhibited similar disdain for 'gay' masculinities, albeit in a less abrasive manner. This often came across as an 'ambiguous disassociation' from alternate masculinities, where students distanced themselves from 'gay' characteristics without unequivocally denouncing them. In these instances, the 'other' was deemed 'ok' but simultaneously 'weird' or 'different'. For example, Dylan and Allan from the Enriched class recognize the skill needed for figure skating but don't "find it that interesting to

watch" (FG Session 1, Enr 2). When asked why, these students provided a tautological

response:

> Brad – Is there any reason you don't think [figure skating is] interesting, like as
> interesting as some of the stuff you like?
> Dylan – Well, I don't it's just …
> Allan – Like watching someone dance on ice.
> D – Yeah, it's true.
> (FG Session 1, Enr 2)

Moments later, Dylan expresses a similar disassociation, noting that "Designer Guys are

like, pretty boring" and that "Brokeback Mountain is kind of like weird, but I mean it's

like their choice" (FG Session 1, Enr 2). This last part of Dylan's statement is telling: it is

suggestive of a gender performance where this student aims to be viewed as someone

who accepts homosexuality but is simultaneously distanced from it. This stems perhaps

from the contradictory messages the students encounter on a daily basis. Indeed, the boys

live in a Canadian society that on some level champions Enlightenment ideals of

'equality'. At the same time, they know that those engaging in activities like figure

skating are "seen as gay or something, even if you're not" (Lance, FG Session 1, Adv. 2).

This idea of disassociation was most apparent in the speech of Steve, Victor and Zach,

three boys who otherwise express critical views of dominant masculinities:

> [Following the boys saying they don't like the Designer Guys]
> Brad – What about Designer Guys? Had you guys seen that show before?
> Victor – No.
> Steve – I've heard of it.
> Zach – I've heard of it, I've never seen it.
> B – What is it about Designer Guys?
> V – I don't want to sound like homophobic, but like …
> Z – I know what you mean, I know what you mean.
> (FG Session 1, Adv. 1).

Victor and Zach are unable to finish this sentiment, apparently unaware of how to

separate themselves from the Designer Guys without 'sounding homophobic'. Important

here is the manner is which homosexuality, not unlike femininity, is disavowed, serving to strengthen the resolve of hegemonic masculinities.

Being 'A Man': (Re)Defining Gender

Not surprisingly, the students who viewed media versions of masculinity through a narrow lens also had the capability to define masculinity in an equally rigid manner. As was described above with the students' critical media views and critical definitions of gender, it is important here to avoid viewing hegemonic media interpretations and stereotypical gender definitions in a cause-and-effect dialectic.

Austin, who has been portrayed as fond of hegemonic media masculinities, was also quick to assert the 'naturalness' of the gender order. When asked if there are any characteristics necessary to be 'a man', Austin suggested "strong," "rich," "hot wife, hot chicks," and "big penis" (FG Session 1, Gen. 4). Asked for his reasoning on this definition, Austin fell into a tautology once again:

> Brad – Why are these things important do you think? So like why are the things
> like hot wife, rich, what makes them kind of important for a man to have?
> Austin – Because they're … that's what a man …
> Clayton – [Only for you].
> A – No it's, that's what the purpose of like, I …
> Derek – Life?
> A – Yeah.
> (FG Session 1, Gen. 4).

No other boys lobbied for the traditional male sex role as fervently as Austin, however some lauded a particular corporeal aesthetic as important for 'a man' to have. In the students' questionnaires, 'muscular/fit', 'strong', and 'athletic' were common responses to the question "Are there any general characteristics you think are necessary to be 'a man'?" and overwhelmed answers such as 'healthy'.

As noted above, a small number of boys also defined femininity in direct opposition to hegemonic masculinities. In these instances, a shapely figure, and an ability to be emotional and caring were outlined as appropriate feminine characteristics. On two separate occasions, characteristics necessary for 'a woman' were defined according to the libidinal desires of men. When Kyle says "some guys like girls that have like special characteristics" (FG Session 1, Enr. 1) and Austin suggests "some guys like quiet women I guess and like very polite and stuff like that," the boundaries for proper femininity are dependent solely on the needs of men.

"You can disagree with something but you'll always want to be a part of society so you have to agree with it": The Unchangeable Gender Order

To this point, I have illustrated how the Vancouver High boys displayed an ability to think critically about media masculinities while simultaneously reproducing dominant gender themes. Categorizing individual students into one of two categories – either critical or hegemonic – is certainly enticing but is an oversimplified approach. Indeed, all of the students save for Ryan and Terry (who espoused critical views throughout our discussion of the media) fluctuated between these differing opinions. Notably, some boys could even reject and accept hegemonic masculinities in the same breath. These students surmised notions of what I have termed an 'unchangeable gender order', where dominant masculinities are faulty, but, in that they are 'normal' or 'natural', are also unassailable.

The students who conceptualized masculinities in this manner usually saw the gender order as socially engrained: whether 'right' or 'wrong', the boys believed gender forms to be fixed, and the potential for change to be elusive. This perspective is best illustrated by Chad and Gavin, who, as shown above, have qualms with the ways men are

usually portrayed in the media (recall's Gavin's suggestion that "you gotta be sensitive and caring at the same time to impress the ladies, but you have to be this butch like, can bench press 250 pounds" - FG Session 1, Adv. 3). Although these representations trade on stereotypes, the boys feel that they need not be avoided entirely:

> Brad – So you say stereotypically, what do you mean by that?
> Gavin – Like …
> Chad – That's what everybody thinks …
> G – (*At about the same time*) Everyone expects you …
> C – That's what you expect of a real, like …
> G – Manly man (*said in a mock grizzled voice*) …
> C – Yeah.
> G – Like Arnold Schwarzenegger type of guy.
> C – Yeah.
> B – And you guys agree or disagree with that?
> C – No no, I think it's stupid.
> B – You think it's stupid?
> G – I disagree with it but, at the same time you have to look at what everyone expects you to be so you can disagree with something but you'll always want to be a part of society so you have to agree with it.
> B – Hm.
> G – You have to, not agree with it but just go along with it.
> (FG Session 1, Adv. 1).

This notion of 'going along' with gender inequality was echoed by other students. Cal and Frank, for example, join Allan and Dylan in condemning traits that are traditionally tied with femininity in the media – thinness, superficial interests, good looks, and so forth. These critiques are tempered, however, by the admission of these students that they 'buy into' the media's logic:

> Brad – So [are those traits] you guys think women should have?
> Frank – No, that's like what the media …
> Cal – Yeah, yeah.
> B – Ok, that's what the media says?
> F – Yeah, the media.
> C – Yeah.
> B – Yeah?
> C – I don't know. I'm kind of more attracted to what the kind of media …
> F – … It's like … you'd like to say that that's what the media says and that's wrong, but like …
> C – Yeah, it's just kind of …
> F – It's just like …

(E and P are speaking together here).
Allan – You don't want a total Barbie doll or you don't somebody that can barely speak ...
[Dylan] - Like a dumb blonde or something.
E – Yeah.
C – ... subconsciously you're usually attracted to those women more even though you don't want to be.
(FG Session 1, Enr. 2)

When pressed about why he's 'subconsciously attracted' to certain women, Frank pointed to the media, "maybe it's heard for so long from the media and stuff, like it's just kind of what's expected of you" (FG Session 1, Enr. 2). Notably, Frank and Cal, like Chad and Gavin, were students that were likely to behave in dominant ways in PE class. These boys may offer criticisms of stereotypical masculinities and femininities, but they ultimately find the gender order to be an inescapable fact.

Interpreting the Media: Theoretical Implications

Illustrating what seem to be inconsistencies in the boys' logic is not to imply a value judgment - that there are 'right' and 'wrong' masculinities to accept or imitate. Nor is it to suggest the boys should display consistent logic, and that there need be patterns in the ways they choose 'appropriate' male figures and desirable masculinities. Instead, the purpose here is to point out how the Vancouver High boys are fickle in selecting and defining masculinities. Rather than relying on a set of immutable ideologies, the boys have what can be seen as an ideological toolkit that permits discrepancies in the ways they understand gender. This point has significant practical and theoretical implications for media, audience reception and gender studies.

Practically speaking, this finding questions the common contention that youth are easily 'duped' when consuming the media. As was outlined in the introduction, this

characterization of young people as passive or uncritical consumers abounds in the media, in the law and politics, and in some academic literature. Steven Miles (2000) counters this prevailing assumption by suggesting that the frequency with which youth interact with the media (more so than any other demographic) provides these individuals with sharp critical media skills. The work of the Vancouver High students in questioning media representations and production provides support for this assertion. Of course, hegemonic beliefs do linger for these students, and there is therefore some value in considering how the media negatively impacts young people. Nonetheless, the frequency with which the Vancouver High students were highly critical of the media suggests that the valourization of dominant masculine figures is not necessarily an unreflexive process. Perhaps more importantly, it illustrates how youth are generally unfairly cast in popular discourse.

Considering theoretical work in media studies, it is not surprising that the boys are able to take up various and often contradictory gender positions. I return here to Miles (2000), who argues that the pervasiveness of the mass media in 'postmodern' societies has permitted variability in tastes, ideologies, identities, consumption practices, and so on, and has allowed young people to escape exclusive reliance on 'local cultures' (e.g., the family) in formatting their ontological beliefs. This, in turn, has facilitated an increasingly fragmented or individualized society (Miles, 2000, p. 50-54). When it comes to gender, the media may be reliant upon hegemonic themes, but they are nonetheless erratic in their portrayals of masculinity (Whitehead, 2002). If we grant young people the ability to "transform, appropriate and recontextualize meanings" (Miles, 2000, p. 31; c.f.

Willis, 1990), then it is not surprising they interpret the media in complex and individualized ways.

For audience reception studies, this research reaffirms one of the most basic maxims of this branch of the literature: that audiences have the ability to make 'dominant' and/or 'oppositional' reads of media texts (Hall, 1980). If it is granted that media messages are largely encoded (or produced) according to hegemonic gender ideologies, the hegemonic interpretations of the Vancouver High boys outlined above can be deemed dominant reads, while their critical perspectives can be seen as oppositional. This is simply a reaffirmation of existing work on media audiences, but since this point is rarely made with *youth* audiences it is certainly worth restating.

Finally, the complex media interpretations described above are useful in thinking about gender theoretically. The manner in which the Vancouver High boys occasionally offered hegemonic views – that is, by discrediting 'alternate' masculinities and femininities – fully supports Connell's (1995) argument as to how dominant masculinities are developed. Of course, more often than not, the boys took distance from a traditional hegemonic position, a point that illustrates how personal masculinities and masculine hierarchies are neither natural nor immutable. Connell's framework allows for the possibility for individuals to shift their subject positions according to context, although, as Wetherall and Edley (1999) make clear, this point is not fully developed in her work. I will return to this important theoretical argument in Finding #3, where the relationship between media interpretations and physical education will be considered.

3.2 Physical Education Experiences

Finding #2: Physical education class, while offering the potential for 'alternate' masculinities, tends to promote hegemonic masculinities as 'normal' gender identities for young males.

Finding #1 dealt with the flexible meanings the Vancouver High boys attach to masculinity as shown in the popular media. Merging my observations of PE with the focus groups (particularly Session Two discussions) and interviews I conducted with students and teachers respectively, in Finding #2 I will show how physical education class is a setting that often permits hegemonic identities to flourish. This is a process that is facilitated by a well-developed relationship between the formal curriculum (i.e., the provincial curriculum that is implemented according to school resources and facilities) and the informal curriculum (or the unofficial school culture). Specifically, the former places an emphasis on competitive team games – in some ways without choice - while the latter invests gendered meanings into these activities that facilitate gender hierarchies. In this analysis, the potential for 'alternate' masculinities to surface in PE class will also be considered.

The Formal Curriculum

The formal curriculum - also known as the explicit or official curriculum - is "the level of the curriculum that appears in school programs, syllabuses, and policy documents and that teachers consciously pursue" (Kirk, 1992, p. 40). In this analysis, I will consider the British Columbia provincial physical education curriculum, its implementation at

Vancouver High, and the resources, facilities, and structure of PE at this school as important elements of the formal curriculum.

"Kids come to PE to have fun": PE Curriculum and Implementation

A recent report on physical education curriculum implementation found that the allotted subject matter proposed in the curriculum is not being met in its entirety at most British Columbia schools. Among the problems found with curriculum implementation were that PE is given a low priority in education, activities like gymnastics are being skipped over, and resources and facilities demand that certain activities dominate class time (PE Curriculum Report, 2001).

This first issue – that other courses are prioritized ahead of PE – was certainly not true at Vancouver High. All of the teachers at the school were absolutely invested in this subject, and the administration seemed to welcome changes that made physical education available to as many students as possible. Enrolment in PE, as well as the number of PE classes available has risen dramatically over the past decade at the school, something that for Mr. F. is attributable in part to the dedicated staff - "And that's the bottom line. If [the teachers] do a good job, the kids will sign up" (Interview – Mr. F, p. 30) – and to the teaching paradigm employed by these individuals (described below). I was consistently impressed during my time at Vancouver High with how the teachers were able to easily engage large groups of students into continuous forms of activity on a daily basis.

The second issue from the curriculum report noted above – that elements of the curriculum like dance are being omitted – is not entirely true for Vancouver High either. Despite severely limited funding, the staff at this school make efforts to incorporate a

diversity of activities into their instruction: billiards, bowling, skating, curling and so forth. Moreover, 'alternative' activities that are emphasized in the curriculum like dance and gymnastics are not omitted from instruction, as is the case in many schools. In the implementation of these activities, the staff honour a teaching paradigm that promotes enjoyable forms of sport. As Mr. F. explains, rather than testing or training specific skills, the goal in PE is to give students the opportunity to participate and have fun:

> My belief is that the kids come to PE to have fun ... and so I need to make them have fun. I need to – well not make them – but I need to provide the environment where the students come in and say "I want to be here I want to play hard, and I want to enjoy myself for now and 10 minutes from now and 20 minutes." Does it mean that I don't test them in free throws or badminton serve or does it mean that I compromise the skill development and the skill testing and the marking for enjoyment of sport? Yeah, but see I don't believe in ... I believe in participation ... I think that's more important than whether the kid is throwing the ball perfectly, or whether the kid is running perfectly. (Interview – Mr. F., p. 26/27).

This approach has certainly brought benefits in that it has increased enrolment in physical education (Interview – Mr. F) – something that is especially crucial considering how this subject is otherwise marginalized in education (Janzen, 2004; Tinning and Fitzclarence, 1992). Moreover, a perspective of this kind is refreshing in that it escapes the increasingly prevalent notion that PE need become more rational, or 'technocratic' (McDonald, 2003; Tinning & Fitclarence, 1992), by foregrounding testing and measurement procedures (as prescribed, for example, in the PE Curriculum Report, 2001). This approach also has notable implications, however, from a gender perspective.

Mostly these implications arise from the manner in which competitive team games form a central component of PE instruction. The teachers offer a variety of activities over the course of the year, as noted above, but competitive activities like dodgeball and football that are conducive to androcentric environments (Brown and

Evans, 2004; Humbert, 1995) still occupy a significant portion of class time[2]. This is partially achieved through the supposedly democratic practice of offering students choices in selecting their daily physical activities - something that is recommended in the provincial curriculum:

> Quality physical education programs are structured so that the duration, intensity, and frequency of activities motivate students and meet their individual needs. When appropriate, students participate in the selection of activities from all movement categories (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1999).

Mobilizing the voice of the students in this sense, while seemingly desirable, in reality permits the loudest and most assertive students - usually those who favour competitive games - to have their way (a point that will be developed below). More importantly, the very activities that can be offered as choices are limited by the resources and facilities available for instruction.

Gendered Tools, Gendered Spaces: School Resources and Facilities

Obtaining sufficient funds to purchase resources and maintain facilities was the third element of the PE curriculum report identified above. This report, which revealed data from surveys completed by educators across the province, found that a remarkable 93.4% of respondents saw 'equipment availability' as a key variable in operating a PE program (PE Curriculum Report, 2001, p. 30). In this matter, Vancouver High is no exception. Provided a very limited budget, the teachers at this school are forced to raise funds on their own to support everything from hiring officials to buying new soccer balls. The resiliency of the staff on this matter was quite remarkable: they did everything from charity events to selling popcorn to make ends meet. In spite of these fundraising efforts,

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[2] Certainly I do not wish to generalize here as I did not spend a whole year with any of the classes, but during my observations these games were consistently employed.

the resources available to the teachers allow for a narrow selection of activities. Mr. F., for example, spoke of his desire to incorporate an aquatics unit into his instruction, something he could not do because of the cost. Moreover, activities that necessitate a great deal of space and require each student to have a particular resource – javelin, for example – are quite hard to execute. Games such as football, basketball, handball and dodgeball are easiest to incorporate into instruction, as evidenced by the wealth of equipment necessary for these sports on hand at the school.

To some extent we can view the *facilities* at Vancouver High, like the resources, as gendered as well. Landscapes can be read as gendered by the practices they invite – for example, the school playground has been characterized as such for the ways it is used differently by girls and boys (Epstein *et al*, 2001) - but there is a need to consider how spaces can be gendered in the manner they are constructed (see Vertinsky & McKay, 2004). The weight room at Vancouver High is perhaps the best example here. The large, heavy-lifting machines that call attention in this room do not render this space a masculine one alone (although heavy lifting is a practice traditionally tied to masculinity – see Klein, 1993); rather, the weight room can be understood in this manner when these structures are considered alongside the images presented on the room's walls. Featured throughout are 'how-to' posters explaining proper techniques for lifting exercises. These signs are noticeable for their size and glossy coating, but also for the 'perfect' bodies they depict. The men on these posters stand out for their extreme musculature, and it is to be assumed these bodies were formulated through male-specific practices like the bench press. Wearing no shirt these figures come to resemble the Strongman (or ''Roid Droid') from the video clips. Many posters also depict a female model who is notable for her

physique as well. Appropriately muscled but still curvaceous, the very tanned woman embodies what Connell (1995) calls 'emphasized femininity'.

These images suggest 'appropriate' activities and body types for boys and girls, and render the weight room a gendered activity space. To be sure, it was not the only one at Vancouver High. In the rafters of the rink utilized during the skating unit hung artwork portraying male and female athletes. Among the depictions of athletic men were a basketball player, a hockey player, and a lacrosse player. The lone women shown were a figure skater and a ballerina. As another example, the walls of the main gymnasium that was utilized for both physical education and varsity sports featured a series of banners commemorating athletic champions from the school's history, as well as catchy school slogans that emphasized the competitive nature of athletics. These elements of the gymnasium invest this space with meanings typically associated with high-level sport, 'spilling over' the values of competitive athletics into physical education (Harrison *et al*, 2004).

The facilities and resources available at Vancouver High, like the implementation of the provincial curriculum, are elements of the formal curriculum that in some ways encourage a competitive physical culture in physical education. The curriculum, school resources and facilities are important in that they facilitate games and activities that are easily tied to stereotypically masculine traits like competitiveness. Of course, it is the meanings students allot to these activities, as well as the actual relations that develop when they are played, that are of most importance. These elements of school life will be analyzed in the following section, but first it is important to describe one final aspect of the formal curriculum: the role of the class divisions at Vancouver High.

"You don't get ... the stragglers in running": 'Advanced' Masculinities

The class separations at Vancouver High – primarily the split between Advanced and General PE – have the potential to influence gender relations as well. Class divisions should not be blamed exclusively for gender inequalities. As we know from the extensive literature on masculinities, gender hierarchies can and do arise in virtually any setting. Moreover, it is worth again noting that the teachers at Vancouver High point to the split between Advanced and General classes as another cause of recent rises in enrolment. Nonetheless, the structure of PE at this school also played a role in both creating and reinforcing power relations between students, a point that is significant to this analysis.

In theory, the Advanced classes form homogenous groups of high-level athletes, while General classes suit the remainder of the student population (save for Enriched students). This set-up can be problematic in the ways Advanced students envision themselves:

> Mr. R. – The pros to having Advanced classes versus regular classes is that the kids in an Advanced class are playing other kids of similar ability ... And so that's obviously a very positive aspect of having an Advanced class. I also see though, as a con, an elitist attitude that develops, because these kids then think, oh they're special and, you know they, the rules that might apply to a regular group don't apply to them because they're, they're God's gift ...
> B – Hmm.
> R – ... I'm not suggesting that we have an Advanced class of Prima Donnas, but with that environment having a class that's an Advanced group, having them grouped together, that attitude can develop and does to some degree.
> (Interview – Mr. R., p. 4-5).

Moreover, as Advanced student Victor points out, this elitist attitude can be internalized across the school, "I guess like it's more like respected maybe, like 'PE Advanced, oooo'. Like it's more prestigious. And I guess in that like, it is more competitive and like you don't get maybe like the stragglers in running" (FG Session 2, Adv. 1).

In practice, Advanced students are not always 'strong' athletically. At times enrolment is low and additional students are needed. At other times, students wish to have the Advanced designation on their transcript, and thus insist they take part in this class. In these instances, I would suggest that gender hierarchies are especially accentuated. Specifically, when students have pre-conceived ideas of the appropriate athletic level for a class, athleticism (or ability) becomes yet another marker of difference between students. Those individuals who do not meet the athletic standards of the class can be seen as transgressing the symbolic boundaries featured in this setting. They are 'matter out of place' and serve to unsettle social norms that, in this case, are formally structured (Hall, 1997). Similarly, students can be out of place in the General class if they are athletically superior to their classmates (an example of this will be provided in the analysis below). Of course, we are dealing in these cases as much with the informal curriculum (that is, relations between the students) as we are the formal curriculum. It is necessary to point out, however, how formal structures that are in place at the school have a bearing on how student relationships develop. A more nuanced discussion of these relations between the Vancouver High boys is provided in the following section.

The Informal Curriculum

Relationships between students can be regarded as the primary means by which gender was put into practice at Vancouver High. The formal curriculum may offer set structures that encourage certain types of (gendered) behaviour, but over-emphasizing this aspect of physical education denies the important role of agency in this matter. To be sure, physical education is not inherently bound to hegemonic masculinities; instead, it

can work through structure *and* agency to promote these kinds of identities. Below I will consider the ways in which informal student relations in PE developed in accordance with the structure of this subject to promote gender hierarchies.

"Everyone who competes really wants the number one spot, to be praised": The Informal Curriculum, Competitive Sport and (Hegemonic) Masculinities

For most of the Vancouver High boys, competitive team games were vaunted in comparison to other activities in PE. Each day the boys began class with a short warm-up jog that, despite its brevity, was almost unanimously despised. Austin echoes the sentiments of many of his classmates when he confesses, "I like anything [in PE] except running" (FG Session 2, Gen. 3). This displeasure with running surely stems in part from its consequences – as Reese notes it's "too tiring" (FG Session 2, Gen. 1) – but I would argue there is a less obvious element at play. The boys seem to accept the merits of competitive team athletics over those of individual sports, at least during class. On one level, this is apparent in how the students 'perked up' after their run for team competitions that were played to decide a winner and a loser. More importantly, in every focus group (Session 2), the Vancouver High students discussed the importance of having some level of competition in PE class.

A competitive ethic was not surprisingly most engrained in the Advanced class, where Steve indicates, "everyone who competes really wants the number one spot, to be praised ... for your abilities and stuff like that" (FG Session 2, Adv. 1). Moreover, in my discussion with Chad, Gavin and Zach, the extent to which these competitive principles supersede those associated with individual and less 'hyper-masculine' sports (for

example, running) was revealed. In discussing Tim, a student he regularly torments and who is only in the class to have the Advanced indication on his transcript, Chad suggests this student's inability to meet the athletic standards of the class is a problem for him:

> Chad – Remember that dodgeball game we had, [a few times ago] where I was telling you how I killed Tim …
> Brad – Oh, ok yeah.
> C - … he had his hands up and I cracked him in the stomach?
> B – Yeah.
> C – I was so happy (*lets out a very loud laugh*).
> B – Why was that so exciting to you?
> C – Because he always annoys me.
> B – Alright.
> (*Gavin and Zach laugh*).
> D – … he's just a sack of shit! He doesn't do anything.
> (FG Session 2, Adv. 3).

When pressed on this matter, Chad reveals that Tim actually does 'do something' athletically:

> Brad – [*To Chad*] So you're saying he doesn't do anything?
> Gavin – He's not very fit …
> B – Right.
> G – He's …
> Chad – No, no, no he's a very good runner, he's a cross-country runner.
> G – Really?
> C – Yeah.
> G – He's just annoying.
> C – (*At same time as Gavin*) He doesn't contribute to society.
> (FG Session 2, Adv. 3).

For Chad and Gavin, Tim's successes as a runner are negligible compared to their own pursuits in competitive games like football. For these boys, appropriate masculinities are those that are capable in competitive team games - those who fail in these sports don't "contribute to society."

This manner in which students laud competitive team games can be linked to hegemonic masculinities. This is apparent in Chad and Gavin's speech, but it is necessary to explore this matter further. From my conversations with the students, it was apparent

that a competitive, win-at-all-costs attitude is a stable feature of masculinity in PE. When asked about the benefits of having all-male classes, students from most of the focus groups suggested that this environment is desirable so that boys can act in more physical and competitive ways. Often, this 'boys being boys' logic was invoked when the students were asked to compare co-ed and all-male PE classes:

> Miller – Yeah ... it's a little weird playing with girls, I don't know.
> Brad – It's, sorry, weird?
> M – Yeah.
> B - ... How come?
> Lance – Well like dodgeball ...
> M – You just want to like, like nail them, I don't know.
> B – In dodgeball you mean?
> L – (*Abrupt laughter*) Yeah ...
> M – In dodgeball or ...
> L – Yeah you don't really want to want to like (*laughing still*) hit a girl in like the face in dodgeball or something.
> (FG Session 2, Adv. 2).

Even many Enriched students who partake in co-ed classes offered a similar sentiment, "I didn't really like [coed PE] cause I was always competitive and I wanted to play with the more competitive people ... and the girls would kind of interfere" (Kyle, FG Session 2, Enr. 4).

Of all the students, it was Austin's group who most fervently advocated the necessity for gender segregated physical education. These boys rationalized their stance by juxtaposing the 'natural' 'wimpiness' of women to their own 'natural' physicality:

> B – Ok, let me ask you guys this: What do you think about being in an all-male phys ed class?
> Austin – ... Well I like it better with guys, [because], like [PE] with girls ... they're not as like (*recoils, as though to suggest fear and passivity*) ...
> Derek – (*Laughs a bit*).
> Clayton – Yeah, they're wimps.
> B – ... They're not as ... sorry what did you say (*To S*)?
> C – They're wimps ... They're afraid of like the ball and what not, so ...
> B – ... Have you guys ever had classes with girls, co-ed classes in Phys Ed?
> [D] – I haven't.
> [C] – Uh, yeah.
> A – [They just] don't do anything.

B – They don't do anything?

A – No.

B - ... Ok why do you think that is? Is that ... is there a reason for that?

C – Aahhh.

A – Guys have more ...

D – Physical.

(FG Session 2, Gen. 4).

In these passages, the competitive sports that form a significant component of physical education are beneficial in that they allow the boys to act in their 'natural' rough and tumble ways. Female students, not born of the same genetic make-up, are therefore 'wimpy' and can only 'get in the way'.

Reflecting on the argument presented to this point, it appears competitive team sports are infused with gendered meanings by the Vancouver High boys. Significantly, Austin and Chad have utilized the same language ("they don't do anything") in describing female students and the male student Tim, respectively. Here we get a glimpse of how both femininity and 'alternate' masculinities are similarly marginalized in the physical education setting according to their failed status in athletics. As a point of note, it seems the opinions of the students expressed regarding PE are out of sorts with what was presented in Finding #1 (i.e., their ability to be critical of the media). This is certainly the case, and will be explored in Finding #3 and in the discussion portion of this paper.

The "top of the heap": (Athletic) Ability, Race, and Gender Hierarchies

The competitive games that are relied upon in physical education and that are imbued with gendered meanings by the students also serve as the medium through which hegemonic masculinities are enacted. Undoubtedly, masculinities are developed in many areas of the students' lives – Chad told of a time he punched Lance in the face in science class, for example (FG Session Two, Adv. 3) – but within the context of this study it was

during games like dodgeball that gender identities were exposed. Since so many of the boys valourized the competitive, masculine components of physical education, it is not surprising that the athletically strong students most easily ascended to hegemonic positions. The formation of masculine hierarchies was therefore very much a result of differences in athletic ability, but as will be shown below, race played a key role in this matter as well.

Athletic Ability

I would suggest that athletic ability was the key marker of hegemonic masculinities for the Vancouver High boys. Since physical education largely relies on the performance of physical skills (at least in the manner it is usually practiced), it makes sense that athletic ability serves as a primary form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1993). Ms. G, a female teacher at Vancouver High, confirms this belief, "I think still to be an athletic male is still to be pretty much top of the heap in high school" (Interview – Ms. G., p. 15). As discussed above, however, it is certain kinds of athletic masculinities that are normalized as 'cool' or desirable. Tim's subordination despite his success as a runner is an apt example of this, as is the way some boys denounced figure skaters in the first focus group session. In PE class, those boys who could not measure up to the standards set by the athletic boys were regularly subjected to various forms of harassment.

At times, masculine hierarchies according to ability blossomed in subtle ways. 'Strong' students often banded together during team selection, leaving the 'weaker' players as teammates by default. In these instances, teachers would reshuffle the teams in the name of fairness, certainly a necessary act but one that further accentuated the

'weakest' of the group. An example of this team 'stacking' occurred in the Enriched class on a day Mr. R. was absent:

> - As the students set up teams for handball, Allan, Frank, and Cal were physically moving some of the boys so that they could get their way. Of course, it was the quieter, less skilled students who fell prey here – Harold, Jack and Ryan especially.
> - During the game, these boys were pushed to the sides by the others (Ryan to a lesser extent, who gets away from this by playing goal). At one point, Kyle controlled the ball near Harold. As he dribbled and pivoted he toyed with Harold, knowing full well Harold did not have the size nor skill to take the ball from him. As he teased the other student, Kyle further humiliated Harold by asking rhetorically 'where's the ball Harold? Where's the ball?'
> (Fieldnotes – Enr., Apr. 19).

This class begins with the dominant students expressing their authority over others, and it does not change course throughout. While team selection is a subtle manner in which hierarchies are instituted, there were many overt examples as well.

Perhaps no game illuminates inequalities in physical education as much as dodgeball. Instilled with 'survival of the fittest' principles, the dodgeball environment allows the strongest boys to flex their muscles (literally) and the weakest with nowhere to hide (also literally). We have already seen one example of a dominant student picking on another in dodgeball – recall Chad's admission of the time Tim "had his hands up" and Chad "cracked him in the stomach" (FG Session 2, Adv. 3). Unfortunately, this was by no means the sole example, as shown in the following excerpt from my notes on the Advanced class:

> - Chad reclaimed his role as the class leader after having missed the last two classes.
> - This involved antics such as calling people 'bitches', using profanity, 'trash talking', and so on.
> - Chad also picked on Tim during the class (as did many other students) despite the fact that they were teammates. At one point, after Tim made a catch, Chad queried, "how did *Tim* catch that?"
> - There is a general questioning of Tim's athletic ability across the class. Students did not hesitate to forcefully take the ball from Tim, even if on the same team.

- At another time, Tim is left as the last remaining player on his team. As he dodges throws, the rest of his team returns to the court to signal that the game has ended. At first they think he has been hit, but when they find out he is in fact still alive they *insist* that he is out and that a new game commence.
(Fieldnotes – Adv., Apr. 7).

Of all the students in the study, none were subjected to this type of denigration as routinely as Tim. Tim is viewed by his peers as an inferior athlete in an Advanced class that values physical ability as the highest form of cultural capital. But while the Advanced class most often allowed divisions according to athletic ability, this was certainly possible in the other classes as well. Often, this was instituted through relationships between male and female students.

Athletic Ability and Girls' PE

Gender hierarchies were more difficult to discern in the General class since the boys formed a more homogenous group in terms of athletic ability. This is not to say, however, that gender inequalities did not arise. We already have an idea of how some General students interpret gender differences – according to Austin's group, girls are remarkable for their 'wimpiness'. On one occasion, the boys in this class shared the gymnasium with female students for a game that was quite similar to dodgeball. As noted that day in my fieldnotes, some of the General boys seemed to take this as an opportunity to express their physical 'superiority':

- Mr. R.'s and Ms. W.'s classes were split in half and then mixed together today for a game of 'Murderball'.
- It was evident from the start of the game that most of the female students did not want to take part. It often took some prodding for any of the girls to take their turn at the bat, and many did not do so at all.
- The complacency of the girls was not unreasoned. Those who did bat were often exposed to powerful throws from the boys, especially Austin. At one point, Austin chased after a female student and fired a powerful throw at her head from close range. Ms. W. was taken aback by this act, but did not reprimand Austin.

> - I would estimate that half the girls actually got involved today. None took part in the act of throwing the ball at other students.
> - Of course, it was not just the female students who shied away from this activity. Many of the boys were reluctant to take the bat, and some did not participate at all. Among the students I noticed to be disengaged from this activity were Sean, Yves, Ted, and Reese.
> (Fieldnotes – Gen., Mar. 24).

Austin does not always stand out for his athletic ability, but when presented with an athletic competition against female competitors he takes the opportunity to attack relentlessly. This is not to imply that the female players were weaker than any of the boys - indeed, there were certainly strong athletes among them. But in this environment that favours the male students it is not surprising that they are unwilling to take an active role. Notably, this example illustrates once again how hegemonic masculinities are propelled in their opposition to both femininities *and* masculinities, as Sean, Yves, Ted, and Reese are essentially omitted from play.

This manner in which female students at Vancouver High were subordinated to hegemonic masculinities was not an isolated incident. The boys in each class often reaped the rewards of what Connell calls the 'patriarchal dividend'. This was evident at the skating rink, where male and female classes of different grades mixed to skate around the perimeter of the rink. As the female students glided politely along the edges of the ice, often holding hands, the strongest male skaters flew through the human traffic that stood in their way:

> - When the first students moved onto the rink through the main doors, Chad, Quentin and Miller tore onto the ice. They glided across the surface, weaving left and right and turning front to back with ease.
> - At one point, the strong skaters played with a football brought onto the ice by Quentin. They quickly weaved in and out of traffic again, and were unconcerned with the flow or direction of the other skaters. They are the best athletes present, and no one dared get in their way. At times they simply roared through the other students, their movements highlighted by their sharp and decisive turns and the sound of their skates cutting through the ice.
> - It is not until Ms. W. steps in that the game comes to an end.

(Fieldnotes – Adv., Apr. 3).

The skating rink, which has already been cast as a gendered space in its construction (recall the banners promoting gender exclusive sports), further allows for gender inequalities in that the boys command the ice surface at the expense of their female classmates.

These behaviour patterns were present in the coed Enriched class as well, as female students were at times moved to the borders of physical activity sites. It should be noted that this kind of gender inequality surfaced less often than might be expected in the coed class. Although many of the boys expressed a desire for gender segregated classes, most seemed to either enjoy, or were at least content with sharing PE with female students. To be sure, many games were marked by students of both genders supporting and encouraging one another. This point about the potential for 'alternate' masculinities and gender relations in PE will be explored in more detail below.

'Race'

In the physical education literature, 'race' has been described as a structure that shapes and organizes students' lives. In Epstein *et al.*'s (2001) research at a primary school, for example, students aligned according to racial differences when arguments arose on the soccer pitch, even if this meant breaking ties with their own teammates. In much the same way, the boys at Vancouver High often separated according to race/ethnicity, something that can certainly be attributed in part to shared customs, cultures, interests, and most importantly, languages. This was true of all three classes, but was accentuated in the General and Advanced classes where a number of students frequently communicated in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, or Japanese (see Table 1 in

the 'Methods' section for information on self-defined 'race/ethnicity'). These divisions between boys surfaced on a daily basis, at times in subtle ways. For example, groups of students often interacted in small, isolated circles that were divided according to ethnicity before class began. In a more obvious way, the boys at times formed groups separated by race when deciding on teams for their daily activities, as shown in the following example:

> - Mr. F. asked the students to form their own teams today. Four teams of five players were needed for football.
> - The class divided as it often does following these directions: two 'Caucasian' groups and two 'Asian' groups.
> - After some time, a few boys asked me about switching the games up (Mr. F. was occupied momentarily). When I hesitated, Chad took control and commanded certain teams to switch fields.
> - Notably, in making this switch, Chad had the 'Caucasian' teams play one another.
> - This split the class right down the middle - ten and ten without a single exception.
> (Fieldnotes – Adv., Apr. 27).

On the surface, separations of this kind are neither surprising nor problematic - these decisions can be rationalized in that the boys wished to play with and against their friends. On a deeper level though, this is symbolic of the way race can serve as a marker of difference (see Hall, 1997) that helps in the formation of gender hierarchies.

Like athletic ability, 'race' has the potential in PE to facilitate power relationships between students. This was most apparent in the manner in which language could serve as a form of capital (especially in the General class), and therefore be utilized to influence and even coerce:

> - Mr. R. asks the students if they would like to play basketball or dodgeball today. He puts it to a vote.
> - It seems initially as though basketball is going to win (although not all students vote, and some – especially those with lower English levels - really don't seem aware of what is going on).
> - Just before Mr. R. declares basketball victorious however, Austin, who has not been paying much attention, realizes the choices.
> - He is adamant about playing dodgeball, and encourages other students to vote with him. Notably, Austin pays most attention to the students who struggle in

English. He jumps back and forth between Korean and English, speaking both fluently (he is the only one who can do this).
- Austin manages to bring some of the 'Asian' students to his side, and dodgeball wins the vote 8-7.
- The game begins, and Austin is being quite loud as usual. 'You're dead Ted!'; 'You suck'; 'What an idiot!': these are all insults fired by Austin at his classmates.
(Fieldnotes – Gen., Feb. 16)

In this instance, Austin mobilizes his proficiency in different languages to facilitate his choice of games. Once dodgeball is selected – a game that is particularly violent – he easily takes up a hegemonic position in class. With this example we return to the issue of providing choice in PE, part of the formal curriculum identified earlier. Certainly Mr. R.'s intention was to allow the students voice in choosing activities, something that would seemingly heighten participation. In this process however, those students who struggle in English – usually the Chinese/Chinese Canadian boys – often succumb to the influence of more domineering personalities (or masculinities). Similar incidents occurred in the other classes, where the most vocal students were able to influence class activities when provided the opportunity.

In the Advanced class, ability in sport was the most notable form of cultural capital. This point was demonstrated above in the discussion of athletic ability, but it is important here to note the manner in which ability intersects with race (and, of course, gender). 'Asian' student Tim was the most frequent target of harassment from students in this class[3]. This came from almost all of the other boys, regardless of their racial/ethnic background. This is not to say, however, that race did not play a role in this matter, as evidenced in the following comments from Chad:

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[3] The problematic nature of the term 'Asian' that is used here to describe Tim is recognized. Tim did not participate in the focus group portion of this research, rendering it impossible to use a self-identified term when speaking about race. The term 'Asian' was chosen as it was used by many boys as a general term to describe their racial/ethnic background in the focus groups and during class.

> Brad – What about any disadvantages to being ... in the all-guys class that you guys have? Anything that you guys don't like about it?
> Gavin – I guess it's just back to the same thing, like some guys are lazy.
> Zach – Yeah.
> G – Some, like, the advantage ...
> C – (*Starts laughing*) All the little Asians who study all the time.
> (FG Session 2, Adv. 3)

In suggesting it is "little Asians" who are of detriment to the class, Chad invokes age-old stereotypes of 'Asian' men as effeminate and unable to match the standards of (white) masculinity (Chan, 1998; also see Archer and Francis, 2005). These are especially harsh words, and certainly beyond the indignities provided by other students, but they represent Chad's mistreatment of Tim for his propensity to 'slow things down'. For Chad, Tim is not only a poor athlete, he is a "little Asian," and thus bears neither of the markers (or forms of capital) of 'appropriate' masculinity. In this instance, it is apparent how athletic ability *and* race converge to facilitate masculine hierarchies.

The role of language in facilitating power inequalities surfaced in the Advanced class as well. This was illustrated on a day Chad and Tim played football together:

> - Chad's team is matched up with Tim's for the last half of class today.
> - As I walk over to watch this game, Tim is breaking away for a score with no one chasing him.
> - Just steps before he reaches the end zone, Tim throws the ball in the air in celebration. Realizing what has happened, the other students break out in laughter. Chad recovers the ball – he is not so much laughing as he is assertively professing how "stupid" this act was. Chad slowly walks the ball in the other direction, arrogantly encouraging the other team to pull his flag.
> - Although Tim tries to protest, or at least explain his intentions, he is silenced by the overwhelming laughter of his classmates.
> (Fieldnotes – Adv., Mar. 20).

Although he makes an effort to explain his case, Tim, who has a low level of English, is silenced by the louder and more aggressive Chad. Chad has the ability to verbally (and at times physically) assail Tim without fear of reprisal, as does the 'Asian' boy Ken, who speaks English fluently:

> - When the students struggle to get into teams today, Chad turns and commands certain students to move. Lance and Gavin join in here, but Chad is by far the loudest. Notably, his temper is directed at groups of 'Asian' students, and he singles out Tim.
> (Later in class)
> - After being subjected to Chad's torment about the teams earlier, Tim is now getting picked on by his teammates, especially Ken.
> - Steve and Ken isolate Tim almost the entire class. Eventually they throw to him, but only once Mr. F! encourages them to.
> - At one point, Ken angrily asks "Tim, can you throw?" Tim raises his hands but does not reply. Ken mimics his hand gesture and says mockingly, "This means no, right?"
> (Fieldnotes – Adv., Mar. 30).

Although Ken and Chad can verbally antagonize him, Tim does not have the means to appropriately defend himself. In this last example, the manner in which athletic ability and race converge to facilitate hierarchies of masculinity - of which Tim is located at the very bottom – is most apparent.

Before concluding, it is worth mentioning that Tim does indeed 'slow things down' during class on occasion, as he often performs poorly in competitive team athletics. Since the physical education literature has highlighted the propensity for this subject to favour traditional 'Western', or culturally specific games (Halas, 2004; Fenton et al., 1999; Vertinsky et al., 1996; Vertinsky, 1992), the possibility that Tim is unfamiliar with activities like football is potentially significant. Unfortunately, Tim failed to participate in the focus groups, and it was thus difficult to explore this matter as it relates to Vancouver High. Rather than offering speculative conclusions, it is important only to reiterate how these kinds of games that are prescribed by the formal curriculum are invested with meanings that allow the marginalization of some masculinities and the exaltation of others, usually according to race and/or athletic ability.

"I was in the Advanced class … and I didn't like it": Flexible Gender Hierarchies

Gender hierarchies were prominent in physical education classes at Vancouver High, but they were by no means immutable. Boys who were dominant figures could in many cases be subordinated as well, and, conversely, some who were frequently subordinated could also rise in the gender order. Consider as an example the relationship between Advanced students Chad, Lance, and Tim. Chad's masculine aggression was usually reserved for the aforementioned Tim, but could be directed at Lance on occasion as well. A recent incident between Chad and Lance highlights the nature of their relationship:

> Chad – Yeah I don't like Lance very much.
> (*Gavin laughs loudly*).
> Brad – Ok, is that because you guys are competitive with each other?
> G – Yeah.
> C – I guess so, I don't know.
> Zach – They like yell at each other all class and like …
> C – You should see us in science class [man], I punched him.
> G – (*Laughs*) For no reason.
> C – I don't know. It was [ridiculous].
> B – In a fight? A serious fight?
> C – Well, I punched him in the face.
> (FG Session 2, Adv. 3).

Lance is occasionally loud and somewhat aggressive in class, but to me this was more from excitement than a will to intimidate others. In the focus group talks, Lance was soft-spoken and highly critical of dominant masculinities. Although he was by no means a poor athlete, Lance failed to win the respect of the class leader Chad. At times I perceived Lance to be sabotaging his own athletic skills (for example, bouncing the ball and spiking it - a hopeless tactic - in dodgeball) perhaps so as to avoid fierce competition with the intimidating Chad.

As a telling example of the flexible character of gender hierarchies, however, Lance took up a new subject position on a day Chad was absent from class. With the dominant figure away, Lance seemed to relish the opportunity to take control during dodgeball:

> - Lance's behaviour appears a bit out of sorts today. He is much louder than usual, and has apparently become the rule enforcer, constantly telling players on the other team that they are 'out'.
> - Near the end of a game when Lance's team is trying to eliminate the last player on the opponents' side, Lance approaches Tim, who stands timidly at the center line with the ball, and demands "give me the ball!" He is adamant that Tim not 'waste' a throw, and Tim eventually accedes.
> - This strong behaviour is not entirely atypical for Lance – he sometimes makes loud comments like "back to the point!" in handball - but today he is much more aggressive and intimidating than I have seen before.
> - I wonder if Lance's behaviour correlates with Chad's absence today. That is to say, the usual dominant masculine figure is away, does Lance take this as an opportunity for him to 'rule the roost'?
> (Fieldnotes – Adv., Mar. 3).

Not only does Lance emerge from his usually composed - if at times loud - persona, he also directs his force at Tim, the usual target of Chad's aggression. Of course, Tim absorbed indignities from many students, but on this occasion we can read Lance's behaviour as a mimicking of Chad's dominant masculinity.

A second example of how masculinities can shift in their relation to each other comes from the General class. George is a Chinese student who is one of the more capable athletes in the class. He is a strong soccer player and is better than most at basketball. In grade 9, George had been enrolled in the Advanced class, an environment he was eager to escape:

> Brad - Would you guys like to be in the Advanced class, or are you happy being in the General class?
> George – I was in the Advanced class ...
> Brad – Ok.
> G - ... and I didn't like it.
> B – How come?
> G – Too intimidating.

B – Oh yeah?
G – Yeah.
B – Ok.
G – [All the tough kids].
B – All the tough kids are in that class?
G – Yeah, they're all like [so cocky].
(FG Session 2, Gen. 2).

George found the competitive setting of the Advanced class to be too intimidating and therefore decided to join the General students. In this context, however, George occupied an elevated position - at least in terms of athletic ability - compared to his classmates. This is shown in my fieldnotes from a day George's class played basketball:

- A group of boys organize into a game of three-on-three on the near court.
- George is one of the stronger players, and he certainly has the most power in this game. He often breaks away from the others with his dribble, and takes more shots than any one else.
- When the game deteriorates, George and Walter decide to play one-on-one. Notably, George orders Walter to run over and change the ball for him – a firm display of authority.
-When Eli walks over and shoots on the hoop at which they are stationed, George says to him harshly 'Why are you playing here? We're playing one-on-one'.
(Fieldnotes – Gen., Mar. 28).

In George's performance, the adaptable qualities of masculinities surface once again. By shifting contexts at the school, George takes up different subject positions with respect to his peers. In this example, as in the case of Lance, we see how changing contexts provide the opportunity for changing masculinities.

Cooperative PE: **The Potential for 'Alternate' Masculinities**

Finding #2 has characterized physical education as a setting that facilitates and at times promotes dominant masculinities. Like the students' perceptions of the popular media, their (gendered) experiences in physical education are more complex than I have allowed to this point. Although physical education very often worked to normalize

dominant gender identities, the possibility for 'alternate' masculinities certainly existed in each of the classes.

To best exemplify the flexible nature of individual masculinities we return once again to Advanced student Chad. As has been shown to some length, Chad almost always held a hegemonic position in class: he was loud, aggressive, and physically imposing the majority of the time. But Chad's character was flexible. He had the ability to switch from an intimidating, hegemonic position to a masculinity that was at the very least empathetic. This 'alternate' identity was shown on my first day with the Advanced class:

> - The class played handball today.
> - I sat on the sideline bleachers, looking across the two courts.
> - The students cooperated fairly well during the game. There was quite a bit of passing, although the best players certainly had the ball most often.
> - A team on the near court dominated. They had bigger kids (not sure of their names yet) who seemed to be good athletes. Still, these students 'played nicely' for the most part.
> - One student on the dominant team was notable. He's the biggest in the class and is quite athletic. Mr. F. said he's a hockey player.
> - This student seemed very friendly though (and he has said hi to me in passing before). When a player on the opposite team was struck with the ball in the face, he went over and made sure the injured student was ok (leaving in the middle of a play).
> (Fieldnotes – Adv., Feb. 10).

This physically large and apparently compassionate student turned out to be Chad, and although this type of behaviour from him was rare, it nonetheless surfaced occasionally.

Chad's 'counter-hegemonic' moments were fleeting, but they were significant in that they provide insight into the manner in which physical education can potentially serve as a space for 'alternate' masculinities. This is not to suggest a set of alternative traits upon which new essential forms of masculinity be based, but rather to point out that physical education need not always support stereotypical male identities. Students in the coed Enriched class often exemplified this, cheering each other on during activities or supporting one another during class runs (indeed, some boys, Like Mark and Noah, even

suggested that it is the girls who are most competitive in class). Ryan and Terry of this class were especially disinterested in engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviour, opting to forgo gender segregated football matches to participate in coed games. Moreover, these boys often removed the competitive element from their activities: on one occasion, for example, they played a cooperative game of basketball with a female student where all were involved equally.

To be sure, the Vancouver High teachers deserve a great deal of credit in promoting this type of behaviour from the students. Mr. F., Mr. R., and the other instructors displayed an honest concern that male and female students participate equally and in a fair manner during activities. Furthermore, they worked to limit gender inequalities by reprimanding students who continuously degraded boys like Tim. Of course, I would suggest that there is still much to be done in fostering a more equitable environment in physical education. As Jan Wright (1999) observes, the work of teachers to limit gender oppression in the PE 'classroom' is sincere and worthwhile, but ultimately, "the underlying issues of power relationships and the effect of cultural expectations about being male or female" are left untouched (p. 184). At Vancouver High, I would suggest that these power relationships and cultural expectations to some extent result from the manner in which competitive activities are uncritically accepted in PE practice. Certainly more research is needed as to how physical education can become a space to critically assess the underlying meanings of the 'media sports cultural complex' (Rowe, 2004) – a point that will be revisited in the conclusion of this paper.

Physical Education and Masculinity: **Theoretical Implications**

Finding #2 illustrates the manner in which physical education can become a masculine terrain through a complex relationship between the 'formal' and 'informal' curricula. Stated plainly, the formal curriculum, composed of the provincial curriculum, resources and facilities, and the structure of PE at Vancouver High, favours competitive team games like football and dodgeball. These activities are invested with gendered meanings by the students – namely, they privilege 'appropriate' masculinities based on ability in sport, and to a lesser extent race – which in turn permits those who exhibit these masculinities to sit atop the gender hierarchy. In this analysis, I considered the relations that develop between male students, between male and female students, and between those of different races/ethnicities that render physical education a 'top dog culture' (Brown and Evans, 2004). Notably, gender hierarchies were not unalterable at Vancouver High, but could be changed according to context. Similarly, individual masculinities could also take strategic distance from a hegemonic ideal; a point that I have suggested offers the potential for a 'counter-hegemonic' environment in physical education (to be reconsidered in the conclusion).

Finding #2 provides ethnographic support for Connell's theoretical assertions on masculinity. In particular, the Vancouver High boys - almost across the board - consider a strong, competitive ethic to be a masculine trait necessary in PE in spite of the fact that only Chad and a few others can actually match this gender identity consistently. This is 'complicity' in the way Connell (1995) imagines it, as these boys support the system that subordinates students like Tim. Furthermore, this analysis provides further credence to Connell's assertion that hegemonic masculinities are provided strength through the

subordination of the 'other' – in this case female students, male students with 'failed' physical abilities, and those marked as different according to race.

Most of Finding #2 also supports the extant physical education literature that has characterized PE as a masculinist environment (for example, Brown and Evans, 2004; Parker, 1996). Hopefully, the argument outlined above adds complexity to this literature in that it considers in depth how formal structures like the provincial curriculum work in congruence with 'unofficial' relationships in order to promote narrow definitions of masculinity. In addition, this analysis also considers how multiple, contradictory, and even 'alternate' masculinities are possible in physical education. This is a point that is seldom made in the literature.

As a final point, it is important to reiterate how Vancouver High teachers need not absorb the blame for the gender 'realities' of physical education class. Indeed, much of what transpired at Vancouver High was propelled by the structure of physical education set in the curriculum as much as anything else. As has been reiterated throughout this study, the teachers worked hard to provide equal opportunities for all of their students. They also intervened when certain boys or girls were mistreated. For example, Mr. F. stepped in on numerous occasions to discipline those who harassed Tim either verbally or physically. Monitoring gender relations in PE is a very difficult task, especially considering the central role of the body and physical activities in this class. The goal here has been to document how gender relations can unfold in PE class, with the hope that this can ultimately influence change for the betterment of this subject.

3.3 Context Masculinities

Finding #3: The masculinities enacted by the Vancouver High boys in physical education class are incongruous with their perceptions of masculinity as shown in the media. This point illustrates how 1) physical education generally works to reinforce, rather than counteract, dominant masculinities that are shown on TV and in movies, and 2) masculinities can best be understood as context-specific.

I sought to investigate three key research questions at the outset of this study: How do young males interpret media messages that provide narrow and stereotypical (or hegemonic) depictions of masculinity?; How is masculinity 'enacted' in physical education class?; and Does physical education class serve to reaffirm or counteract popular depictions of masculinity shown on TV and in movies? These first two questions have been explored in Findings #1 and #2, respectively. Looking across these first two sections, in Finding #3 I will assess this third and final research question and consider the relationship between how the Vancouver High boys understand masculinity and how they practice gender in their everyday (PE) experiences. Specifically, I will argue that by reasserting the normalcy of hegemonic masculinities, physical education class works to silence the critiques of dominant masculinities offered by the Vancouver High boys. Moreover, in that many students enact masculinities that oppose their beliefs on gender as shown in the media, the context specific nature of masculinities is further revealed. That is to say, just as the boys fluctuated in their beliefs on gender in the media (from critical to hegemonic views), and just as they could shift between subject positions in physical

education (consider the case of Chad, for example), so too were they capable of taking up different masculinities *across* these contexts.

"You idiot! ... Just don't touch the ball": Context Specific Masculinities

Since accounts of gender in the media were variable at an individual level, with most boys showing an ability to purvey *both* hegemonic and critical views, it is difficult to say unilaterally that the boys' behaviour in physical education class contradicted their media interpretations. Nonetheless, it can be said that most students had a very strong tendency to be critical of media versions of masculinity, and that these boys often acted in ways that were inconsistent with their spoken beliefs. Such can be said of Allan, the aforementioned Enriched class student who was critical of the ways 'alternate' masculinities are subordinated in the media, and spoke of masculinity as being unfixed from essential character traits. Allan was perhaps more critical of dominant masculinities than anyone in the study, yet this certainly did not inhibit him from appropriating a hegemonic position relative to other students in his class. Consider my fieldnotes taken while Allan's class played dodgeball:

> - The class returned from their run to play dodgeball in the gymnasium.
> - In each of the games, the boys are quite vocal, with Allan taking the lead. He frequently gives both male and female students orders that follow his personal game strategy, and he often provides commentary on the state of the game.
> - For example, during one game, 3 girls and 1 boy remain in play on Allan's team. From the sidelines, Allan bellows, 'Cal, you're our only man out there'. Judging from his tone and his general disregard for female participants, I think he means 'man' to be a synonym for 'hope' in this case.
> - His comments throughout the rest of class include:
>   - 'You suck!'
>   - 'Come on, this is disgraceful!' (when his team is losing)
>   - 'Get off the court!' (when he strikes an opponent with the ball)
> - In the final game, Allan makes a 'hit' on another opponent and flexes his muscles to no one in particular.
> (Fieldnotes – Enr., Feb. 24).

Despite his diminutive stature (he is one of the smaller boys in the class), Allan is assertive and at times imposing in this class. His behaviour is somewhat curious in that it matches the very masculinities he discredited in our focus group discussions. This type of dominant masculine behaviour was not uncommon for Allan over the course of the study, and it arose again in a particularly hostile manner on a day his class played a modified soccer game where four teams participated at once:

> - Allan is causing some trouble today. He gloats when Dylan's team is knocked out of the game, an act that Mr. R condemns by sarcastically saying "Good sportsmanship Allan."
> - In a later game, Allan's team is ousted when his teammate Harold picks up the ball (hand-ball is a violation). Allan is disgusted by this act and yells "Harold!" and then more quietly "You idiot! It's soccer."
> - Harold has no response. He is less athletic, less 'cool', and apparently lower in the class hierarchy. After getting a drink, Cal approaches Harold and calmly, if condescingly, reiterates the rules for him.
> - Allan is still vexed, and before the next game he has another go at Harold, forcefully saying, "Don't touch the ball," and moments later, "It's alright, just don't touch the ball."
> - To his credit, Harold did well to stay involved in the class. A few games later he inadvertently hit the ball with his arm. Another team tried to call this violation, but Harold fervently denied committing an offense. Harold appeared terrified during this second incident, and I imagine he was fearful of Allan's reaction should he cost their team another loss.
> (Fieldnotes – Enr., Apr. 20).

It is fair to expect the kind of behaviour Allan expresses here from some of the Vancouver High students. Austin internalized hegemonic masculinities uncritically (for the most part), and reproduced them in his daily activities. Kyle was much the same, valuing traits such as strength and toughness when tied to the male body in the media, and then tormenting weaker students like Harold in physical education class. In a contrary manner, Ryan and Terry were very critical of the media, and seemed to 'follow through' with this in their everyday experiences. For students like Allan, however, there is a curious interplay between how masculinities are interpreted and how they are expressed. These boys consistently behaved in ways that conflicted with their criticisms

of dominant masculinities as shown in the media. This was true for many Advanced students like Lance, who repeatedly disavowed masculinities based solely on strength and toughness but then picked on 'weaker' athletes like Tim in PE. Indeed, even Chad, who repetitively occupied a dominant and intimidating persona in physical education was very critical of media representations of these very same identities.

It can be said, then, that in the competitive, 'top dog' culture of physical education, the critical media skills of many Vancouver High boys are checked at the door, so to speak. Students like Allan, who so readily upset the taken-for-granted facets of dominant gender forms, were positioned in physical education – especially in games like dodgeball – to mimic these very same masculinities. In this regard, it becomes apparent once again how masculinities are not socially predetermined, but are brought into practice according to context. The boys may indeed question hegemonic masculinities as shown in the media, but this is a relatively 'safe' space in which to do so – they do not need to interrogate their own masculinities at this time, nor do they need to risk their positions in the class gender hierarchy. In the context of physical education class, competitive *personal* values are esteemed, no matter how these same values are conceptualized when consumed through the media. As such, most boys are unable to understand the personal as political, as is often said, and fail to 'follow through' with their nascent gender critiques.

Gender Contradictions: Theoretical Implications

Finding #3 is first relevant to the small body of literature that examines the intersections between youth, the media, and physical education. Kirk (2002), and Kirk

and Tinning (1994) suggest that physical education is complicit with the media in teaching young males (and, in their analysis, young females) 'appropriate' or 'normal' gender identities. Certainly, considering how gender hierarchies arose in physical education at Vancouver High that favoured physically imposing masculinities that are also prominent in the media, the findings of these authors were reverberated in this research.

For research interested in the cultural 'uses' of the media (i.e., the 'third wave' of reception studies described by Alasuutaari, 1999), Finding #3 has implications as well. The data presented here supports Miles' (2000) suggestion that young people possess somewhat refined media skills, yet they fail to incorporate these skills into their lives beyond their immediate experience. Students like Allan may indeed reject iconic masculine figures in the media (as well as the production of these figures), but ultimately their daily behaviours go far in supporting these very gender identities. Miles stops short of assessing *why* it is that youth so frequently fail to bring critical media skills into their everyday experiences, however this point will be considered as it relates to the current project in the following section.

Finally, the complex relationship between media interpretations and PE experiences is useful in thinking about gender theoretically. Wetherell and Edley (1999), who were identified earlier for their suggestion that "Connell's account of the discursive/ideological field is ... too neat" (1999, p. 352), conducted a series of interviews with men to gauge their impressions of what it means to 'be a man'. Rather than remaining fixed in a particular 'stage', men in their study mobilized hegemonic masculinities at times, and took strategic distance from them at others. This perspective

seems suitable for the Vancouver High boys, who showed an ability to discredit hegemonic masculinities shown on TV and in movies, but also to reassert the normalcy of these gender forms in their daily interactions. Consider once again Allan, who was adamant that masculinities are personal and unhinged from any *a priori* definition, yet nonetheless gravitated towards a hegemonic position in class. Allan's shifting subject position is appropriately captured in the following passage from Wetherell and Edley's study:

> The man, for instance, who describes himself as original, as beyond stereotypes, as having a personal, worked-out philosophy of masculinity or indeed as just ordinary and average has not escaped the familiar trope of gender. He is precisely enmeshed by convention; subjectified, ordered and disciplined at the very moment he rehearses the language of personal taste, unconventionality and autonomy, or ordinariness and normality (1999, p. 353).

Importantly, what we have here is not so much a rejection of Connell's framework, but rather a confirmation of its value. Connell did not intend for her model to imply static positions like 'hegemonic' and 'subordinated'. Instead, these positions are constructed through practice, and are mutable according to context. As such, Allan's masculinity, like that of all the boys, is one that is very much context-specific – he can move to a hegemonic position, or take strategic distance from one when so desired. This interpretation of Connell's work is appropriate in explaining how the Vancouver High boys understand and enact gender in complex and at times contradictory ways.

4 DISCUSSION

The argument presented in Finding #3 considers the relationship between the media, physical education, and masculinity in the lives of the Vancouver High boys. I have suggested that these students have critical media skills but rarely 'use' them in their daily experiences. This point reaffirms what has been documented in the literature, but also leaves much to be resolved. Specifically, if the Vancouver High boys are so often critical of media representations of masculinities, and if they are immanently aware of the gender ideologies that can sway media productions, why do they tend to reproduce dominant masculinities in their daily lives? While Steven Miles (2000) suggests that "young people are indeed critical of the media, but only as far as their immediate experience allows them to be" (p. 84), the important question of *why* this occurs remains unanswered. Why do youth limit their critical media skills to 'immediate experience', failing, like the Vancouver High boys, to transfer them to 'real' life? Using the conceptual tools developed by Willis' (2000; 1977) in his research into 1970s British school culture, below I will suggest that these media 'penetrations' of the Vancouver High students are 'limited' in a variety of ways.

'Penetrations' and 'Limitations'

In *Learning to Labour* (1977), his famous ethnography of a British secondary school, Willis employs the complimentary concepts of 'penetrations' and 'limitations' to explain the behavioural patterns of a small group of working-class boys. Unconcerned with the promises of upward social mobility offered in the educational setting, and seemingly destined to graduate from counter-school life into the working-class 'shop-

floor' culture, Willis viewed the anti-conformism of 'the lads' as both a criticism of dominant capitalist rhetoric and a method for social reproduction.

On the surface, the propensity for 'the lads' to have 'a laff' – that is, engage in disruptive classroom behaviour – could be interpreted simply as ephemeral acts of disobedience, unseated from a grander ideological significance. Willis, however, looks past this 'boys being boys' logic, suggesting 'the lads'' actually 'penetrate' (if at times unwittingly) the contradictory nature of 'the teaching paradigm' that is rooted in a capitalist ideological system. 'The teaching paradigm' espouses the meritocratic potential of academics and, by extension, capitalism: hard work on an individual level permits upward social mobility, even for those of the working class. In rejecting conformism, 'the lads' exposed the ideological tension between individual and group logics inherent to modern education. That is to say, mobility may be available for the individual within the capitalist system, but at a group level it is wholly impossible, for collective mobility demands "the destruction of the whole class society" (Willis 1977, p. 128). Of course, this penetration is not necessarily an active social critique from 'the lads', but is rather an offshoot of their recurrent non-compliance. This point does not mute the political significance of their actions, as Willis makes clear in his later text *The Ethnographic Imagination* (2000):

> 'The Lads' reported in *Learning to Labour* are not directly concerned logically to critique the contradictions and partialities of state schooling; they pursue 'the laff', fun and the pisstake. But these latter things can only flower in the light of a set of lived assumptions about the false promise of schooling, and they daily reproduce a feeling of superiority for 'the lads', versions of how they should use and inhabit their own vital powers. These life forces, engendered, channelled and reproduced in the pursuit of fun, expand and practically run up against what contains them, so further exposing institutional repression as material for penetration (p. 38).

The penetrations of 'the lads' form a biting critique of the dominant paradigm, but they stop well short of social transformation. For Willis, this can be attributed to 'limitations', or contradictions, in their logic that serve to repress, disorganize, and prevent the political potency of their emerging social critiques. Most important in his case study is the "anti-mental animus of the counter-school culture" (2000, p. 42). 'The lads' valorize manual work at the expense of white collar or mental labour, a mindset that permits the simultaneous denunciation of conformists individually (teachers and 'ear'oles'), and the educational system as a whole. This Cartesian separation of body and mind may rationalize the social position of 'the lads', but it also binds them to "dead-end jobs" (Willis, 2000, p. 42), thus permitting the continued operation of a capitalist system that is reliant upon this type of work. Entangled within this anti-mentalist ontology are significant, and equally limiting, notions of gender. Mental work for 'the lads' is intrinsically feminine, while manual labour is lauded for its ties to 'appropriate' masculinity. This gendering of labour solidifies the standpoint of 'the lads' and is viewed by Willis as a "final and damning move" where "mental work becomes not only pointless paper pushing but also sissy work" (2000, p. 44). The social critiques of 'the lads' – penetrations that are seemingly imbued with political potential – are thus limited, first by the staunch anti-mentalism of this group, and second by their gendering of labour practices.

Willis' explanation of 'how working-class kids get working-class jobs' is convincing, but it should not be confined to the parameters of his case study. As he suggests in *The Ethnographic Imagination*, penetrations can be imagined at a broader level as a way social actors make sense of circumstance, or as a means for "cultural

thinking" (2000, p. 35). Discursive materials offered by 'the system' are pliable, and can be appropriated and reordered according to the needs of the individual/group. This is visible for 'the lads' in their "use of capitalist consumption commodities – clothes, drink, cigarettes – not only to resist domination but to make, project and believe in versions of their own worldliness and superiority" (2000, p. 36). Similarly, the idea of 'limitations' can be pulled from Willis' work and broadened to explain how individuals engage in "unconscious blindness," and reproduce dominant social patterns. The very resources that allow for "local challenges" of hegemonic social patterns can also reconstruct the status quo "in potentially more virulent home-grown form" (2000, p. 41).

There are strong connections between Willis' penetrations/limitations model and Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework. Namely, in both these accounts, the potential for cultural resources to both counter and perpetuate dominant values is accounted for. With respect to Connell's work, this concerns the contextual variability of (hegemonic) masculinities. As described above, masculinities can be mobilized, allowing individuals to shift identities according to context. Discursive resources similar to those used by the lads – language, ideologies, commodities, etc. - are helpful in accomplishing this. Layering the hegemonic masculinity framework with Willis' penetrations/limitations is thus useful in explaining how and why the Vancouver High boys are able to simultaneously be critical of and reproduce dominant masculinities.

Media Penetrations

Like Willis' 'lads', I would argue that the Vancouver High boys' recurrent criticisms of the media form a penetration of the prevailing social order (in this case,

gender order). While 'the lads' exposed contradictions in the 'teaching paradigm', the Vancouver High students questioned the dominant masculine logic presented in the media. There are similarities on many levels here, three of which are of particular importance.

First, like the 'teaching paradigm' in education, hegemonic masculinities are normalized in the media. Tough, confident and aggressive personas are routinely valourized on TV and in movies and by implication are shown to have no damaging consequences. Similar to 'the lads', who denounce dominant logic and expose its contradictions, so too do the Vancouver High boys reject dominant masculinities and expose the contradictions inherent to these gender identities. The Vancouver High boys disassociated with hegemonic masculinities for numerous reasons: they are too cocky or over-confident, they are grossly over-muscled, they're fake or 'hoaky', and so on. Importantly, the students also rationalized their dismissal of dominant masculinities by pointing to their unhealthiness. As has been shown in the literature, hegemonic masculinities are problematic in that they promote potentially harmful lifestyles (Sabo, 2004; Messner, 1992), a point that does not escape many of the boys. For example, the Strongman is not only undesirable for his accentuated physical aesthetic, but his body-type is seen as enhanced by steroids and is thus unhealthy. As Howie points out, if somewhat crassly, "He's got like shrinking nuts and shit going on" (FG Session 1, Adv. 3). This characterization of the Strongman may be unfair, but the point remains that the boys recognize the unhealthy consequences that potentially accompany excessive masculinities.

A similar point is made of rapper 50 Cent. As noted earlier, Steve is unimpressed with this musician since "his songs and music videos exploit women in bad ways" (FG Session 1, Adv. 3). Moreover, both Lance and Victor criticize the construction of 50 Cent for its reliance on "drugs and alcohol and guns, violence" (Victor, FG Session 1, Adv. 2). Even the boys who enjoy watching violence on TV recognize its potentially harmful consequences. Sean of the General class admits he no longer admires action star Jet Li now that he realizes that fighting "can hurt people" (FG Session 1, Gen. 3). Chad, a hockey fighter himself, also made this point clear: "fighting ... it's obviously not a good thing. People get injured" (FG Session 1, Adv. 3). Of importance here is how the boys see through the taken-for-granted benefits of hegemonic masculinities that are repeatedly expressed in the media. Rather than internalizing these representations at face value, the boys critically expose their 'hidden' elements that often involve danger and injury to one's self and others. In this regard, we can view the boys' criticisms of media representations as a penetration of the dominant gender logic routinely presented on TV and in movies.

Second, as Willis argues in *The Ethnographic Imagination* (1990), penetrations are more than mere criticisms. Rather, they are unique in that they involve the selective appropriation and reordering of existing discourses. Appropriation is often associated with material products, as has been documented with spectacular subcultures like the Punks (Hebdige, 1979). Willis is clear, however, that appropriation can entail more than the selection of tangible objects, but of "images, material and meaning" that influence meaning-making processes (2000, p. 74; also see his discussion of 'symbolic creativity, Willis, 1990). 'The lads' did not just rebuke the capitalist status quo, they utilized the

tools offered by 'the system' both in language and material products to do so. To some extent the same can be said for the Vancouver High boys. Often, the critiques offered by these students were facilitated by what can be deemed an appropriation and reordering of traditional 'masculine' values. A fitting example here is Frank's admission that he considers the figure skater and the Designer Guys to be 'brave'. Usually saving this type of praise for Ultimate Fighters and boxers, in this instance Frank extracts a key component of hegemonic masculinity and applies it to individuals usually relegated to a subordinate subject position. The opposite was surely done as well – that is, traits usually deemed inappropriate for men were at times spun and considered valuable. For example, Lance and Miller touted caring, sensitivity, and generosity as important masculine traits (FG Session 1, Adv. 2). In this sense, 'masculine' qualities, even when fixed in the media to specific masculinities, could be taken up by the students and redirected in 'counter-hegemonic' ways, once again forming a potential penetration.

Third, while 'the lads'' critique of the 'teaching paradigm' formed a penetration of 1970s British capitalism, so too do the views of the Vancouver High boys expose what are usually unseen elements of the prevailing capitalist system. Here I am referring to the students' questioning of media production. The boys dismissed media representations of dominant masculinities, but they were also sceptical of the motives that drive media producers. These individuals were seen as out for either ratings or money, or, in one instance, to live out their 'masculine fantasies' (FG Session 1, Enr. 2). As a result, the images and narratives presented on TV and in movies are not only objectionable but are 'fake' or 'unrealistic'. As Gavin of the Advanced class plainly states, "So basically TV is fake, I think ... we can agree on that" (FG Session 1, Adv. 3). According to many boys,

extreme media representations resulted from the profit motivation that underpins media production. Like their views on the harmful consequences of hegemonic masculinities, and their use of existing discourses to accept or reject masculine figures, the Vancouver High boys' insights into the nature of media production forms another penetration into the existing social order.

Media Limitations

If the Vancouver High boys do indeed see past media discourses that normalize hegemonic masculinities, it is important to consider the impeding 'limitations' that lead to the reproduction of dominant gender patterns. Fortunately, the question of why these students so easily enact dominant identities can be answered (at least in part) by returning to Findings #1-3. I would argue that limitations are achieved in three primary ways: 1) through the culture of PE class that facilitates dominant identities; 2) through the inconsistent manner in which the students understand the media; and finally 3) through the boys' dismissal of dominant masculinities because they are 'unreal'.

'Real Life' Limitations: Physical Education Class

What appears to be the most obvious limitation to the students' penetrations of the media - at least in the context of this study - is the gendered nature of physical education. As shown in Finding #2, physical education is not inherently gendered, but has been normalized as such through structure and practice. Some boys are able to find counter-hegemonic spaces in PE, like Terry and Ryan who devalue the macho elements of the subject, but for the most part PE can be seen to reinforce stereotypical elements of

masculinity. Strength, toughness, competitiveness and aggression are rewarded in physical education, and games like dodgeball reinforce the media's insistence that hegemonic masculinities are valuable and should be desired, especially by young males. For students like Austin, who understand masculinity in very narrow ways, the nature of physical education serves as proof that the inequitable gender order is indeed 'natural'. For boys like Frank or Cal who have internalized conflicting ideas about gender, physical education offers a space where dominant masculine values are almost unswervingly supported, thereby limiting the potency of their social critiques. Perhaps of greatest concern, however, are the effects rendered on students like Allan, who lean towards transgressive definitions of masculinity (recall his anti-essentialist perspective). For these students, competitive 'masculine' principles are antithetical to their gender perspectives, but these values are normalized in PE and there is thus little room to escape them. While Allan dismisses masculinities based in stereotypical traits, he regularly enacts a hegemonic persona in his 'real' life. Like other students, this is indeed a limitation to his potentially powerful media penetrations.

Media Limitations: The Unchangeable Gender Order

The notion that physical education limits the students' ability to act on their criticisms of dominant masculinities is certainly plausible, but it should not be overstated nor deemed the sole contributor in this matter. PE plays a role in that it is one institution among many that privileges masculinities that are steeped in stereotypical characteristics. Over-emphasizing the influence of this school subject, however, absolves other institutions (namely, the media) from any blame, and to some extent excuses agency from

the debate (although students are certainly involved in forming PE culture). Considering the tendency for the students to perceive the media in hegemonic ways, the extent to which their ideas about gender can act as limitations should not be ignored.

The Vancouver High boys may have shown a sophisticated ability to condemn hegemonic masculinities, but as discussed in Finding #1 this did not necessitate coherent patterns in decoding the media. At both the group and individual levels the boys showed contradictions. Dominant masculinities could easily be decried, but this did not predict the acceptance of 'others'. This was shown in the way·many students simultaneously dismissed hegemonic men like the Strongman and non-hegemonic figures such as the figure skater. Furthermore, the boys frequently reversed their own logic, in one breath rejecting stereotypically 'masculine' traits, in another enthusiastically reinforcing them. It is reasonable to suspect that these lingering hegemonic views, even if less prevalent than critical perspectives, can nonetheless influence certain behaviours from the students. To be sure, students like Chad may deem hegemonic masculinities as excessive, 'fake', or undesirable, but this does not prohibit a view that these gender forms are also 'cool'. The point here is not to outline a direct correlation between media interpretations of masculinity and actual gender performances. Instead, it is simply to suggest that hegemonic behaviour patterns are perhaps not surprising if we consider the fractured nature of the students' perspectives on gender.

For some boys, the link between hegemonic beliefs and hegemonic behaviour is more pronounced, and requires further attention. These are the students who subscribe to the idea of an unchangeable gender order, as described above. In these instances, gender relations are either 'natural' or are so engrained within the makeup of our culture that

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there is no sense in seeking their upheaval. Recall how the Advanced student Gavin most clearly presented this perspective, noting that he disagrees with common depictions of masculinity, but that "you'll always want to be a part of society so you have to ... go along with it" (FG Session 1, Adv. 1). Students following Gavin's logic may offer strong criticisms of dominant masculinities, but their corresponding belief that gender relations are inevitably fixed and unchangeable may illustrate *why* they fail to mobilize their gender critiques. Once again, this forms another potential reason why seemingly powerful penetrations into the media are ultimately silenced, or in Willis' terms, limited.

The 'Reel' and the 'Real': A Final Limitation

Willis (2000) writes, "It might seem that lived penetrations heroically dare and challenge the world. In fact, their forms and artistry are often the very means through which what they seem to oppose is reproduced" (2000, p. 40). Following this contention, I would suggest that a final limitation to the Vancouver High boys' potentially powerful media critiques is the very manner in which they contest the media's logic. Specifically, the boys' recognition that masculinities presented through the media are 'unreal', 'fake', or 'hoaky' in a way prohibits them from recognizing these same masculinities in their 'real' lives. Or, to use Willis' words, this silences their ability to "dare and challenge the world."

The manner in which the students in this study saw media versions of masculinity as 'fake' has been well documented. Allan's perspective on '24''s Jack Bauer neatly summarizes these views: "There are no Jack Bauers of the world. There's no guy that like saves the world in 72 hours 3 different times" (FG Session 1, Enr. 2). This perspective

serves as a penetration in that it is undoubtedly correct: media representations of masculinity are excessive and, more often than not, are 'unreal'. But masculinities as shown on TV and in movies also champion particular values that can be mimicked in the 'real' world. The number of boys in this study who idolized and imitated celebrity athletes supports this notion, as do social statistics that outline the frequency with which young males engage in dangerous practices that are only otherwise seen on TV (Sabo, 2004; also see Bloom & Smith, 1996). The point here is that masculinities, even if unreal when constructed in the media, have 'real world' consequences. People do internalize the values espoused by hegemonic male figures – one need look no further than Finding #1 to confirm this.

Almost all the students indicated that they saw no connections between the masculinities they witness on TV and those in their everyday lives. Some boys viewed certain men as realistic – the sports stars were commonly referred to here, as were people from 'reality' shows like the Designer Guys – but for a great number of students, media masculinities are notable for their extraordinariness:

> Brad - So do you encounter any of these different types of characters – so maybe like a Strongman type, maybe like a Jet Li, like 50 Cent – do you come across them in your everyday life?
> Kyle – No way.
> B – No?
> K – No.
> B – You don't think so?
> K – That's why it's so exciting like when you see them … You haven't seen them before.
> (FG Session 1, Enr. 1).

The Vancouver High students acknowledged the masculine traits of various hegemonic figures they encounter on TV, but had difficulties relating to these characters in any way. Noah, for example, discusses how he dis-identifies with 'unrealistic' masculinities when

watching television, "I [lose] consciousness ... when I'm watching the more unrealistic shows I know that it's not realistic and there's nothing for me to relate to ... it's just scripted" (FG Session 1, Enr. 4). Of any questions asked over the course of the study, those pertaining to parallels between media and 'real life' masculinities were the most difficult to answer. This may indicate that there are no similarities to be found, but my observations of the boys' PE classes suggests otherwise. A more reasonable cause is that most boys do not actively consider how media masculinities are mirrored in their everyday experiences (and vice versa).

With respect to physical education class specifically, the boys rarely saw connections between the media's masculinities and those enacted daily in PE. Many acknowledged that media masculinities are built on 'masculine' characteristics like strength and toughness in Session One, and many acknowledged that masculinities in physical education are built on the same traits in Session 2 (as Gavin confers, the stereotypical man in this class has to "be strong and shove it in people's faces" - FG Session 2, Adv. 3). Somewhat strangely, however, few made a connection between these two separate 'settings'. Justin of the Advanced class was one of the few students to suggest that there are notable similarities, offering a comparison between how professional athletes seek to intimidate each other and how the Advanced students stare one another down in dodgeball with the same goal in mind (FG Session 2, Adv. 1).

By repeatedly proclaiming the fictitious nature of media masculinities, the fact that these gender forms surface in their everyday experiences seemingly escapes the boys. In essence, the boys separate the reel from the 'real', so to speak, and deny that media representations of masculinity can be appropriated and re-enacted in settings like

physical education class. The boys may revile 50 Cent or Jack Bauer and deem them artificial, but save for Justin, few recognize that these kinds of masculinities are prominent in physical education. This, I would suggest, is another way in which their potentially transformative viewpoints of the media are ultimately limited.

5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is necessary to return at this point to the initial rationale(s) provided for this research. The recurrent theme that young people are 'at risk', and are especially vulnerable to the mass media, served as a departure point for this analysis. Following Giroux (2000; 1997), it was suggested that, despite the regular pronouncement that the media can have harmful effects on youth, the ways that these individuals internalize and reorder/reproduce media messages about masculinity is considered far too infrequently. Furthermore, the manner in which the media articulates with other institutions – namely physical education – in the making of gender identities has also received scant attention. With these issues in mind, this study was fashioned to examine what and how young males learn about masculinity through two (related) aspects of their lives: the media and PE class. By adopting a multi-method approach, this research permitted the perspectives of many to be considered in this matter - most importantly that of students themselves.

The findings that emerged with this research provide insight into the complex manner in which masculinities are 'learned' by young males. With respect to the media, the Vancouver High boys demonstrated very convoluted and often conflicting ways of decoding media messages. Although hegemonic depictions of masculinity were often reinstituted as 'normal' by the boys, they were more often questioned, criticized, and denounced as fake or even problematic. Moreover, the students were quite critical of media productions, identifying how production processes can be underpinned by financial, and at times gendered, motives.

As for physical education, it was apparent that this subject often works to reinforce and even encourage hegemonic understandings of masculinity and the male body. The Vancouver High boys invested masculinist meanings into the competitive team games that are favoured by physical education's formal curriculum. This allowed for the formation of gender hierarchies based on differences in athletic ability and/or race. Notably, individual masculinities as well as relations between masculinities (i.e., gender hierarchies) were found to be flexible at Vancouver High. This point revealed the potential for 'alternate' masculinities – that is, those not based on hegemonic principles like toughness and strength – in physical education class.

Looking across the findings that emerged with respect to the media and physical education, I have followed Miles (2000) in suggesting that the Vancouver High boys do not utilize their critical media skills in their everyday lives. Instead, the boys displayed context specific masculinities that could be at one moment critical of hegemonic gender forms, at the next accepting of them. Consulting Willis' (2000; 1977) work on counter-school culture in 1970s Britain, I suggested that these inconsistencies can best be understood as a series of 'penetrations' and 'limitations'. As for media penetrations, the Vancouver High students resembled 'the lads' in that they questioned the taken-for-granted elements of media masculinities, they appropriated the 'tools' used to promote dominant masculinities to criticize these very same identities, and they disrupted the capitalist motives that undergird the production of hegemonic media narratives/imagery. These potentially powerful media critiques were also limited in three related ways: first, by the gendered nature of physical education; second, by the hegemonic media interpretations of the students that can exist alongside their media criticisms; third and

finally, by their inability to connect media versions of masculinity that are decried for their 'fakeness' to their everyday, 'real life' experiences.

Potential Contributions

With these findings in mind, the potential contributions of this research can be assessed. From a theoretical perspective, the argument presented here supports Connell's (1995, 1987) initial formulations on 'hegemonic masculinity'. The hegemonic masculinities adopted by the students at Vancouver High were formed primarily by the subordination of femininity and 'alternate' masculinities. This was true in how the students took up hegemonic interpretations of the media, but was more visible when some boys forcefully ascended to the top of gender hierarchies in physical education class. As many boys valued dominant masculine characteristics, despite showing an inability to appropriate a hegemonic position themselves (especially in PE), the extent to which complicit masculinities are vital to the 'gender order' was revealed as well.

This research has also provided support to those who have sought recently to reformulate Connell's initial framework. Wetherall and Edley (1999) added complexity to the 'hegemonic masculinity' paradigm by illustrating how masculinities can fluctuate between subject positions according to context. The boys in this study showed an ability to do this as well, providing credence to the notion that masculinities *and* hierarchies of masculinities are indeed flexible. The manner in which students like George and Lance fluctuated between subordinated and dominating positions goes far in showing the mutable character of gender identities.

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One of the most basic tenets of media studies research has also been supported in this study: that audiences can interpret media messages in multiple ways, including 'preferred' or 'oppositional' readings (Hall, 1980). What is significant about this research is that it makes this point with respect to a youth audience. When youth are provided voice in the research process, the complexity and diversity of their opinions on the media is revealed. That is to say, young people are not passive receivers of media messages, but rather they have a sophisticated ability to think critically about the media narratives and images to which they are exposed. Although dominant masculinities are at times accepted and even valourized, the potential for the students to also critique these gender forms suggests this is not an unreflexive process. In this respect, the findings presented here have added depth to current studies that have characterized the media as gendered without weighing how the 'targets' of these media actually perceive them.

This research is perhaps most useful for its ability to contribute to physical education and the literature on this subject. Kirk and Tinning (1994) have suggested that the media and physical education are connected through their emphasis on 'physical culture' and 'ideal' gender forms. This assertion was provided support here, as the masculinities that are shown to be 'normal' in the media – those described as hegemonic throughout this work – were reinscribed as such in physical education class as well. And although this provides what appears to be a gloomy outlook on the stability of the gender order, I would argue that the findings developed above offer the potential for a transformative gender politics. That is to say, the boys in this research already possess the necessary tools with which to confront and unseat prevailing gender forms. While these students seem on the cusp of 'dethroning' the hegemonic masculinities *du jour*, they are

limited in part by their lingering hegemonic views, their inability to recognize these identity types in their 'real' lives, and by the relative ease with which physical education facilitates gender hierarchies. Significantly, I believe physical education class is the ideal setting in which to alleviate *all three* of these concerns. This could be instituted through critical discussions of the gendered meanings that are commonly attached to sport, a practice that would potentially 'expose' hegemonic values, highlight the 'real' nature of dominant masculinities, and ultimately uproot taken-for-granted gender ideologies in PE. An equally important step would involve decreased reliance on competitive activities in physical education, as games that render teams 'winners' and 'losers' also tend to permit 'winning' and 'losing' masculinities. Certainly, eradicating competitive sport from physical education is, in the immediate future at least, a difficult proposition due to the structural forces (e.g., resources) that promote these activities. Physical educators, researchers, and policy makers should nonetheless continue to seek novel and imaginative ways to engage youth in physical activity. I believe this kind of work, along with critical discussions of sport, gender, and the body, would render a non-competitive and more 'gender sensitive' PE attainable in the current educational environment.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research can provide further insight into several of the issues discussed here. First, with respect to audience/reception studies, this project was constrained in important ways. Most obviously, the study was confined to the male sex, leaving the opinions of female physical education students silenced. Previous research has examined how female audiences interpret the media (Currie, 1999), but more information is needed

on how their perceptions of masculinities and femininities shown on television and in movies influence their experiences in PE. In addition, the small and locally based sample in this research rendered comparisons across groups - most notably those that differ by race and class – difficult to do. I have spoken to the importance of race in the physical education setting, but more information is needed on how young people form 'interpretive communities' according to their shared social locations.

Related to these concerns is the general need for more research on youth audiences. The 'third wave' of reception studies would certainly benefit from more detailed analyses of how young people understand (gendered) media, and how these interpretations play out in their everyday experiences. This study focused on masculinity as it is learned in the media and in physical education, but future research could explore how the media works in a reciprocal manner with other institutional and cultural settings (for example, competitive sports). Furthermore, future research could go beyond the realm of this study by offering a more probing examination of the larger context in which physical education is located. PE class is certainly vital in shaping how young male and female students conceptualize gender, but the experiences young people have in this setting are contingent upon a host of other factors, like the broader school culture, the community/neighbourhood setting, local sport and physical activity opportunities, and familial attitudes towards the media and physical activity/education, among others. Ethnographic methods that offer even greater depth into the media and the 'everyday' experiences in the lives of a specific - if relatively small - audience would complement the more common practice of researching how multiple audiences decode a similar text.

The call for audience research also raises an important methodological point. The employment of multiple methods in this research was beneficial in that it impeded any one perspective from standing as the unassailable 'truth'. Providing the voice of youth participants is crucial, but as Atkinson and Coffey (2003) argue, teaming an analysis of what is 'said' with one that considers what is 'done' is the most appropriate method for discerning how 'real life' is performed.

With respect to the physical education literature, in contemplating how specific gender ideologies become 'natural' in this setting, future studies might provide greater concentration on the role of the body in this process. Analyses that follow Swain (2003), who focused on the ways that gender is embodied in physical education (i.e., how the body serves as a "means of classification, inclusion and differentiation" – Swain, 2003, p. 299), would be extremely valuable in this regard. This kind of research would be especially fascinating if it were to consider how the media is influential in the embodiment of gender in PE class, and how television, movies, the Internet, and other forms of media potentially influence everything from language to physical comportment.

Finally, also concerning physical education, I would suggest greater investigation into the ways that PE can provide a space for 'alternative' masculinities is needed. By now we are aware of how physical education often favours hegemonic masculinities based on competitive values. And while this study was relatively novel in that it introduced the elements of the media and 'flexible' masculinities into physical education studies, like most research in this field it fell short of imagining what a 'non-hegemonic' physical education actually looks like in practice. This does not mean searching for new essential traits upon which to base new forms of masculinity, but as noted above, it

requires more depth as to how PE can critically assess the androcentric culture of sport and physical activity. Moreover, future research that offers practical solutions as to how physical education can critically approach stereotypical and potentially harmful ideas about 'normal' masculinities and femininities that are so frequently promoted in the popular media is of extreme importance. Indeed, this kind of future research, when considered with the suggestions for media/audience and gender studies above, would ultimately provide greater insight into the complex ways that masculinities are learned.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

1) What is your age? ____

2) Please describe your racial/ethnic background? _____

3) In what area of Vancouver do you live? _____

4) Do you regularly watch any of the shows/movies shown in this video?
   - If yes, which ones?

_____

_____

5) What are your favourite ...
TV shows: 1) _____   Movies: 1) _____
          2) _____   2) _____

6) How many hours a day do you watch television/movies? _____

7) Do you <u>like</u> any of the people/characters in these clips? Who and why?

_____

_____

8) Do you <u>dislike</u> any of the people/characters in these clips? Who and why?

_____

_____

9) Is there anyone on TV or in movies (real people or characters) you strive to be like? Who and why?

_____

_____

_____

10) Are there any TV shows or movies that accurately show life like you live it with your friends? (If yes, which ones?)

_____

_____

11) Are there any general characteristics you think are necessary to be 'a man'?
1) _____   2) _____
3) _____   4) _____

12) Are there any general characteristics you think men should not have?

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

13) What do you like <u>most</u> about physical education class?

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____

14) What do you like <u>least</u> about physical education class?

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____

15) What does/do your parent(s)/guardian(s) do for a living? (Please include part-time work)

Mother/Guardian: _____
_____

Father/Guardian: _____
_____

16) What is your parents' education level? (Check each column as appropriate)

	Mother	Father
Some high school	____	____
Finished high school	____	____
Some college	____	____
College diploma	____	____
Some university	____	____
University degree	____	____

Other (please specify) _____

17) What are your two favourite schools subjects?

_____   _____

18) What are your two least favourite subjects?

_____   _____

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Appendix 2

Focus Group Interview Guide – Session One

1. Impressions of Video Clips

- Have you guys seen any of these clips before? Which ones?
    - Are they shows/people you usually watch/see?

- What did you think of the video clips?

    - Did any of the people shown appeal to you?
        - Do you like any of these people/characters? Why?

    - Was there anything or anyone that you didn't like in the clips?
        - Why?
        - Do you dislike any of these people/characters in particular?

- Are any of these clips realistic?
    - Why or why not?

2. General Feelings on Media, Gender, and Masculinity

Viewing Habits:

- What TV shows and movies do you normally watch?
    - Who are the primary male characters on these shows?

- How are the male characters portrayed in (___) movie/show?
    - How do you feel about these portrayals?
    - Are they realistic?

- How are the *female* characters portrayed in (___) movie/show?
    - How do you feel about these portrayals?
    - Are they realistic?

Role Models:

- Are there any other male characters you like?
    - Why?
    - What descriptive words would you use to describe these characters?

- Do you look up to any of these male characters (i.e., do you aspire to be like them in any way?
    - Anyone else?

- Are there any people in the media you don't want to be like?
    - Why?

Characteristics of 'Men' and 'Women':

- Are there any particular characteristics you think a 'man' should have?
    - Can you think of anyone who embodies these characteristics?
    - Anyone in the media?

- Are there any characteristics you think a 'woman' should have?

Men's Bodies:

- How are men's bodies usually shown in the media?
    - How do you feel about this?
    - Do you strive to have some of the characteristics of these men's bodies?
    - Are they healthy?

- Are there any particular bodily characteristics you think a 'man' should have?

Everyday Life:

- Do you see characters/events like these in your everyday life?
    - If yes, where?
    - Are there many similarities between what you see in the media and your everyday experiences?

Appendix 3

Focus Group Interview Guide – Session Two

1. General Impressions of Physical Education Class

- What are your impressions of physical education class?
    - What do you like/dislike about this subject?
    - How do you like the activities you participate in?

- How does P.E. compare to other courses you take at school?
    - How does it compare to other parts of your life (for example, sports, music/band, etc.)

- What kinds of relationships are there between students in physical education class?
    - Is this different from other places/classes at school?

- What kinds of relationships are there between students and teachers in physical education class?

- Will you continue with P.E. in grade 11?
    - Why or why not?

- If you could make three changes to physical education, what would they be?

- *Ask about any relevant specific incidents that arose over the course of the observation period.*

2. Physical Education and the Media

- How would you compare the ways people act in physical education class with how they act in movies/TV?
    - Are there similarities or differences?

- Is it important to have a particular body type in physical education?
    - If so, what kind of body is most desirable?
    - Who would you compare this body-type to?

- Do you ever talk about the media in P.E. class?
    - Do you ever talk about masculinity?
    - Do you ever talk about body types?
    - In what ways do you talk about these things? How much?

Appendix 4

Teacher Interview Guide

1. Position and History

- What is your position at the school?
    - What sorts of tasks does your job involve?

- How long have you held this position?
    - Have you had any other roles?

- Why did you choose teaching physical education as a profession?
    - Did people influence you in making this decision?

- What is your background in sports/athletics?

- What are your feelings about the education system in B.C.?
    - How do you feel about physical education specifically (especially the curriculum)?
    - Have your views on these topics changed over time?

2. Relationship With Students

- What relationship do you have with physical education students?

- How would you describe your interactions with these individuals?
    - Are the interactions different dependent on which students are involved?

- How do students behave in (your) class?
    - How do you think they feel about physical education?
    - Do their opinions differ (from one another)? If so, how?

3. Media and Physical Education

- Do you deal with the topic of media at all in your class *(for teachers only)*?

- Do you deal with masculinity *(for teachers only)*?

- How do you think the media – specifically images of men - affect the lives of students (if at all)?
    - Do you witness these effects in physical education?

- In what ways do the media negatively impact physical education? Positive impacts?
- If you could, what changes would you make to the physical education curriculum? To its administration?

Appendix 5

Video Clips

The following clips were shown at the start of each Session One focus group. Each clip lasted between 10-30 seconds, making the video roughly 4 minutes in length:

Sports:
- A male competitor in action at the World's Strongest Man competition. The 'Strongman' is seated pulling a truck with a long rope.
- A highlight clip of a Vancouver Canucks hockey game showing three consecutive events: a violent body-check, a fistfight, and a goal by Canucks forward Markus Naslund.
- A highlight from an NBA basketball game showing Tracy McGrady, a star player, performing a high-flying dunk.
- A male figure skater in competition completing dance movements and then a jump.

TV/Movies:
- A clip of the popular TV program '24' where the lead character Jack Bauer (played by Keifer Sutherland) leads an intense conversation on how to stop a terrorist group.
- A clip of action movie star Jet Li engaged in martial arts combat from the film *Kiss of the Dragon* (2001).
- A commercial for the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a popular Hollywood film that tells the story of two gay male cowboys
- A clip of the TV program 'Designer Guys' where three male designer renovate living spaces.

Music (televised performances):
- A clip of rapper 50 Cent on stage at a concert performance.
- A clip of rock band U2, also on stage at a concert performance.
- A commercial for the Make-a-Wish Foundation charity starring musician Usher.