Looking Back at Looking Up: Unpacking the Production and Impact of Idealized Masculinity in Youth Hockey
by

Martin Henry Rubin
Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Psychology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
Acknowledgements

Any hockey player that has made it as far as I have knows that the first people he needs to thank every day he gets the opportunity to put on his skates are his parents.

Mom and Dad, without your unconditional encouragement, sacrifice, and dedication to my success in hockey and school, I would have never been able to be who I am today. You are both the most shining and positive role models a son could ever ask for. I love you both with all my heart and soul.

Josh, thank you for being a consistent motivator for me. You are my engine and my best friend.

And, Bob Steele, thank you for believing in me when you were all about done with male athletes. You have given me a chance to make something real happen with this thesis. Thank you for your support, your kindness, your empathy, your challenges, your laughter, and your bravery. I love our long talks, we are always learning from one another. Remember, whether you believe it or not: together we can make change, one man at time.

A special thank you to my friends who are always there for me: Linne Halpern, Tina Glusac, Ethan Savel, Ryan Fidell, Noa Azulai, Nila Ravi, Madeleine Strait, Darci Collins, Lianne Yun, Alex Fabry, Jon Logan-Rung, and Chad Malinowski
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ......................................................................................................................3

**Chapter 1-The Hockey Father: Making Men from Mites** .................................................12

- Hockey Hierarchies .............................................................................................................14
- The Locker Room ...............................................................................................................19
- Techniques for Making Men in the Locker Room ..........................................................22

**Chapter 2-Practicing Manhood: Initiation Rituals and the Sacred Courtroom** ...........28

- Manhood/Hockey Initiation Rituals ..................................................................................33
- Kangaroo Court ..................................................................................................................44

**Chapter 3- Impacts of Idealized Masculinity** .................................................................50

- Physical Violence: The Bar Fight ......................................................................................51
- Sexual Violence ..................................................................................................................56

**Conclusion** .......................................................................................................................64

**References** .........................................................................................................................77
Introduction

TO YOU FROM FAILING HANDS WE THROW
THE TORCH, BE YOURS TO HOLD IT HIGH!
-Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae – Montreal Canadiens Locker Room

Eloquent black and white portraits hang high above the dressing stalls of the Montreal Canadiens’ locker room in a single file line. They have adorned the room since 1909. Though they were the same age when their photos were taken, the faces of the men in the photos are older and more serious than the men who currently inhabit the locker room (Dryden, 1983). The photos seem to get older every day. Scars line the men’s cheek bones and eyelids. Proud, often toothless grins beam from their faces as they stare down and across the dressing room, watching. To whomever hung them there, their purpose seemed simple: to immortalize men in the space in which they raised their legacies to the pinnacle of talent, toughness, and sport, otherwise known as the Hockey Hall of Fame. However, it is more complicated than that, for these men do not appear to be hockey players. Rather, they seem to be soldiers; and if it were not for the recognizable names on the plates detailing each of their years of “service,” then one could actually go on believing that these men were truly war heroes.

Their presence day-to-day, although quiet and static, is a not-so-subtle reminder that just like soldiers, they sacrificed their bodies and souls to build the concrete foundation that holds the ever-developing tradition of hockey as it was known then and is known today. While none of the photos are adorned with flashy frames, engraved epithets, or rich remarks like their counterpart booths in the Hall of Fame in Toronto, their presentation speaks volumes to those who can understand it.
These men are memorialized as standards of excellence towards which all Montreal Canadiens must strive. They sit on their perch to ensure it. Yet, excellence in this context can mean far more than winning hockey games. To me, and surely to those generations of Canadiens that have filled that locker room, this type of excellence is achieved through the creation and exhibition of dominant masculinity in the locker room, on the ice, and away from the rink.

This Montreal Canadien’s locker room aesthetic is imagery that all hockey players, young and old, should know something about. Hockey traditions like this carry so much nostalgic weight that they have an incredible way of connecting generations of hockey players. After all, the readers of this essay are divided by several generations of hockey history, therefore, examples must speak to current players and coaches alike. Even more specifically, this essay will only focus on North American male identifying hockey players, coaches, parents, and the culture in which they interact. To them my message from the start will be clear: I want to provide a space where patriarchal hockey traditions and cultural markers that separate it from other sports (and all-male spaces) are presented as potential situations in which masculinities are being created and recreated through linguistic and cultural coding.

For example, why do the words of Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae's (1918) First World War Poetry, *In Flanders Fields*, display themselves proudly above the military-like photos in the Montreal Canadien’s locker room? This is a vivid visual representation of cultural coding and transmission of masculinity. This quote and its placement epitomize hockey’s desire for progressive growth in the individual players, in the team, in the tradition of the sport, and beyond. The eternal burning light of the
torch is a symbol for burning passion, strength, and toughness, otherwise known as the dominant masculinity forged in the bonds of war meeting sport: ice hockey. Both in the poem figuratively and in the locker room literally, the flames are passed to the next generation in a desperate way; they are passed in order to assure that the values of the previous generation remain intact. They make a plea to all hockey players that is trans-historical. These faces, their legacies, are constantly policing, surveilling, creating, and recreating the patriarchal values of masculinity for their contemporary viewers. And much like patriarchal values in other similar subcultures, their messages transmit contradictory codes. They summon a victorious, rugged individualism that hockey tradition both wants and needs to further its traditionally violent style of play. Yet at the same time, their position in the locker room also speaks in an ambiguously plural voice which seems to be beckoning those rugged individuals to ally themselves into a team. These photos remind the men in the room, to themselves, and to their peers, exactly what it means to be a hockey player. This reminder is similar to and often competing with what it means to be a man. So, how can a row of photos that do not even feature people playing hockey, combined with two lines of poetry written about a war in which no player fought, define for the Montreal Canadiens’ players their entire identities? Codes transmitting social and historical messages about dominant masculinity exist between and within generations of men’s and youth hockey culture. The main goal of this essay is to expose and unpack those dangerous and confusing codes and expand on a growing body of research that analyzes the nature of coding masculinities within the pedagogy of the (in)formal education of youth hockey.
It is my firm belief through my nearly twenty-year long hockey career that my identity as a hockey player and as a man are wholly intertwined. This process started for me as a young boy in the (in)formal education that comes from hockey coaches and team culture. I use the term “(in)formal” to blend the dichotomy of scholastic versus extracurricular activities, a binary which is often used as an illusion for how children spend their time and energy. Formal educations, North Americans tell themselves, should come from school and religious institutions while informal educations can come from other sources such as recreational sports and artistic outlets like theatre or dance. My argument here is that a “formal” education can teach far more than academic knowledge and an “informal” education can reach beyond more than just recreational skills. In fact, I believe that everything I know about masculinities and being a man, both in my personal identity and my cultural knowledge of the subject, come from my (in)formal education from hockey coaches, parents, and teammates. Therefore, I use the term “(in)formal” to reflect a hiding, yet systematic formal education within an environment that believes itself to be an informal education…and a game.

I was raised in the first wave of a growing hockey community in St. Louis, Missouri. One would think that this small hockey community would not carry with it the traditional culture and values that more established, northern cities have developed over hockey’s longstanding history. However, the key players in the development of my hockey community were all Canadian and Northeastern professionals either playing their last days out in St. Louis or settling down with a
family post-career. All of my coaches growing up were ex-pros, a few were even hall-of-famers. With that status, these men were invincible. They could train and teach us in any way they saw fit. So, what did they do? They basically used this rational: since they themselves had reached such heights of hockey fame that, if they repeated exactly the same training and (in)formal education that they were taught, my teammates and I were bound for similar glory as well. So, we were put into the future pro factory line. They referred to us as “hockey players,” and not “people that played hockey” in an attempt to teach us to link up our self-identities with the values and rules they had set forth for us. They taught my teammates and me that violence, aggression, sexism, homophobia, competition, and dedication were all ways to prove to them that we were truly “hockey players,” and for that matter, young men. And to be honest, being a “hockey player” was all I ever wanted to be and all I ever wanted them to affirm that I was, until I began to realize what it made me become.

In asking what it means to be a (male identifying) hockey player, one is also asking an essential question: what does it mean to be a man? For the (in)formal education a North American hockey player receives from an early age is purely metaphoric, reliant on the socialization of dominant masculine values confusingly tied up in a web of hockey tradition, playing skills, coach-player relationships, sexual identity, and peer pressure/conforming. One study even found that “teammates and coaches in youth hockey leagues judge players’ competence more on their willingness to engage in violence (especially fist fighting) than on their playing and skating skills” (Weinstein, Smith, & Wiesenthal, 1995, p. 844). This finding speaks to an illusion of the coach/player relationship as well as an illusion for the reasons a boy
will enjoy playing the sport itself. The young hockey players are simply looking
everywhere for approval, and they constantly are receiving different messages about
what it means to be a hockey player and a man at each turn.

This essay will use ethnographic, biographic, media, and film examples to
culturally locate the sources and channels that constantly create and recreate
dominant masculinities in the sub-culture of youth hockey while not only
acknowledging, but detailing the marginal masculinities forged within the cracks of
the hypocrisy of the hegemonic form. This is necessary because “studying
masculinities involves both the contingent and the embedded dimension,” writes Gary
Whannel in a groundbreaking work called, *Sport and Gender Identity* (Aitchison,
2007). This book succeeds in finding strategies to separate dominant and subordinate
masculinities that feed off of one another to create themselves and various “othering”
categories. To do this, writes Whannel, “it requires that we recognise both the
sedimented traditions and residual cultures, and the dynamic hybridites…that are
implicated in the production of masculinities” (Aitchison, 2007). Using the approach
that recognizes the moving pieces of masculinities and how they dynamically interact
with one another in hockey culture, along with my knowledge of the social and
historical aspects of hockey’s “sedimented traditions,” we will be able to parse out the
messages and motivations that create and recreate these masculine identities.

The young hockey player is constantly being flooded with culturally packed
information about how he should act according to his chosen identity as a “hockey
player.” Unfortunately, these messages are often disguised as approved violence,
locker room talk, and competitive insults. Often coaching/teaching moments
contradict the young player’s morals both religious and secular, his home-taught values and behavior, and his biosocial sexuality. I will show that this (in)formal education uses cultural information, namely misogyny and homophobia, as the main conduits through which dominant masculine values are created and recreated in two specific relationships: coaches’ relationships to their players through motivational tactics and player’s social relationship with one another in the locker room culture. These areas are where Whannel’s “dynamic hybridities” come into play: having emotions but not displaying them, fearing violence but partaking in it, wanting intimacy, both sexual and platonic, but refusing it, loving women, including mothers, but bashing them, and thinking queer thoughts while openly hating queer people/behavior. These tensions define the inner psyche and outward behavior of the identity of the hockey player. This essay will identify and unpack these tensions and the spaces in which they exist such as the locker room, the initiation ritual, and the sacred hockey court. For dominant masculinity is so dynamic and far reaching that each one of these dissonances manifest themselves differently in each of the aforementioned spaces that hockey players revere.

While I have briefly mentioned my relationship to hockey as a current player, I must use more detail to illustrate my positionality in hockey’s cultural and linguistic coding that is such a prominent factor in creating and rehearsing masculinity. Not only was I a player as a child growing up, I was an elite player with the opportunities to travel the entire country as well as Canada to play hundreds of teams from cities and towns far and wide. Even though each rink, each town, and each state are
different, several commonalities grounded my experiences. One of the most salient
elements is the locker room. I learned over time, seamlessly, how to talk and how to
act in the locker room so as to gain respect, friendship, and admiration as well as to
avoid violence and bullying. Regardless of the physical location of the locker room,
its ruthless rules and conspicuous challenges remained the same from the start. I was
never the most popular, in fact, I was hardly noticed for the majority of my time spent
in the locker room. However, being hardly noticed was far better than being the
recipient of the gang aggression focused on feminization, homophobia, and racism. I
considered myself an expert in the social navigation of the power dynamics in nearly
any locker room in which I stepped foot. Immediately I could tell who to avoid,
where to sit, what to say, and how act based on cues I had learned to recognize in
painstaking and dangerous trial and error over time. Yet, however autonomous and
manipulative I may have thought I was, the culture still owned me and dictated all my
behavior.

Therefore, I consider myself to be a sort of translator: one who is able, if he so
chooses, to speak the language of the locker room, dance their dance, even when they
do not realize I am pretending or playing along. In an academic setting, my advantage
as a translator is access to all of the spaces without being outed as a “spy.” Michael
A. Robidoux (2001), in his ethnography of a professional hockey team’s locker room
culture called *Men at Play: A Working Understanding of Professional Hockey in
Canada* attributes lack of access to personal conversation and intimate moments with
the players as the largest hole in his research (p. 10). He often was referred to by the
hockey players as a “spy.” This is no strange coincidence in the life and work of an
ethnographer. However, I have the incredible fortune of presenting myself like a hockey player in every sense of the term. Therefore, I am not only let into the spaces, I have a permanent seat in all the conversations, coaching moments, initiation rituals, drunken parties, intimate details, and important cultural events without any detection. “The boys,” as they like to refer to themselves in plural, are just their natural selves when I am around.

The readers of this essay will soon discover that I have little interest in analyzing the game of hockey as it is played on the ice nor do I have any stake in critiquing the race or class issues involved in its current state. Rather, I aim to focus on removing the hockey player from the game itself and consider him as a member of the larger society, one that is constantly becoming more aware of the political powers of idealized gender attitudes and behavior. To do so, I must first and foremost bring my own masculinity to the forefront of my analysis. That I have not just been an innocent bystander in my personal stories told in this work is key. I have participated in acts of violence, sexism, racism, and homophobia inside and outside the hockey locker room. I have nurtured my teammates’ insecurities in their masculinities by not stepping up and stopping their/our rhetoric involving violence towards women and the feminization of other men. That I have not only witnessed but participated in these acts throughout my career renders me uniquely capable of unpacking the power dynamics of idealized masculinity in youth hockey. While I will not be able to separate myself from the experiences as they may have happened objectively, they will still exist on these pages as living testaments to the socialization of masculinity in their (in)formal educational settings which, in my opinion, still holds value in
ethnography. These pages will not serve as my attempt to denaturalize my behaviors from the environment in which I learned them. Instead, this work will operate as my personal acceptance of this past behavior and a demonstration of my recognition of its harm both for my own development and the maturation of my teammates. I hope my readers, as players or coaches, will use my experiences to rethink their own masculinities to consider how their language and behavior affect other hockey players’ identities, especially the young, impressionable ones who will take their gender identities into the (in)formal education of the next generation.

Chapter 1- The Hockey Father: Making Men from Mites

The Zamboni moves at a monotonous pace around and around the rink, slowly letting water freeze over the new sheet it creates. It hums at a loud, low frequency that could almost be soothing, if I did not already know what was to follow its departure from the ice. At nine years old, packed in a concrete tunnel with sixty other players waiting for the Zamboni to finish its job, I want it to stay on forever. I want the tranquility it makes. I want the predictability it gives me. I am nervous because it is the last round of tryouts for the Squirt Major AAA team, the highest-ranking team in the state. I am afraid because I am competing against so many other players that I have never seen before. And I am truly terrified watching and listening to the others as we are waiting for the Zamboni to leave. The pack is fluid, and nervous energy is making everyone shout, curse, and bump into one another. “You’re a fag,” one player in a white helmet says to another in a black helmet while banging his cage on the other’s (they were rivals last year, and soon to be teammates the following). “Yeah?” the other one retorts, “at least I’m not a poof like you!” Everyone around them laughs
audibly in order to further embarrass the instigator, even though none of them knew what their jokes actually meant. I surely did not at the time. I try again to find the Zamboni to regain my control, but sticks are smacking sticks in sword fights and bodies are pushing bodies in every direction and all I can think about is how overwhelming this all feels.

I catch a glimpse of my father in the stands. His eyes meet mine only for a moment and he nods silently in reassurance. At the time, it was all I needed to know that I could really make the team. And what great timing it was because the Zamboni was gone, the calm before the storm was over. We shoot onto the ice like a ball out of a cannon and it all feels more familiar to me again. My skates were in fact the same ones I always wore, my stick, still just as comfortable in my hands as it had ever been. It was time to just play hockey, to give everything I had inside to prove myself on that day. And prove myself I did. I made the Squirt Major AAA team, the amateur model of my hometown NHL team. There was more. The supposed largest perk of making this team was the chance to play for a coach that had played a long career in the NHL. His status meant knowledge and development beyond what other coaches could offer, access to tournaments in faraway places that we had never dreamed of playing before, and a new sense of being elite which separated our team of nine year-olds from our peer’s lesser squads. He was an ideal figure that promised infinite progress for young players in a growing hockey town.

Something must be said for why I remember more about the moments waiting for the tryout to start than I do the actual tryout itself. For that was the first time I remember being truly intimidated by other hockey players. Their macho images,
hyper-activated in the chaos of pre-tryout jitters, inflated their threatening potential as hockey players without even setting blade to ice. Surely, they had learned these behaviors from their fathers or older brothers or some hockey movie because that language was too specifically rehearsed and effective to be naturally flowing out of their childish mouths. Little did any of us know, however, that our biggest role models in teaching such hyper-masculine behavior in regard to violent, homophobic, misogynistic, and feminizing scare tactics were about to skate into our lives. For most of us, they will never leave.

**Hockey Hierarchies**

For several reasons, youth hockey is an excellent arena for coaches to begin to catalyze gender identity formation for boys at young ages. To start examining the process of how masculinity is transmitted from generation to generation one must break down the infrastructure of youth hockey and the spaces it creates. Due to its existence in an individualist and capitalist society, North American youth hockey organizations are firmly structured in hierarchies. First, the age levels have names that are linguistically diminutive, reflecting a division of knowledge from the adults: from youngest to oldest we have mite/atom, squirt, pee-wee, bantam, and midget. Next, there are four starkly separate levels in the youth hockey hierarchy: house hockey, A level, AA level, and AAA level. Each level and age group is characterized by more intense competition, travel schedules, coaching attitudes, and player’s potential to rise up or fall off the “pyramid” as it is often referred to. The true product of the “pyramid” is that the higher one climbs, the more power and exposure their coach will have over the players and their parents, ultimately skewing the gender identity
formation process of young boys in an (in)formal setting towards dominant masculine values. It is known that gender identity formation is occurring simultaneously at all ages and levels as boys socialize and learn about their bodies and identities within the bounds of organized hockey, this is why organized sports were invented in the first place. However, I will demonstrate that the patriarchal structure that intertwines coaches’ relationships with the lives of their players intensifies this formation of gender identity into a hegemonic masculine form as the age and level of hockey increases.

At the bottom is house hockey, the most egalitarian form of the game in which teams are chosen at random and are only separated by age groups so as to avoid much older kids playing against smaller and younger opponents. This level is not even focused on development yet; just pure play and fun. It is the most reminiscent of the Canadian pond hockey, or “shinny” style of play. Former NHL player Fran Huck once said that, “most of the hockey [he] played was river hockey. The kids themselves did it. There were only outdoor rinks, and none of what we see now with kids being regimented and spending so much time in dressing rooms,” (Robinson, 1998, p. 194). However, house hockey’s reputation is riddled with stigma for its inherent lack of intense competition because the players are just beginners with hopes to learn more skills as their exposure to the game grows. The role of the coach is relaxed and there is no training required in order to coach at this level.

Next are the A levels which are coached mostly by parents of players. These teams, depending on their region, travel a city-wide network of rinks to play evenly matched A level teams from other areas in that city (in some dense hockey
populations there are several levels within the A level as a whole). The teams are selected based on one or two tryout periods in which most players do not have the skills and abilities to truly distinguish themselves as potentially great players. Here is the first place in which older men are analyzing players and choosing young boys to play (or not play) for their teams. This is the beginning of the patriarchal structure of competitive youth hockey. At the next level, the AA level, there are only a few teams in the region with the ability to choose from a pool large enough to fill a roster with already adept, confident, and skilled players. These teams travel statewide, sometimes playing teams from several states away in order to test their readiness and talent. Coaching at this level is chosen by a small committee that oversees the operations of the youth organization. The coaches must have had some playing experience, whether it was high school or club hockey, and must demonstrate their commitment to the development of their players by organizing a competitive learning environment. The USA Hockey Coaching Seminars at both Level 1 and 2 separate this talent pool from the ranks below because these players have already learned fundamentals of “systems play” (ie. fore-check, power play, breakouts, etc.) and hockey skills (shooting, skating, stick handling, etc.). Winning and losing are important factors in AA hockey; there are state and regional championships on the line from ages 6-18. AA players are also in a unique position to rise in the hockey hierarchy to the AAA level or descend back to the A levels from which they came, therefore, this is the first level in which there is an anxiety about skill development, physical size and strength, as well as players’ attitudes and commitment. AA players make up the majority of high school
and club college teams, except for a few regions in the United States like Minnesota that do not participate in the USA Hockey Development Model.

The AAA level shows a clear separation in both the commitment and skill level of the players as well as coach/player relationships. Teams are chosen by councils of men who make up the coaching staff. Tryouts involve a long and judgmental process that pulls from a massive pool of potential players. Bodies are interchangeable at this level, therefore, players know there is only a thin margin of error allowed to remain at the top. The stakes are high because these players are motivated to make junior hockey, college hockey, and professional or Olympic hockey rosters. Their teams will travel the United States and Canada in order to test their abilities against the best players from every region. Coaches of these teams must have had at least junior or NCAA college playing experience and most of them played professionally. National championships are held at this level. Junior hockey teams draft the AAA players and NCAA colleges make commitments of scholarship to these players from ages as young as fourteen. While these are truly exceptional teams, players, and situations, the rapid change in structure from house to AAA demonstrates how quickly the intensity and importance of coaching picks up.

At the high levels, parents hardly have any say in how their children are coached, for unless they have more hockey experience than the coaches, their status will not be great enough to enforce change. Dictatorships arise out of this dynamic. AA and AAA coaches constantly teeter on the line of passion/aggression when coaching their players and dealing with the parents of the team. The relationship coaches have with their players as well as their personal behavior on the bench and in
the locker room reflect their own experiences as players watching their coaches. An important article called the “Long-Term Coaching Development Concept” not only proves that former players pick up their coaches’ behavior, but also approves of the process by advocating that it is a keystone of developing effective coaching in the next generation (O’Leary). In 2006, USA Hockey, the governing authority over youth hockey in the United States used this report to justify their most important development in coaching education: the American Development Model. This model is an idealized progress map that details the main objectives for players and coaches at each stage of their development in hockey. The report cited that “a key planning point in the [Long-Term Coaching Development Concept] model is to ensure that [coaches] benefit from training as they start their coaching journey while they are athletes, even as teenagers” (O’Leary, p. 31). So, how then, are coaches entering into the profession, regardless of their level, supposed to coach their players in any other way than the coaching they received as young players? If a current coach’s gender identity formation had been catalyzed by an abusive, aggressive, and/or ill-tempered coach in his past, will he be more likely to repeat this behavior when introducing his team to his idea of masculine values? And how will he act when adversity arises such as lack of effort from players, poor officiating, or parent criticism? With young players always watching, and more often, being the object of the hyper-masculine behavior such as not-so-subtle misogynistic and homophobic language, aggressive posturing, and violent lashing out, there is only one version of masculinity being taught, regardless of the coach knowing he is teaching it or not. Herein lie the systematic issues that aid the transmission of dominant masculine values given by the
coach to the players through their specific relationship created by youth hockey structure.

As hockey become more competitive, coaches enter into players’ lives as pseudo-father-figures; “hockey fathers” replace biological fathers as the new source of knowledge that dedicated hockey players must tap into in order to rise up the pyramid. For this, coaches have more status granted to them which quickly cancels out parent intervention and opinion. These “hockey fathers” hold within them the great ability to help players rise to their highest potential, to be that coach that got their player into college or the NHL. They also have the power to ruin player’s careers for personal or political reasons by slandering their reputations. Using the word “uncoachable” to describe a player is a prime example of how coaches can use their power to hurt player’s careers. The term is culturally understood as nearly equivalent to a parent claiming that their child is unruly, unteachable, and has behavioral issues. The term itself refers to a subjective, narrow point of view to which only the coach has access. This gives the player no agency to advocate for himself nor let parents speak for him. “Uncoachable” players never make it past high school hockey because no hockey father wants to babysit players that have the reputation of acting like children. In other words, just like dominant masculine biological fathers, hockey fathers demand a strict allegiance and obedience to their patriarchal rule and have linguistic and political tactics to reinforce this dynamic.

The Locker Room

As we have already seen, coaches have an immense amount of power even when coaching young players at lower hockey levels. This power is inconspicuously
structured in several ways to their advantage, another one of these strategies is created by the sanctity of the locker room as a specific cultural space. Once players are old enough to tie their own skates and get themselves dressed (around ages 6-8), parents are no longer allowed in the locker room, and moreover, their proximity to and questioning of the coach’s authority is jettisoned to rink lobbies and parking lot conversations. The space of the locker room then transforms into an all-male sanctuary as well as a practice arena for testing out hyper-masculine behavior learned from the coaches themselves. Later in this essay I will analyze the dynamics of the locker room as an all-male space without any adult presence. For now, I will focus on the structure that allows coaches to have power in the locker room over their players that serves as a vehicle through which masculine values pass from men, now assuming pseudo-fathering roles in an (in)formal educational setting, to young, impressionable boys exposed to masculinity in this intense form.

I want to take a moment to analyze the physical space of the locker room and the metaphoric world in which it creates. Locker rooms in hockey rinks are often rented spaces (only elite teams have their own locker rooms separated by padlocked doors). However, there is a continuity between levels that, from a young age, the locker room becomes the central location of the team’s identity: it houses all social interactions, team meetings, comical moments, and celebrations regardless of it being the same exact room or not. Due to its simplicity in only having a few benches and a door that closes, every locker room can be transformed into the team’s room, therefore its existence as an owned space is pure metaphor enacted subconsciously by all teams as they enter their room. In fact, the integrity of teams is often referred to as
“the guys we have in the room…” which further locates the identity of the team to a specific space: the locker room (a private space), not the ice (a space shared by another team as well as spectators).

Even getting to the locker rooms themselves is a baptism into the locker room culture. Most often they are adjacent to the rinks or must be connected to the rink through carpeted corridors (skates cannot touch metal, tile, or wood flooring), therefore, one must travel through several sets of doors and/or tight, unamusing hallways to get to the room in a process symbolizing an entrance into a space where common societal values and rules do not apply. The rooms are separated from the lobbies and rink bars in which the parents congregate before and after their children hit the ice, so players are free from parental supervision. The space is therefore governed by the social rules of the team enforced by the players themselves and the coach’s rules as their hockey father. Locker rooms are situated to be spaces of secrecy and exploration, team bonding and sharing, (in)formal learning and teaching (but not always in a constructive manner).

Unless obvious issues exist between players in a locker room, a coach will most often put on their gear while sitting outside the room and enter periodically to talk to groups of players or to address the entire team. When the door is closed, the coach is free to do or say anything he wants to his team. He displays his power because he is the only person, player, or figure allowed to enter and leave the space in his own way. No player or parent can do this. Coaches can go over practice plans, talk about upcoming team events, or make pregame speeches addressing the important points of the upcoming game. Or, as I have seen plenty of times from my
own experiences, coaches can turn violent by throwing trashcans, breaking players’ sticks by snapping them over their knees like a small tree branch, screaming insults and curse words into children’s faces, or kicking the players’ equipment bags into cluttered messes for them to pick up later. Behind closed doors, players have no distractions, so focus is unavoidable. They also have no opposing role models to be actively critical of the violence that they see. Therefore, constructed locker room space allows for misogyny and homophobia to seep from coaches’ words and actions into the air of the locker room. The lack of diverse representations of masculinity colors players’ experiences of hockey as a game, and manhood as an identity, in which the mixing of “othering” sentiments and violence are integral to its forms.

**Techniques for Making Men in the Locker Room**

Hockey culture is strongly shaped by motivational coaching strategies often coded into linguistic and physical violence in the locker room. The cultural conception of the locker room and politics of power it provides are imperative to transforming an ordinary space into a sacred, privatized arena of anti-femininity. To begin, the feminization of the opponent is key for coaches to help their players to dehumanize the teams they face; this allows space for violent acts to occur in the game without having the players feel of guilt or shame. “Because of punishment for ‘feminine’ behaviors,” Kilmartin (2015) writes that at a fundamental level, “boys may begin to view femininity and females with contempt” (p. 71). In this case, being labeled as a “fag, pussy, homo, poof, wimp, wuss, bunny, fruitcake, girl, cocksucker, etc.” are the linguistic mechanisms through which the othering of the opponent is communicated in the locker room. This contempt, now dangerously compacted into
strong, portable linguistic form, is then carried onto the ice and physically acted out through hockey’s aggressive and violent nature. In the scenarios involving the feminization of the opponent, the coach is demonstrating to his players a set of behavioral guidelines to follow on the ice and consequently threatening punishment that will ensue if those measures are not followed. This phenomenon does not happen in a vacuum. Boys pick up these tactics and adapt to the expectations set for them to make sure they do not act outside of the masculine script they are coached to follow; namely, showing weakness. For example, I remember vividly the look of pure disgust in my Squirt AAA coach’s face when we lost to a team that had recently lost to a girls’ team in a non-league matchup. He charged at a trashcan in the locker room post game, whirling it the air, threatening us with violence and insults. No one around him, he surely thought to himself, could please his conception of what it means to be a man: “those pussies couldn’t even beat a bunch of girls!” He yelled at us again the following practice while we were standing on the goal line completely out of breath because he was making us skate mountains (blue line back, red line back, far blue line back, goal line back) to punish our unwillingness to follow his rigid, dominant masculine values. However, we had no chance to voice our opinions: ‘it was a fluke game, we were tired, or maybe, just maybe, that girls’ team was pretty darn good!’ The only thing we really learned was that we needed to perform like coach wanted us to perform or we were going to be punished for anything less.

Along these lines unfortunately, coaches feminize their own players using the same rhetoric used to feminize their opponents thus connecting femininity with weakness within the team space as well. A well-known, yet completely disregarded
example of this mechanism comes from the beloved hockey movie *Miracle*, telling the story of the unlikely victory of the USA Men’s Ice Hockey team’s 1980 gold medal Olympic win. In a scene where hardcore coach, Herb Brooks, enters the locker room during the second intermission of an important game against Sweden, he wastes no time telling his players how he sees the game going. It is a silent, pensive room as he enters. Immediately players tense up at his presence. He screams at a player, “Who are we playing, Rammer?” The player answers and before his words are heard, Herb throws a table to the ground in the middle of the locker room. Faces wince at his aggression and he makes eye contact with Rob McClanahan, his next victim, who has most of his gear off so he can treat his badly bruised leg, an injury from the period before. Coach demands that McClanahan put his gear back on to play, but the player looks back at him and says he cannot do it, he is too badly hurt. Brooks then condemns and embarrasses McClanahan in front of the entire team by saying he has no time for quitters: “A bruise on the leg is a helluva long way from the heart, you candy-ass.” This rouses McClanahan into a frenzy as he gets up on his healthy leg and screams, “you want me to play, Herb?” at a retreating Brooks leaving the locker room. Brooks then turns around and shouts back at him with a fully extended finger, “I want you to be a hockey player!” Brooks then completes his exit, but not before slyly and ironically saying to his assistant coach as he passes by, “think that’ll get em goin’?” as if he had staged the whole scene from the beginning. The assistant coach shows his approval of Brook’s behavior by smiling and nodding, laughing to himself as he enters the riled up locker room to see McClanahan redressing with anger and passion (O’Connor, 2004).
This scene is packed with bold linguistic and physical violence coding feminization as an approved motivational tactic for coaches to get the best out of their players. *Miracle* was scripted and rated PG in order to tell an important story to the widest range of hockey loving audiences possible. Therefore, the term Brooks uses, “candy-ass,” to insult and feminize his player was also scripted in the PG setting. In a real hockey locker room, far away from critics and toddlers, the term “candy-ass” would be “pussy.” Hollywood had to help Brooks try to make his anti-feminine statement clear without using overtly offensive words. For Brooks, admitting weakness and vulnerability is feminine, which, to him, is wrong. He then reinforces his own concept of dominant masculine values by saying that he wants McClanahan to be the opposite of a “pussy,” which in his words, “I want you to be a hockey player!” mean that being a hockey player is at direct odds with exhibiting any feminine characteristics. On the largest stage in the world, with far more viewers than any other hockey event that has ever taken place, this movie dramatically emphasizes to its audience that being a hockey player, performing that identity, is being anti-feminine. Furthermore, the term “candy-ass” was overtly popularized in American hockey culture’s growing internet presence as well as the saying, “A bruise on the leg a helluva long way from the heart” (O’Connor, 2004). In the following scene, McClanahan’s presence in the game changes the team’s energy and helps them come back from behind to beat Sweden. The camera catches Brooks proudly smiling to himself in full approval of his violent and misogynistic motivational speech in the locker room. While many coaches already knew that publicly shaming players using feminization and throwing objects in the locker room are effective tactics, many more
coaches undoubtedly picked them up to use on their players in the years follow the movie’s debut.

When coaches connect social and hockey specific punishment to feminized and homosexual activity they can affect players far beyond the hockey rink. This is where coaches’ roles in gender identity formation are crucial to recreating the dominant masculine men in the next generation. Players will associate being a man with acting and speaking in ways that announce to all others around them that they refuse to have anything to do with feminine behavior. The origins of this complex come from the notion that players must satisfy their coaches’ idealized values of masculinity, ones that will actually never be achieved. Often coaches get into coaching not for the love of the game like they claim to, but rather for the position that allows them to affirm their own masculinity through asserting male dominance in a societally accepted realm. Players will never live up to coach’s expectations because coaches will always change them to maintain their dominance. This tactic is also affective because players will internalize the coaches’ behavior and conceptualize male-dominance as a larger cultural norm. M. S. Messner, Donald (1996) write that this form of acceptance perpetuates “image[s] of the angry and violence-prone prototypical man” as a citizen, not just a hockey player safe in his locker room and rink (p. 71). The cycle begins once again and boys from the following generation will be brought into manhood with the same principles as their unrevolutionary coaches.

An even closer look at hockey specific rhetoric reveals it as an incredible vehicle through which anti-feminine values are transmitted. Coaches will say, “Go
get a hit on the first shift, to let this team know we aren’t pussies;” they will tell their forwards that on the fore-check “only ladies’ teams wait for their D (defensemen) to make a first touch on the puck, we have to hunt like men;” they will talk about having “bigger balls” than the other team, relating size of genitalia to a courageous and fearless style of play whilst implying the other team does not have testicles. It is clear that anti-femininity is a common sentiment, yet coaches seem to take it even further with eroticizing their insults coded as motivational words. Common words used to motivate players are: “fucking, spanking, smacking, fisting, and raping” opponents. We have already seen plenty of the eroticized insult words such as “pussy, cocksucker, and homo.” The uniquely secluded and sacred space of the locker room offers a stage for which motivation can be expressed in deeply violent and erotic words without the repercussions of a public exhibition of these taboo terms. It is clear that dominance in hockey is intertwined with sexual dominance which perpetuates attitudes of sexual aggression and conquest of female bodies.

A recent incident in Littleton, Colorado involving a Bantam coach screaming what he thought to be a motivating speech to his fourteen-year-old A level players, turned into a viral exploit when his speech was filmed and later posted on the internet. Getting carried away with his locker room talk he ranted, “I want to see you stick your hands up these guys’ fucking asses and working them like a fucking puppet;” he then continued by screaming within earshot of the other team’s locker room, “Fuck Green Mountain! Fuck their coaches! Fuck their wives!” (Garrison, 2017). The coach was immediately fired; however, the video still remains online, displaying quite clearly the scared faces of the players witnessing the coach’s explosion of aggression.
The Littleton coach’s physical posture in the locker room is also a vivid representation of the physical dominance a locker room space allows a coach to command. In most cases, coaches as fully-grown adults are larger in size and strength than their players. Therefore, in order to demand respect and attention from a group that outnumbers them, they must demonstrate their prowess by threatening violence; as mentioned before, common tactics are taking out their aggression on inanimate objects such as sticks, bags, water bottles, and trashcans. This kind of “expression is a part of a reductive process,” writes Robidoux (2001) in response to watching violence and hearing the rhetoric of a professional hockey room, “that subordinates all experience that does not fit within this physically dominant, white, heterosexual male construct,” (p. 133). The questions, then, must be asked: once these lessons are learned from coaches, how do boys practice this toxic masculinity? How do they display the developing concepts of their identities as hockey players and young men? The next chapter will focus on the social aspects of locker room culture free from adult supervision, in other words, how coaches’ values are reinforced, practiced, and used as group formation strategies in peer to peer situations in hockey and beyond.

**Chapter 2- Practicing Manhood: Initiation Rituals and the Sacred Courtroom**

When I was sixteen years old I played on a team that forced me to drive forty-five minutes to and from the rink each night, which gave me a lot of time to think. Looking back, I truly wish that I had spent more time thinking about being on the ice, running plays in my mind, visually conceptualizing my skills for the day, preparing for the physical challenge ahead. However, the majority of my drives to the rink were spent anxiously running over the possibilities of what challenges lie ahead of me in
the locker room. I played with a group of guys that I grew up playing against and while our skills on the ice were the same, their attitudes towards women, sexuality, and male bonding were wholly different; they accurately reflected the same coaching we all received separately as children.

It was late winter, the sun had already set on my drive to the rink after school; I was always more anxious when nighttime came before hockey practice. My mind would not stop running and my hands felt clammy on the wheel. I had to maintain extreme focus just to remain in my lane and to remind my heavy foot that I was not going to avoid anything if I got to the locker room earlier than usual. I knew what was coming. The night before, Brandon*, the self-proclaimed alpha-male of the team, sent a picture to the team’s group chat boasting about the synthetic vaginal sex toy, referred to here as the “pocket pussy,” that he had been gifted by a player on the older team. He demanded that we all worship it after practice the next day. Responses in the chat were all sheer excitement and approval. I had never seen one in person before, but several members of the team had told me what it was when they described it in a ceremony that their previous teams had gone through in which every member of the team was mandated to have sex with the sex toy while several or all teammates watched. At the time, I had understood why the “pocket pussy” was so popular to all the boys, it represented vaginal sex on command, a commodity that most boys could not afford. However, I could not understand why everyone wanted to join in watching. Admittedly, I was curious to feel what it felt like, but I was downright terrified of all the boys watching me do it; I was not in fear of being nude, though,

* The following is a true story, but all the names have been changed
because flinging and wailing semi-erect penises was a staple in the locker room and I had occasionally participated in that behavior as well. An important factor in my terror was that the talk in the room was always focused on praising Brandon for his massive penis, and qualifying Connor, Eddie, and Brad (usually known as Chams for the excessive amount of chewing tobacco he consumed) for their tying second place penises that were still bigger than the rest of the other players’, including mine. These four were also the social ring leaders of the group, even though their hockey skills were average. Turns out you can have any size penis (or not have one at all) and be a great hockey player without the two being related; though, that revelation did not exist in our locker room.

I was usually the first to arrive in the room and the first on the ice, so on that day, I made sure that I saw as few teammates as possible before I was out on the ice. I needed some serious mental focus to get my mind away from what was going to happen in the locker room post-practice. Hockey distracted me well enough throughout the practice, but I could hear teammates talking about the order of the upcoming ritual, who would go last, and how gross the “pocket pussy” would be after they used it. Several guys publicly speculated if Brandon’s penis would even fit inside of the sex toy, playing directly into the loyalty he had earned by being the most hyper-masculine of the group and having the physical stature to prove it. When practice was over I usually stayed on late to work on skills, but on that day I decided to sprint into the room, fling my gear into my bag, and avoid the perilous showers with extreme caution even though putting on my school clothes while I still smelled of hockey was my largest pet peeve. Luckily though, my decisiveness got me out of
the room before the ritual was even starting. Little did I know at the time, however, was that I would have much preferred having public sex with a sex toy in that locker room compared to the room in which it ultimately happened.

Apparently my teammates did not have the ritual in the locker room that day because they decided they were going to save it for our bus trip that weekend. We were travelling ten hours to Detroit in one bus while the older team in our organization, we called them the 18s because they were Midget Major and we were Midget Minor, travelled right in front of us. If I was afraid of the hyper-masculinity of the boys on my team then I was terrified of the guys on the 18s. They had tattoos, foul mouths, and ruthless rumors that followed each one of them. Shane was supposedly on illegal steroids, Kyle played with a knife in his skate, and if Hunt had a bad game, he would bang his head against the wall until it was bloody. We always stayed at the same hotels as the 18s, their rooms just down the hall from ours, always in earshot, ready to pounce on an opportunity to embarrass us. Brandon was friends with a few of them and had without a doubt told them about his idea for an upcoming “pocket pussy” ritual. In fact, the 18s might have demanded one, seeing as it was their team who passed along the object of ritual to our group. I was reluctantly rooming with Connor and Tommy, two of the rougher boys on the team; we were not allowed to choose our roommates.

The room was dark in the early afternoon. We had already played in the morning on Saturday and lost. I decided to try to focus on the game ahead so I took a quick nap on my bed (the floor) and started on my homework for the weekend. We did not play again until 9:30pm and our bus was leaving at 7:15pm. Both on their
phones giggling, Connor and Tommy simultaneously sprung up and crashed into one another running towards the door. Not even one knock sounded when eight or nine boys from both my team and the 18s came in and yanked me off the floor. They shoved me on the bed laughing. My heart was beating out of my chest. Surely they were not going to hurt me in the middle of a hockey weekend, right? Brandon was the loudest, louder than his normal chest puffing self. I suspected he was trying to impress the older boys by insulting me and whirling his penis around in the air near my face with his shorts halfway pulled down. Everyone except for me was laughing, calling me a “fag” and a “poof.” About half the group had their bare asses shaking, the others were pawing at what one of the boys had behind his back: the pocket pussy. “Your turn, Jewbin, prove that you’re not so fucking gay” Brandon sneered, finally putting his penis away. Anti-Semitic jokes were my low hanging fruit. I said “no way, that thing looks used.” The room turned aggressive, they all converged on me in unison; they shoved it in my hand and said “fuck it right the fuck now! We don’t have any room for faggots on this team.” I looked up at them in horror and thought, maybe they will compromise: “What if I did it in the bathroom? You can wait for me out here.” Miraculously, they agreed. “But if that thing isn’t fresh with your fucking jizz,” one of the older boys threatened, “we’re gunna have a fucking problem. Understand? We’ll be waiting.” I was nearly lifted into the bathroom and dumped onto the floor. I slammed the door shut and jabbed at the lock so they could not barge in on me. I panicked, I did not want to put my penis inside that disgusting thing, who knew how many people had been in it? I looked around for soap or lotion to put inside it instead, but I thought it might get recognized by the smell. Were they
really going to check? I could feel them pounding on the door, screaming and laughing about how small my penis was compared to theirs, speculating that I was probably looking at gay porn in order to get an erection. I shrunk down on the floor and did the only thing I could think of at the time.

Masturbating was so incredibly difficult with the humiliation of their insults and the guilt that I felt for giving in to them. While I never touched my penis to the sex toy until the end for evidence, I still look back on that episode as one of the most stressful and traumatic moments of my life. In the end, I compared stories with my friends on the team, each one spilling a similar shame-tainted tale of violence, eroticism, homophobia, and coercion. I think we counted ourselves lucky that we did not have to do anything sexual with any of our coercers. We all concluded that that is just how hockey goes sometimes, perhaps that was the only defense mechanism we could use to rationalize the disgusting behavior of our teammates and ourselves.

**Manhood/Hockey Initiation Rituals**

This is just one of the many personal stories I have about the recreating and practicing of dominant masculinity in unsupervised all-male spaces, this not only includes hockey locker rooms, but boarding school dormitories and fraternity pledging events as well. While their severity varies greatly, my stories along with the stories told by the authors featured in this text all have similar themes: in-group/out-group making, abuse of power, coercion, violence, sexual overtones, confused homoeroticism, misogyny, and homophobia. Rather than tell these stories one after another, I will use the following chapter to analyze the unsupervised all-male spaces created in hockey culture as a way through which dominant masculine and
heteronormative values are reinforced, surveilled, and cofounded with what it means to be a hockey player. I will focus on two main phenomena which are integral to North American hockey culture: initiation rituals and kangaroo court. The nature of these events are extremely secretive, therefore, my relationship to them is not only analytical, but personal. I have not only been witness to the described events, but complicit in their unfolding as well. I will try my hardest to let my masculinity remain a factor in the stories I will tell as well as serve as lens through which I analyze the cultural material.

The initiation ritual is a cross-culturally accepted process through which common societal values are indoctrinated in the objects of the process of the ritual. In this case, the objects here are the initiates because they are acted upon by the initiators. Most often, initiation rituals stand the test of time and are passed down from generation to generation; they are the tradition that supposedly bonds all members of the group regardless of the time at which they were initiated. Male initiation rituals are commonly used to bring boys into the covenant of manhood, however, in hockey culture there are only minimal age gaps between those indoctrinating and those being indoctrinated. Therefore, the definition of manhood in this case is a manufactured representation of what it means to be a hockey player and subsequently an idealized reflection of the cultural conception of what it means to be a man. This phenomenon must be placed underneath a microscope in order to understand what cultural values are demanded from the objects of initiation, how they are being reinforced by the dominant group, and how the dominant group benefits from exerting this power.
Hockey initiation rituals must have a few necessary elements in order to occur: first, teams must have players from at least two age groups (most often this means Bantam (14/under) and older, but club high school, Midget (18/under), and junior teams (21/under), and collegiate teams are usually the culprits); next, the oldest players on the team must have been initiated when they were the younger cohort on their teams in previous years; and last, a private, secluded space must be allotted to the boys in order for the ritual to occur. Rationalization rhetoric surrounding the rituals is also a key factor. Older boys will say that team bonding is the ultimate goal of a hockey initiation ritual. Players will speak with reverence when they say that it is imperative to their team’s success that the group bonds together this way because they need to be willing to do anything for one another; this sentiment, somehow, will translate to the ice. The details of the ritual, though, are never leaked; only rumors are allowed to fly around in order to misguide the initiates and make them unaware of the stunts to which they will be subjected. I remember being told by the captains of my high school team that all I had to do as a freshman was walk out into the rink lobby after practice one day to get the seniors a stick of gum from the concession stand. However, when that day came, I did not know that my clothes were going to be taken away from me while I was working on my skills post-practice on the ice. I was forced to strip my hockey equipment and walk into the busy lobby of my home rink, completely naked, with enough pennies to buy eight sticks of gum for eight terrible seniors who tormented me. Oddly enough, the girl at the stand already had the gum out and ready for me. I deduced that she had seen this happen one too many times and was trying to help me out.
Rituals in hockey culture have two main goals. The first is to define the rules of masculinity that are upheld by the team. These beliefs are coded within the rhetoric of “tradition” and “team bonding” in order to have an excuse to teach them to the youngest players on the team. Specifically, the rules include heterosexuality, willingness and eagerness to be sexual with women and to treat women as objects, recognition of the patriarchal structure of the team, fervent homophobia, problem solving with violence, and individual mental and physical toughness. As we have seen already in my two stories, this (in)formal educational tactic is carried out with surprise attacks, violence, coercion, humiliation, and homoeroticism in order to force the group’s values onto the object of the ritual. Making space for transgressive and violent acts to occur, the initiation creates a co-dependency of confidence between initiator and initiate. Robinson (1998) writes: “initiation may well be successful in bonding a player to a team, not because the relationship gives him great pleasure, but because the forced alliance of the initiation joins victim and perpetrator as co-conspirators; they share a ‘dirty little secret’” (p. 87). This leads into the second goal of the cultural phenomenon which is to act as an opportunity to publically reaffirm the insecure dominant masculinity of the perpetrators of the initiation. Much like coaches using their power to see themselves as dominant public figures in order to make themselves feel more like men, initiators use their status as a tool to prove that they control their own peers. Robinson (1998) continues that “it is taking ritual and tradition as license to do things that you would never do to anybody else, anywhere, anytime else in your life” (p. 86). So then we must ask, why is the opportunity to take advantage of one’s teammates and peers exercised so often in hockey culture?
The cultural structure of hockey specifically lends itself to brutal initiation rituals because of hockey’s violent nature as a sport combined with the cultural conception of the locker room as a sacred, all-male space in which a team’s identity is formed and reinforced by playing with and practicing masculinity. The most common hockey ritual is a blend of dog-fighting and cage-match mixed martial arts called “locker boxing.” The initiation is simple: players gather around in the locker room in a small circle enveloping two members wearing nothing but hockey helmets, hockey gloves, and their jocks (although my first few locker boxing experiences were forced nudity) and let loose on one another, punching and tackling their opponent until one fighter is proclaimed winner by the older boys on the team. The locker room is a relatively convertible space, therefore, it allows for a makeshift ring to form quickly. Young players who have seen how fast a locker boxing ritual can form are constantly navigating the locker room with fear, though they would never admit it.

Another interesting aspect of the ritual is that it is named after the sport of boxing, even though hockey includes violent fighting that is more similar to locker boxing than boxing itself. Boxing is known as a game of chess, there are several rounds that allow a fighter to feel out his opponent and expose him at the right moment. Hockey fighting, on the other hand, is often characterized by flailing haymakers thrown at rapid pace because of the short window in which fighters have to beat one another up. It is ruthless. Young players who watch hockey cannot escape being exposed to dramatized and romanticized hockey fighting on television and social media. Every team has a local hero that is a fighter; the hype conjures him as a protector of his home turf, a selfless guardian of the skilled players on his team. Kids
are drawn to the fighting because it is the most intense way of feeling like they are a part of the action of a hockey game as well as a vivid representation of manhood right before of their eyes. They endorse these cultural messages by wearing their favorite fighter’s jersey to school and pretending to be him when they are locker boxing. This is the origin of the ritual: a modest recreation of the opportunity that hockey gives fighters to prove themselves masculine and heroic, sacrificing their bodies to defend a noble cause greater than themselves, their manhood. Just like on the ice in front of thousands of fans, the young players huddled in their hidden locker rooms get the chance to settle their issues with violence and prove their emerging masculinity to those who are willing to challenge their emerging hyper-masculine aggression. Paradoxically, though, the two items that locker boxers wear, gloves and helmet, the hockey fighters on the ice do not wear. This is so that there is no holding back; players are allowed to punch anywhere they want as hard as they can. A Canadian medical journal picked up on locker boxing in order to warn parents about its danger, however, their focus was only on immediate player safety regarding the repeated blows to the head that players receive during the ritual. They treat it just as hockey critics treat hockey fighting: its violent social and emotional tolls pale in comparison to the possibility of opening oneself up to head injuries. They write with caution: “while shoulder dislocation, cuts from skate blades, and even toe amputation are among reported injuries, the primary concern is concussion” (Moulton, 2007, p. 177). While concussion protection is very important, there are more than just physical injuries looming within the locker boxing ritual.
Being forced to locker box is terrifying. Not only are the fighters victims of their opponent’s aggression, they are also subject to the mood of the ring of boys surrounding them which can be hostile as well. Spectators will trip fighters, push them into one another, pretend to catch fighters as they are falling and pull back at the last moment, heckle the participants with amplified insults and bigotry, and make side bets on winners and losers. For the fighters, there is no real winner. Either result has one teammate punching another teammate which can be emotionally traumatic. Ultimately, the entire ritual is at odds with the team bonding aspect of the hockey initiation ritual. When did the bonding happen? How are boys supposed to know who to trust when everyone is a potential enemy?

Furthermore, while no one wants to be embarrassed and emasculated by losing, which they surely consider every time they are forced into the ring, the winners will ultimately have to advance to a further round meaning they must fight more teammates and possibly an older boy on the team. At that point these boys are not just victims of their opponents, they are victims to the trick being played on them as well. When weighing out the consequences of fighting an older boy on the team one must consider that if they win, they will face continual social and physical punishment from the older teammate for the rest of the season, with the looming possibility of a re-match hanging over them at all times. If they lose they will be jettisoned back to their low social ranking with humiliation and shame. Veterans that voluntarily step into the ring will often do so in order to truly wail on someone they deem fit for punishment. They will practice the linguistic techniques of dehumanization taught to them by their coaches in order to qualify their opponent as
someone who deserves a beating. When one steps into the ring with a physically and socially favored opponent, the chances of winning are slim to none because of the crowd’s involvement in ensuring the under-dog’s loss, effectively reaffirming the dominant masculinity of the veteran. The ritual is rigged in order to suit those who need the confirmation of their own masculinity the most. It also succeeds in teaching younger boys that the only way for them to ultimately get the public recognition of their masculinity and dominance that they have been denied thus far is to submit the next group to the same ritual in order to dominate them physically. This ultimately sets up an arena in which problem solving residual emotional issues with violence is separated from its purpose and transformed into entertainment.

Other team initiation rituals follow overtly sexual scripts. My prep school hockey team had all the rookies line up naked at one end of the locker room while all the veteran players summoned one rookie at a time over to a specific spot in the room. The rookie would turn around so his butt was facing the veterans who were holding back a thick, strong bungee cord pulled to its maximum stretched position. They would make the rookie bend over as if he was being sexually penetrated, exposing his entire bare butt to the wrath of the cord which the veterans would let go in order to whip him extremely hard. It was incredibly painful and if rookies showed any sign of weakness, they would pull the cord back and do it again. The more times a rookie winced in pain, giving the veterans the reactions they wanted, they would make the rookie “beg for more” in a feminized, sexy tone of voice ultimately enacting the subordinate role of a violent sexual fantasy played out together as a group. Their insistence on making the voice sexy was the most outstanding aspect of the ritual; it
was the homoeroticized gesture that ultimately made them fire the cord, effectively simulating a group orgasm. This is the first example in which male bonding in an extremely homophobic environment is catalyzed by deeply homosexual activities without the acknowledgement of their homosexuality. Many of the following examples will be underpinned by this confusing aspect of homoerotic male bonding in an overtly homophobic culture.

Robinson's (1998) reports on Canadian junior hockey team initiation rituals are harrowing. The physical and emotional abuse that is compounded with intense sexual violence is deeply disturbing and worth much analysis. Her book *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada’s National Sport* reports these incidences that were carefully swept under the rug by townships and hockey organizations across Canada; it also forces the readers to unpack the cultural messages of dominant masculinity transmitted through initiation rituals like this one:

It started the second Scott walked in the front door. The large house...belonged to Dennis Lebert, one of the owners of the Tilbury Hawks and a well-respected ear doctor in town. Someone gave Scott a beer...That didn’t seem to suffice. Someone put a funnel in his mouth, and poured beer down...In no time, Scott was feeling woozy...There was a porn video on the TV. The players were constantly urged to drink and pressured to masturbate while the porn movie played. Then they were called in the garage, two at a time. When Scott passed through the door, even at his drunkest state he was shocked...There was a strange setup of a pail attached to a string... ‘There was evil in that room,’ Scott said, upon reflection. ‘You could just feel it.’ Scott and another boy were ordered to strip...They tied the string to his penis...Out came the pucks. They started to throw them into the pail. As the weight increased, it pulled heavily on the string. It hurt, but Scott endured until the string pulled off...The team captain...put on a surgical glove...two marshmallows [were]...insert[ed] one in Scott’s rectum, one in his teammate’s. The rules of the contest were announced. Whoever squeezed the marshmallow out first without using his hands, won. The other guy had to eat both marshmallows. This was followed by another contest. A plastic Molson cup was filled to the brim with beer. The boys were told they were going to have to do push-ups. The cups were positioned on the floor so their genitals
would dip into them after each push-up. Whoever did the fewest push-ups had to drink both beers...They were blind folded and told to lie face-up on the floor with their tongues out...[one of them] pulled his pants down and sat on their faces. (pp. 66-67)

While this story is one of the more intense anecdotes featured in this essay, its homosexuality is not what defines its severity. Rather, the manipulation and the apparent desire to cause physical and emotional damage to the initiates is what makes it so appalling. The point is that the homosexual activity of the hockey initiation ritual is purely a standard of its undertaking. Homoeroticism is a valued form of expression and communication within hockey culture, it is passed along from generation to generation through hyperbolic displays of dominant, aggressive, masculine sexual behavior enacted on the initiates in order to indoctrinate them as physically, emotionally, and sexually submissive to the larger cultural conception of manhood.

Think about it, what is the inner-conflict that Brandon is dealing with while he is flinging his penis in my face and calling me a “fag” at the same time? What is happening in the mind of the laughing team captain as he is violating a teammate’s consent by sodomizing him with a surgical glove in order to pit the boy against another boy to make them eat feces? Clearly these boys, just like most boys in the world, crave emotional attention, physical and sexual touching, and sometimes enjoy getting it from the boys they are most comfortable with, their hockey team. However, these completely normal feelings are at odds with the strong cultural values of anti-femininity and homophobia that are preached to boys at a young age. The dissonance is picked up by the boys in power and inflated through public and intensely violent manifestations of their confusion. This is why so many aspects of the hockey initiation ritual have to do with the rectum and the penis.
I am reminded of one of the most popular hockey movies to ever come out called *Youngblood*. Dean Youngblood, a cocky farm boy from a small town in Canada is recruited at a young age to play for a Canadian Major Junior hockey team which will set him on track to play in the NHL, if he does not lose himself in the world of junior hockey. Early in the movie there is a crucial scene in which he is writing his name and number on his stall above his equipment, signifying his arrival to the team, when a group of the team’s veterans dressed in full hockey gear corner him. No one is around so Dean tries to escape, but he is caught and stripped. The older boys hold him down on the table and gag his mouth with tape while one of them gets a straight razor and shaving cream. The scene insinuates that the veterans are shaving Dean’s pubic hair, although no shaving is actually displayed. What is displayed though, is a group of men grinning, laughing, and pinning down a squirming naked boy while someone yells, “Derek, make sure to press hard!” The shaver, the team captain, is standing between Dean’s legs, saying nothing but “ooo” and “ahh” while he is doing his business (Markle, 1986). This is a rape scene even though it is played off to be a funny moment of male bonding. For the hockey players watching at home, it is hard to read between the lines of the scene because they cannot fathom hockey players raping other hockey players, especially in the locker room. However, the abuse of power in the scene is extremely important because it seems to elude the understanding of players and critics alike. Unfortunately, many junior hockey teams have taken up this exact ritual since the debut of *Youngblood* over three decades ago.
Much like the other initiation stories, the boys in charge are actively trying to prove to themselves that they are not homosexual (even in the slightest) by forcing younger boys into positions of submissive sexual activity and openly mocking them for it. This is why the movie’s scene is told with a sense of humor; the humor distracts the audience from being disturbed by the homoeroticized violence. However, initiations only narrow the options for the recently indoctrinated generation to eventually problem solve the same personal dissonance about their own insecure masculinities and heterosexualities that have been forced on them. Therefore, the only way they can turn is towards repeating the eroticized violence and continuing the cycle of sexual repression and gender identity confusion that is so integral to the experience of the hockey player.

**Kangaroo Court**

A few times in this essay I have briefly mentioned a term that undoubtedly has confused any reader who has not grown up within male hockey culture: kangaroo court. In the following analysis of this phenomenon specific to North American male hockey teams, my goal is to continue unpacking the ways in which dominant masculine values are taken up, practiced, and internalized within the secret spaces of the locker room. I will also begin to explain how deviance from these specific cultural values is policed, surveilled, and subsequently, punished in a culturally accepted judicial system called the kangaroo court. Before I begin, I want to personally acknowledge that this is the first time in my life that I have revealed the secrets of the kangaroo court in full detail to anyone outside of the hockey community, it makes me feel anxious just writing about it, let alone the possible social consequences I would
face if someone I know was to find out. Therefore, I too have internalized the secrecy of the kangaroo court and its powers to keep me thinking I am always being watched by my judgmental peers.

Although the ceremony varies from team to team and age group to age group, there are several consistent characteristics of every kangaroo court on any hockey team. Kangaroo court is an extremely serious and respected secret weekly gathering of the entire team in the locker room. Most often court happens at the same time, on the same day, every week in order for players to manage their schedules so that court becomes a staple event in their lives. Much like an actual judicial court system, it is an opportunity for members of the team to accuse one another of transgressing the team’s previously agreed upon rules of conduct. The accusations are called “fines” and each offense is monetized to a certain dollar amount that the accused must pay for their so called crimes. Fines are assessed according to the accuser and the team’s “judge” who has the final say in any accusation. Any accused teammate is allowed to defend himself through a re-telling of the story involved in the fine, this is called a “rebuttal”; however, if a rebuttal is overturned by the judge, the accused player’s fine doubles. Therefore, respect and immunity are allotted to each accuser, while the accused face multiplied punishment if they are unable to defend themselves convincingly. The system is designed to raise as much money as possible in the team fund to buy alcohol, drugs, or prostitutes for the end-of-season celebration. Moreover, players are encouraged to fine one another in order to grow the team fund as large as possible thereby defeating the purpose of a respectful system in which rebuttals carry just as much weight as accusations.
The courtroom is set after practice when all players are sitting quietly in their seats. No phones are allowed, no one may enter or leave the room, and removing equipment or standing up is prohibited unless the judge grants special permission. The judge is usually chosen by the oldest members of the team, sometimes he is chosen by the previous team’s judge. He is an unofficial team leader and his job is to oversee all fines while trying to stay as fair as possible in his judgements. This almost never works in practice. The judge must also define the rules of court: finable offenses, prohibited fines (usually on-ice fines are not allowed), courtroom conduct, and the monetary scheme which players use to decide how much money an offense deserves. There are several common rules of court. If someone does not hand out a fine for two weeks in a row, they will be fined for being a “nice guy,” thus incentivizing continual accusations on teammates and de-incentivizing respect, courtesy, and belief in the court system. If someone does not pay their fines from the previous week, the entire amount they owe to the team doubles. The people who do not pay their fines on time are outed at the beginning of every court session; it is a moment of the court process that embarrasses those who are irresponsible, thus ensuring loyalty to the court. If someone is caught breaking one of the court’s maximum rules, they must pay a maximum or “max” fine which is usually set at $5; a significant majority of fines are only $1. Each team has their maximum rules and they are usually specific to the team’s culture. Here is a list of the maximum fines I have witnessed: “cuckholding” another teammate/sleeping with a girl he likes or is dating, lying in the courtroom, engaging in a committed relationship with a woman, sitting with women at the lunch table, public displays of affection (PDAs) with a woman,
hanging out with friends outside the hockey team during a team sponsored function, being a virgin, and, most importantly, telling anyone else about kangaroo court. Due to the fact that any player can fine any of his teammates, the maximum rules are internalized in the boys’ social behavior and taken very seriously in their conduct. Therefore, kangaroo court defines a set of social and sexual expectations for hockey players to follow in their daily lives. It controls their heterosexuality and limits them from thinking and acting independently of their identity as a hockey player. Boys must weigh the consequences of engaging in a relationship with a woman because teammates are concerned that women will take away their teammates, their sources of physical and emotional intimacy. Therefore, the rules of court are created to limit teammate’s interactions with anyone outside the team in order to prevent jealousy and reinforce the team’s cultural guidelines. Furthermore, the delinquency is punished both publically and financially which is a massive social deterrent to defying the courtroom’s rules in player’s daily lives.

It is important to also examine the expressions, actions, and events that happen daily in the locker room that do not receive the status of finable offenses in court. Interestingly enough, homoerotic expression such as prolonged nudity, penis length comparison, detailed depictions of private sexual encounters using teammates as actors for dramatic effect, body rubbing, dry humping, butt touching, penis swinging for voyeuristic pleasure, and all initiation ritual behaviors are never brought up in court unless they are enacted outside of the locker room or other safe all-male social spaces. A player is much more likely to be fined if he is seen talking to a girl at a party that another player had previously been with rather than if that same player
was caught staring at another player’s penis in the shower. He is much more likely to be fined for wearing a pink shirt to school than if he were seen rubbing another player’s thighs for him in the locker room. However, as we already know, the homophobic rhetoric always lives within the locker room thereby enforcing apparent anti-homosexual social norms even though the sacred court encourages obvious homoerotic locker room antics. This contradiction is not directly addressed in the locker room, therefore, in order to compensate for confused gender identity behavior, the emphasis of the court’s rules are geared towards perpetuating dominate, heteronormative masculine values, especially punishing women for their interactions with men. Misogynistic talk flies around the courtroom without any precautions. Women are referred to as “chicks, cunts, bitches, dogs, muff, lesbos, and hoes.” The candid expectation of court reveals women’s personal and private sexual characteristics as well as exaggerated versions of their sexual encounters with teammates. For example, a common event held within the court is called “story time” which gives an attentive audience to anyone with a hyperbolically erotic or violent story. Players will brag about having sex with more than one women in a weekend, “double teaming” a women with a member of their hockey team, anally penetrating a women without her consent, getting into a wild fight at a party, or running from the police. While the judge, a chosen, honorable position, should be standing up for the women being slandered and hypersexualized in the courtroom, he often lets it happen, and even more, incentivizes it by handing out “credits” or the right to not have to pay a $1 fine to those who make him laugh or amuse him with their sexist language and takes during “story time.”
So what lessons do young players learn from the courtroom? First, boys realize very quickly that their behavior is constantly being watched. More importantly, the expression of their own personal identities is being policed by their peers in an overtly dramatic way that leads to an extremely narrow conceptualization of masculine behavior and hockey player identity. Boys learn to lie to their friends as well as their significant others in order to protect the court. The courtroom also teaches about male dominance over women, especially through the technique of seeing women as sexual objects that men can use and conquer at their will. Many boys go through their first sexual experiences thinking about the courtroom rather than communicating with their partner, asking for consent, and treating women with respect. The following chapter will discuss the social and political ramifications of the intense indoctrination of dominant masculine values from initiation rituals and kangaroo court. Unfortunately, as hockey players become young adults, they are prone to sexual assault, domestic violence, assault and battery, alcoholism, drug and gambling addiction. Far more times than not, these felonies and addictions are related to their involvement on a junior, college, or profession hockey team as well as the (in)formal education of sexually aggressive, homophobic, and misogynistic behaviors from their youth hockey careers. If only the courtroom was used as a platform to reward players for noteworthy play on the ice or outstanding involvement in the community rather than punishing them for behavior superfluous to the team’s success, the following chapter would not have to be written.
Chapter 3- Impacts of Idealized Masculinity

Throughout the process of unpacking the cultural and linguistic coding that shaped the identities of my teammates and me, and thinking critically about what really influences masculinity, I realized that hockey is just a show. Hockey insists that its viewer follow only what they can see and hear right in front of them; that it be analyzed only by that which is shown in the arenas, rinks, radio, film, TV, and other channels in which hockey is performed. Therefore, hockey fans and hockey researchers alike, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, really only follow what the performance they can see and hear. They see the admirable agility, skill, and dedication in the speed of the game combined with the incredible aggression, fighting, and willingness to ignore pain that amps-up the excitement on the ice. In the media they hear about individual efforts, respect, and team camaraderie and very little about the sexist and homophobic insults that lie just off camera. So much is happening right in front of them that when they turn on their televisions or open their newspapers and see that a junior, college, or professional hockey player has been accused of sexual, domestic, or physical violence off the ice, they can only guess about the causes of the events based on what they have witnessed: the on-ice performance. However, there is something going on behind the scenes the whole time, something that incorporates the same sights and sounds as the game, but in unknown, unseen, unheard, and therefore, unfathomable ways. The ways in which these elements interact in the locker room are more difficult to guess, but they are fundamental in changing how hockey players perform in their everyday lives as men. While I am not advocating in the slightest that hockey players or the institution of
elite hockey are purposefully tricking people, I believe that too much focus is put on analyzing the on-ice behavior of hockey players in order to accurately explain the reasons why they hurt people off the ice. For these men, there is far more going on behind the game, but for the public, there is a near blackout of access to the transmission of cultural materials in locker rooms and coaches’ offices.

Before I proceed, I also want to point out that many of men in the world, some hockey players included, are not violent; this area is still worth much study, though, because of the violent people in the world, the vast majority of them are men. This chapter addresses how hockey players express the masculinity drilled into them on and off the ice through their violent off-ice behavior. This explanation departs significantly from the heretofore accepted evidence that has been traditionally used to explain this violence.

**Physical Violence: The Bar Fight**

There is a pattern of elite hockey players acting violently in public, abusing their status as professional athletes, and using barrooms and back alleyways as spaces in which they can prove their masculinity by praying on the weakness of others. Patrick Kane, a young and incredibly skilled Chicago Blackhawk was arrested at 20 years old in 2009 after an altercation with a cab driver on a side street in Buffalo. The *Chicago Sun-Times* writes that “the 62-year-old cab driver said he was punched in the face, grabbed by the throat and had his glasses broken in the dispute… Kane took back [the] $15 when the cab driver said he was 20 cents short of the correct change on a $14.80 fare” (Lazerus, 2015). One of Kane’s very few comments about the incident showed no remorse: “Obviously I’m in a little different situation than most
kids at this age but at the same time I think it’s definitely been a learning lesson and something I want to move forward on” (Lazerus, 2015). Kane has never been in an NHL fight. Brett Sutter, former Calgary Flames forward, was also arrested for punching a cab driver in 2010. *Sport Illustrated* reports that he assaulted the cab driver after being kicked out of a bar in Scottsdale, Arizona for inciting a brawl (2013). He has 4 career NHL fights in ten NHL seasons. Joe Corvo, former Boston Bruin, was arrested in 2002 during a stint in the minor leagues when he was kicked out of bar for grabbing a woman’s ass; he then returned to the bar to punch the woman and kick her after she was on the ground. He then fled the scene (Benjamin, 2011). He has since made reparations for his violence, but his NHL career was not affected. He enjoyed more than nine consecutive years playing in the league following the arrest. Corvo has only fought twice in his NHL career. These are just a few of the aggressive behaviors perpetrated by hockey players off the ice, yet two of the most famous cases involve players that have rarely or never fought on the ice. Admittedly, that statistic does not fully explain the phenomenon, however, it does suggest that there might be alternative explanations for how violent behavior is indoctrinated and rehearsed by hockey players.

I want to direct the researchers’ attention away from the assumption that violence within the game of hockey is the largest contributor to violence off the ice. A fascinating report called *Athlete Aggression on the Rink and off the Ice* states that cultural values of dominant masculinity are related to hockey players’ tendencies towards physical and sexual abuse away from the rink (N. T. Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004). This study is on the right path by analyzing the cultural values of
hockey, though, when providing explanations for dominant masculine behavior in the real world, still assigns too much responsibility to the violent nature of hockey as it is played on the ice. Yes, off-ice fights, usually bar fights, mimic hockey fights to the extent that they are fist on fist punching fights often catalyzed by aggressive linguistic jabbing between men; but did those men learn how to fight off the ice by practicing on the ice? No, the mechanics of a hockey fight are much different; players have to balance on razor thin blades of metal while fending off an equally massive attacker. Silverwood states that it is the environment of the game that causes this violence just as much as it is the player’s tendencies to be violent. She says in the movie *Ice Guardians* that “when you’ve got guys who are skating at 30 miles an hour, and they’ve got a massive stick in their hand which could be a weapon, you’re going to get some kind of tension that comes from the game” (Harvey, 2016). This environment is fundamentally different than a bar fight. Simply put, there is so much more to a hockey fight. Hockey fights are often staged, premeditated, and carefully researched bouts of already anticipated anger. While hockey does provide a space for spontaneous fighting, fights are always between men of similar stature and physical prowess. Fights occur, ironically, in order to protect other players from cheap-shots and to police the unwritten hockey “code of conduct” that players must follow to be respectful to one another, especially the more skilled players (Harvey, 2016). This is the origin of the term “enforcer.” An enforcer is a pseudo-hockey position created for players willing to fight more often in order to hold the opponent accountable to the unwritten “code of conduct” thus institutionalizing the phenomenon of hockey fighting. Derek Boogaard, one of the most famous enforcers in hockey history,
admitted to watching thousands of hours of video online of the enforcers he would face in his upcoming games, learning their styles, knowing the right times to initiate a fight with them, and devising ways to beat them or intimidate them. Do not be fooled, though, his nickname was the “Boogeyman.” At 6’8” his style was to use his long left arm to protect himself from the reach of the other fighter, gripping his collar and yanking him around while his right fist smashed relentlessly into the top of his opponent’s head. Derek was once arrested after a parking lot fight in which he broke a man’s nose who asked Derek to punch him; the interesting detail was that during the brawl that ensued shortly after, Derek gave him an uncharacteristic upper cut, a move that he had not used in his hockey career of over 160 NHL fights (Branch, 2014).

N. T. Pappas et al. (2004) make a great point that “aggression and assault are encouraged by bar’s [owners and staff] privileging of male athletes, allowing them to drink for free, taking their sides during fights, and giving them an arena to operate” (p. 296). But bar owners are not hockey coaches, they do no ask hockey players to fight in their establishments. Rather, bars are spaces that imitate the ritualistic locker boxing arena; tight circles, much like in locker rooms, form around bar fights, but in hockey fights, referees are charged with ensuring the two fighters have a proper space to use in their display of aggression. So, when Curry (1998) writes that bars allow male athletes to take advantage of situations where they could prey on the physical inequalities of others, does that sound familiar? Even though professional hockey provides a stage on which problem solving through aggression and violence is not only encouraged, but expected, the tendency to take advantage of the physical
inequalities of others in a public space through violent means in order to affirm one’s
dominant masculinity is learned from the private spaces of youth hockey culture. It is
not a coincidence that these spaces solidify the impulse of problem solving with
aggression as well as rehearse make-shift versions of barroom style brawling for
young players to eventually realize their potentials for employing physical abuse as
adults.

It is well researched that hockey fighting and general aggression in the game
is overly romanticized in NHL media and gratuitous movies such as *Slap Shot*, *Goon*,
and former NHL coach Don Cherry’s show, *Coach’s Corner*; these sources obviously
infiltrate the youth hockey player’s perceptions about hockey identity and where
aggression, violence, and manhood fit in their own behavior. The cultural messages
of this propaganda, namely slow-motion videos of brutal hockey fights as well as
misogynistic and homophobic commentary about the losers of those fights, are taken
up by young learners and attempted on the ice. However, these attempts occur right
along with learning the rules of youth hockey, which aggressively polices and
punishes this exact behavior. Referees and coaches alike will not allow on-ice
fighting or using the body or stick as a weapon. It is clearly in the rules as well as the
formal education of young players. So, the young boys who admire their favorite
fighters and want to emulate their behavior, ironically, find quite a bit of resistance to
it on the ice. Therefore, I want to suggest that the (in)formal education of dominant
masculine values adjacent to the rink, meaning in the locker room at a formative age
for hockey players, is a more relevant accomplice to physical assault and sexual
violence perpetrated by hockey players as adults than the culture surrounding how the
game is presently played on the ice by the young players.

**Sexual Violence**

“It’s so hard to control sixteen to twenty-one-year-olds. It’s a part of their hockey ego” says a young woman who billeted (hosted) Canadian junior hockey players in her house for many seasons; she continues, “ninety per cent of the team may be okay, but there’s three on every team who have no morals. You know they get most of the attention, and they set the standard” (Robinson, 1998, p. 26). Throughout 1990-1992, former Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds superstar, Jarret Reid, had been one of those standard setting influences. Charged with five sexual assaults, two break-and-enters, nine bodily assaults, one uttering death threat, two mischief charges, and two breaches of a bail order, his status as the team’s best player and a future NHLer protected him from being reported for the public incidents in which he attacked his former girlfriends outside of bars, in the high school parking lot, and at team sponsored parties. Many assaults investigated Robinson's (1998) book “occurred in front of teammates or while they were in the next room. At times they had to hold Reid back from attacking Anderson, or create interferences so he couldn’t drag her outside and beat her up. No one reported him to police or to the sexual assault centre” (p. 31). Why was he so protected and prioritized over the women he clearly beat and raped? He scored points. Parallel to the primary stages of his investigation, Reid led his junior team to two consecutive national championships, scoring more than 35 points in each of their playoff runs. Team bonding and on-ice success are key to this case. Reid was never outed by his teammates or community members because he was
not a violent player nor a fighter on the ice. Rather he was a skilled player that helped the team win. The private spaces of the locker room, which provide practice for violent sexual deviance, were also a zone of plotting and protection, deputizing conspirators to redirect attention from Reid’s constant display of dangerous, dominant masculine behavior, approving it, in order to facilitate team camaraderie and on-ice success.

Junior, collegiate, and professional hockey, as it is played today, stands as a representation of the approval of the dominant masculine values taught to the players at a young age. Players perform this hegemony on a stage capable of perpetuating it through aggression, violence, and winning at all costs. And while these values are transmitted to the next generation of players through movies and NHL media, the young players are still too far from the violent style of play on the ice to be picking them up and transferring them to physically and sexually abusing their peers away from the rink. The connection is not strong enough. The real source of the violent behaviors outside the rink is the locker room culture adjacent to the rink that is inherited from initiation rituals and dominant coaching strategies; they teach slowly, hands-on, from a young age, that being dominant is key to being manly; that seeing women as inferior and as objects of the entitled, male sexual desire is an incredible tool to reinforce dominant masculinity; and that problem solving is done with fists and not emotions or thoughts. Sexual violence as an act is practiced in the initiation rituals and kangaroo court, not on the ice. Players are not taught how to abuse their sexual partners while they are working on edging drills or back-checking schemes. They might hear reinforcing misogynistic and homophobic language as they skate
past their coaches or line up at the face-offs with their opponents, but that language is
only partially the issue of rape culture. N. Pappas (2012) asks, “if teammates have
little regard for the way they treat each other, how will this influence the way they
treat casual female sexual partners with whom they are not bonded?” (p. 38). The
private spaces of the sacred all-male spaces are where they learn how to truly act out
abuse in “a highly eroticized…atmosphere,” as Robinson (1998) calls it, “that tries to
re-create the outside world and uses the new entrants, the rookies or knobs, as the
designated females…socially construct[ing] both feminine and masculine
roles…simply acting in ways they believe real men should act” (p. 94). This is where
they learn how good it feels to be dominant in an eroticized environment, where they
learn just how to physically convince themselves that they are not homosexual by any
stretch of their imagination. Robinson (1998) then asks poignantly:

When treated like this, how do young Canadian male hockey players learn the
prerequisites of appropriate sexual behavior, the values of intimacy, the ability
to empathize or listen to other people’s needs, sometimes putting them ahead
of their own? (p. 42)

Jarret Reid exemplifies the raw answer to this question: they might have never
learned.

Hockey researchers and organizations alike have hardly gone to the private
male spaces in which the dangerous socialization and practicing of violent sexual
abuse occurs. The connection is often not considered. Kelly Chase, famous hockey
tough-guy and a personal acquaintance of mine once said in the documentary that
charges itself as an unflinching window into the real world of pro hockey violence
called Ice Guardians, that the “naysayers,” those who are trying to make changes in
hockey’s game and culture, “don’t get in the locker room other than when you’re in
your underwear and in a towel. So they don’t really know” (Harvey, 2016). Yet, a recent article states that “several studies have indicated that college athletes are overrepresented among those who are involved in aggressive and violent sexual behavior on college campuses” (N. T. Pappas et al., 2004, p. 291). Much like Kelly Chase, N. T. Pappas et al. (2004), one of the authors of the journal article about hockey players and sexual violence, writes that he has personal experience in the hockey world as both a college player and coach. He says that “the situations described are very common in male athlete culture, and they reflect only a small extent of the actual sexual behaviors that occur,” admitting that he knows from personal experience that more is happening than their line of questioning could reach (p. 307). The article follows up that the behavior is due to a “continuation of traditional male socialization that occurs in early childhood,” referring to hockey as both a dangerous game and culture in which traditional male socialization occurs (p. 307). They do not attribute it to locker room culture specifically, though, because they do not have the evidence to make those claims. However, they do note that “these attitudes and talk often carry over into actual violent behaviors,” and that hockey players “do not concede to engaging in violence against women themselves, they discuss it as if it is a somewhat routine occurrence within male hockey cultures,” (p. 307). They move on from addressing the most difficult questions, thus making the mistake, again, of not being able to remove the hockey player from the game in order to analyze him as a person and citizen socialized by dominant masculine values from several intersecting sources.
So, is it also possible that hockey players do not admit to engaging in routine violence behind closed doors in the locker room as well? Is there a pattern of disassociation from off-ice violence in general, whether it be sexual, physical, linguistic, or emotional? Silverwood (2015), a sociologist and criminologist with a particular interest in the violence of hockey that is managed, organized, and regulated outside the boundaries of the criminal justice system writes of the sociological causes and aggressive possibilities of team identity in hockey. She explains that “deviance of a subcultural group is an important element,” meaning that team’s identity is reinforced by violence that is not merely “a by-product in maintaining group cohesiveness” (p. 38). It is important to note, though, that deviance in this case can mean violence both on and off the ice, she does not prioritize one or the other. So in the hundreds of examples of gang rape committed by hockey teammates across the United States and Canada, from junior hockey towns to large universities, are groups of men raping women specifically because they play hockey? A game that perpetuates dominant masculine values by allowing individual and team identity to form by slamming their bodies into one another and fighting each other with their fists without any legal consequences influences their sexual deviance. However, there is much more going on behind the scenes feeding these intertwined personal and team identities related to masculinity and hockey success. Robinson (1998) writes:

A player who engages in group sex, who long ago shut down the voice inside him that questions if the woman has really consented, does so because he needs to meet his own standards of masculinity and fain the approval of his teammates who will judge him not as a compassionate human being, but as a hockey player. His actions have nothing to do with providing sexual pleasure and respect for a woman and everything to do with being seen as a man in his world. He does this because being a “team player” is good for his game, his bank account, and his future worth in hockey. (p. 118)
Maintaining personal masculine identity and team identity cohesiveness are priorities for hockey players both on and off the ice. They can complete these goals on the ice with body-checking, fighting, and winning games, performing dominant masculinity through the metaphor of the game; they can also realize their dominance off the ice with physical and sexual violence by disassociating their actions from the consequences in order to benefit their personal masculine image and their team’s cohesiveness in the locker room.

Many teammates of mine throughout the years have told proud stories of wild group sex in order to gain masculine respect from their teammates. Every story has similar elements: first, there are always more men than women in the story, in fact, most of them include only one woman; next, the stories always take place in secluded basements, hotel rooms, and dorm rooms where there is a heavy supply of alcohol; there is never a mention of consent, in fact, most of the stories are told from the perspective of the men being shocked that the woman was crazy enough to be there in the first place; and last, someone else always has a better, more violent story to tell afterward. Videos from hidden cameras, teammates in closets or behind half-opened doors, have been distributed amongst the team showing drunken group sex with two to sometimes five men around one very drunk woman laying on a bed or couch. The cameras see from hidden angles because they are for the team’s peeping eyes, not for the woman’s pleasure or knowledge. No consent had ever been given to let the sex acts be filmed, let alone performed. Once, there was even a viewing party for the foursome that three of my teammates had with a drunk, underage girl that had been filmed from a closet by two other witnesses. The video was downloaded onto a
computer and edited in order to fit onto a TV, therefore it had been through two rounds of vetting before it made it to the screening party without anyone recognizing the crime they were seeing. Even though the whole team was mandated to watch, participation did not feel obligatory. The boys were extremely excited as we watched our peers violate a drunk girl and we laughed every time one of them pointed at the camera or high fived another teammate. This form of group deviance, according to Dr. Silverwood, is integral in maintaining group identity. Somehow, it is always understood without being spoken explicitly that these kinds of team bonding moments will actually pay off for the team’s success on the ice. Certainly the individuals involved felt a boost in their masculine identity during the sexual encounter and even more so when they re-watched the tape with their teammates in the same setting that hockey film is studied.

Robinson (1998) retells a horrifying story of a pair of Canadian junior hockey players who brutally raped an underage woman in a basement wood workshop. The names in the story have been changed in order to protect their identities, but the story still deserves to be told. One of the boys, called Johnson in this story, waited until his acquaintance Saunders, the victim, was asleep on the couch of his friend’s house. He had brought Saunders and her girlfriend there to hangout after a large party, Saunders had nodded off on the coach around two in the morning. She awoke to Johnson kissing her, she resisted, but he ignored her and said, “you know what I’m going to do to you?” He carried her to the basement workshop. He undressed himself and her and ignored her resistance. He repeated several times that he knew she really wanted him, that everyone really wanted him, and that he wanted her to spell his name while he
“pushed her against the freezer and had vaginal intercourse with her.” Robinson notes that during the rape Johnson’s teammate, Shultz, entered the scene upset; “why didn’t you wait for me?” he said, clearly revealing that this was a routine for the two. Shultz then vaginally penetrated Saunders as well. “She says she protested again, telling him to stop, that she had a boyfriend…he did tell her, she says, not to tell his girlfriend.”

The boys forced Saunders on to her knees and sodomized her one at a time while the other forced their penis in her mouth (pp. 110-111). The woman was traumatized for a lifetime by the brutal incident. Both of the players were charged for sexual assault.

In fact, male dominated group sex fantasies are commonly shared among teammates, especially line mates that are interested in boosting their chemistry in the locker room and on the ice. In these scenarios, though, the woman involved is far less important, for the goal is not sexual pleasure for the men (or her for that matter), rather they desire to share a deviant act that will help them develop a deeper relationship within the subcultural context of the hockey team. Two of my teammates in high school boasted endlessly about talking a drunk girl into leaving a party with them and taking her out to one of the boy’s trucks. They forced her to give blowjobs to both of them at the same time, and interestingly enough, they made it very clear that they were high fiving each other the entire time. This could have been a tactic to make other players jealous of the depth of their intimacy, which in hockey terms is euphemized as “chemistry.” The story ends with them both simultaneously finishing on her face, an exaggerated detail constructed from watching porn, and then getting into the truck without providing a ride or even a towel for the young woman. The story was reenacted by my teammates in the locker room, using one of the rookies as
a stand-in for the poor woman. The team could not get enough detail, they begged the two to reveal who the girl was so that they could split off in pairs and try to make her do it to them as well; unfortunately, and also fortunately, the two boys did not know her name.

**Conclusion:**

The process of researching, reflecting, writing, and editing this thesis has been emotionally exhausting. With every word I have written I feel as though I have betrayed the sport and culture in which I have spent the majority of my childhood and adolescence, painting a grotesque picture of the dark secrets that the bright game of hockey holds close to its sweater. Sometimes that is the hard position that abuse puts people in. I have poured my heart and soul into the game of hockey, but I did not do it to pursue glory, fame, or career status. I truly loved to play; stepping on that ice every day, just knowing that I could immerse myself in such an intense, beautiful, challenging activity made coming to and going from the locker room and dealing with all of the violence seem worthwhile. But I often catch myself asking, though, “why did everything else have to be so hard?” I hardly ever connected with my teammates, on or off the ice. I have only had two maybe three positive coaching role models. While I have some stories of fun road trips and exciting overtime championship wins, most of my memories will be of misogyny, homophobia, torment, sexual abuse, violence, and antisemitism; namely, I will never be able to forget how hegemonic masculinity made my teammates and me act toward one another as well as toward our peers away from the rink. The structure of youth hockey, unfortunately, allows for this pursuit of the unattainable idealized masculine
identity to go completely unchecked and even more, (in)formally educated by its leaders to impressionable young boys who do not know any better. I have endured writing this in order to step up and point out what is really happening behind the scenes of hockey, how it creates hyper-masculine men that have the power to recreate the next generation of hyper-masculine men and deeply affect the lives of many young men and women, especially those tortured and violated along the way.

I have explored the power dynamics of private spaces that the structure of youth hockey creates in order to transmit values of dominant masculinity from the coaches to the young players. Leaning heavily on my own experiences as an elite and well-traveled collegiate hockey player, I offer an ethnographic lens capable of coloring the experience of being a witness as well as a target of the education of aggression as a form of problem solving, misogyny and homophobia as rhetorical techniques to dehumanize others, as well as anti-femininity as a form of defining masculine identity. I explore hockey language as an expression of cultural violence insofar as the misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric from coaches that is institutionalized in coaching strategies and hockey lingo. Young players take up these othering sentiments through their euphemistic uses within the game of hockey and internalize their anti-feminine significances, thus incentivizing the use of language that reflects dominant masculine values rather than vocabulary that promotes emotionality and empathy. Hockey coaches indoctrinate their players into a culture in which there is only one winner and several losers, even if, ironically, they are all playing a team sport. Therefore, there is no room in the current system to teach young boys how to recognize the emotions of their teammates and friends based on their
behaviors and feelings, much less how to notice their own. To coaches, that would be considered a waste of time in a system that only values team wins or individual movement up the hockey pyramid. This is partially a product of the intense pressure that coaches and players feel to always be improving which is propagated by the lure of elite collegiate and professional hockey levels.

If the power dynamic between the young player and the hockey father as coach is going to continue, systematic changes need to be made in the education of the coaches. As a Level 2 Certified USA Hockey Coach, I have gone through 18 hours of training directly from a deputized agent of the USA Hockey organization. Only a fractional portion of the sessions were dedicated to social issues like bullying, dealing with parents, treating all players with fairness, etc. Anything that had to do with coaches using “inappropriate language,” a vague umbrella term that did not explore institutionalized misogyny and homophobia within hockey rhetoric, was addressed in a manner that was geared towards avoiding a possible lawsuit or media incident that would reflect poorly on the hockey organization. Instead, there needs to be more time dedicated to educating coaches in the importance of recognizing and stopping the anti-feminine sentiments behind the hockey language they were taught as kids and use to teach their own today; USA Hockey would benefit from being honest about this language’s existence and facilitating discussions about how the language has power to continue indoctrinating young boys into a culture of male dominance and aggression.

On a similar note, the educational opportunities for coaches do not include anything about recognizing emotionality within themselves, nor does it cover
teaching their players how to do it with one another. If coaches can learn to step outside of the need to win at all times, they can use their power to turn discretionary moments between players into learning lessons about recognizing emotions in others and problem solving with feelings and words, rather than aggression and violence. Coaches should be taught that if they are withholding the expressions of emotions other than anger in front of their players they will be hockey fathers that deprive their impressionable boys of an emotionally approachable source of knowledge; yet, hockey is an extremely emotionally encompassing activity and culture. Hockey can be used as a practice arena for dealing with a wide range of emotions such as sadness, frustration, jubilance, hopelessness, fear, and jealousy. Unfortunately, though, it is difficult for boys to recognize and manage these emotions without role models that show them how, either by example or with hands-on teaching moments. Just like coaches preach the importance of practicing the fundamentals of skating, shooting, stick-handling, and passing, coaches need to put into perspective for the boys that the fundamentals of emotionality are important to becoming good people both in the locker room and away from the rink. The opposition to this argument is terrified that boys will not be as aggressive and physical in the game. It uses the exact misogyny and homophobia that the game of hockey could completely continue without by calling coaches who want to help their players learn how to recognize their own emotions “sissies” or “pussies.” If a player is capable of recognizing and controlling his emotions, he will be far more in touch with himself, his teammates, and the game. He will know exactly how to mentally and emotionally battle through the adversity of everything between difficult summer training regiments to high stakes moments in
championship games. He will also be a social leader on his team who knows how to praise his teammates, hold them accountable for their mistakes, and be a role model for those who are struggling with their masculinity and still want to prove it through sexual and physical aggression. This all starts with coaches as positive and emotionally available role models who recognize the power they have within the structure of youth hockey.

As I have mentioned countless times before, young players still see hyper-masculine aggression hyperbolized, praised, and romanticized from NHL media. However, there is an upswing in the last decade of the idealized NHL hockey player and therefore for the young fans, the idealized man, changing from a brutish, uncontrollable goon to an extremely skilled, cunning, hard-working playmaker. The ideal man’s body type has changed from the hulkish, fist-fighting tank-on-skates to a leaner, agile, speedy body that can blow by slow-footed defenders with ease and beat goalies with intricate dekes. These new-age idealized men are not overbearingly strong like the men of the previous generation who used their strength for violence, but there is still an emphasis on their applied strength such as their wrist strength to stick-handle and shoot with accuracy as well as their strong quads and quick-footedness for skating. The first example was Wayne Gretzky, unanimously voted as the greatest player ever. Decades ahead of his time, he remained a baby-faced, slim, cunning player throughout his entire career scoring thousands of points and winning several Stanley Cups. He was the first dominant player to not look like the contemporary idealized man, which at the time resembled the primitive representations of masculinity described above. Gretzky set the tone for the next
generation of skilled playmakers to dazzle the young fans watching at home and create a new paradigm of the ideal hockey player. Current examples of these men are Patrick Kane, Johnny Gaudreau, Connor McDavid, Auston Matthews, and Sidney Crosby; these men are all intense hockey players, but rather than focusing their time and energy on superfluous aggression and physicality, they demonstrate to the young players at home what it takes to be a real goal scorer. As players are humanized more and more often with the NHL’s bombarding social media presence, the idealized men of our day are showing kids how to do stick-handling and shooting drills in their driveways, how to do edge-work before and after practices, and how to eat right to stay healthy. They are also men who are outstanding citizens. They use their free time and money to go out into their communities to do philanthropic work as well as get on the ice with fans in their cities to do some hands-on teaching. They do not propagate fighting or aggressive behavior on the ice, rather, they problem solve on-ice issues by being the best at what they are put out there to do, scoring goals. With a growing number of new-age idealized hockey players/men and more publicity than ever before, it is hopeful that the examples they set are taken up by more and more players and coaches in the immediate future.

There are obstacles to this development, though; for example, the playoff beard. One of hockey’s fervent traditions follows a superstition that does not allow players to shave their faces from the start of the playoffs until their team’s season ends when they lose. It is considered more than just bad luck if a player decides to shave before his team loses, it breaches the code of conduct. Therefore, player’s beards become icons for their fans; the beards are long, wiry, and extremely visible
because the players wear no cages over their faces. Even more, the beards symbolize the burliness and almost primitive, caveman-esque masculinity of the players as they trek through the grueling playoff hunt. Notice the wording, extremely noble and masculine. The playoff beard poses a challenge for several of the new-age idealized hockey players because they are incapable of growing thick, fully-formed beards during the almost six-week-long playoff grind. Their beards, or lack thereof, make them stand out as men because they are nearly invisible, sometime very patchy. The full beards of the other players physically separate what looks to be the men from the boys, regardless of their hockey talent or toughness. The beardless players are ruthlessly insulted by their opponents and the opposing team’s fans as well as the media. The insults are permeated by extreme anti-femininity calling them, “sissies,” or “pussies,” and claiming that their “mothers grow better beards than [insert player here].” in attempts to draw a connection between femininity and weakness or inferiority. In 2010, Patrick Kane decided to try to take the attention away from his blonde beard and gave himself what turned into a massive trend in the hockey community, the “Patty Kane Mullet.” Immediately following its debut, thousands of young hockey players followed his lead by shaving the sides and tops of their heads while letting the long, bushy backs “flow.” They then shaved razor thin racing stripes along the sides of their heads, imitating the trendsetter’s three side stripes. This mullet, along with his massive success as an incredible playmaker and goal scorer, cemented Kane’s infamy as a new-age idealized hockey player as well as proved that his hockey identity, style, and masculinity were accepted and adored by hockey’s young fans. He did not need to be a tough guy, which he tried to be in his stunt with
The only demonstration of his masculinity that mattered was his dazzling stick-handling ability and uncontested speed. The new-age idealized man can prove himself by playing hockey within the rules.

My next section analyses the ways in which the dominant masculine values received from hyper-masculine coaches are taken up by the young, impressionable boys and practiced in private all-male spaces like the locker room. The main focus of this section is the ritualistic cultural phenomena that help rehearse and reinforce misogyny, homophobia, and aggression using the locker room as the hidden epicenter to locate all of this activity. The essential forms of expression used to indoctrinate young players into the fold of dominant masculinity are physical violence and homoerotic violence. I define and detail the sacred initiation rituals and their purposes for inculcating aggressive masculinity to the next generation of boys who are used as props to reaffirm the unresolved masculine identities of the superior cohort. I then illustrate another ritualistic aspect of youth hockey, the kangaroo court. This weekly meeting is a powerful and institutionalized technique of constant peer surveillance in which culturally constructed misogynistic and homophobic rules are used to police the behavior of teammates while providing a space to publicly humiliate and make them pay for their “transgressions.” My suggestions to the readers who are midget and high school hockey coaches is that they need to understand that initiation rituals and kangaroo courts are most likely happening in their locker rooms and other private all-male spaces that they technically have control over, but do not constantly oversee. Coaches need to have honest conversations with their players about the dangers, both physically and emotionally, of the initiation rituals and locker room courts. Just as
well, coaches need to take on more emotional responsibility for their players. If they notice social cliques forming, they need to make sure they are checking in with the marginalized players because they might be targets for the more hyper-masculine, and often more powerful, dominant group. Hopefully the more thoughtful and gender-equality geared education of young players will grandfather out the need to have the dangerous power structures like initiation rituals and court within the private all-male spaces that hockey allows.

In the final section, I explore the social and political outcomes of the dominant masculinity taught through hockey and locker room culture with a specific focus on the physical and sexual violence perpetrated by hockey players away from the rink. I offer a different viewpoint to the traditional research paradigm that links levels of aggression in individual players within the game of hockey itself and attitudes towards misogyny, homophobia, and physical and sexual violence away from the rink. The severe limitation that plagues social research on hockey players is access to locker room culture and the private all-male spaces that perpetuate anti-feminine and dominance based sexual attitudes. I offer an insider’s perspective as to why hockey players are linked to sexual and physical aggression from their education within the inaccessible spaces, away from the aggressive on-ice behavior that researchers use to connect hockey players with physical and sexual violence as citizens. I have witnessed too much of it first-hand to know that there is more going on behind the scenes than the news stories as well as the research can tell us. However, I am still limited by the media portrayals of the available cases of violence that hockey players have caused. I am also limited to a strictly heteronormative outlook on sexual abuse.
According to Laura Robinson, there is a great deal of homosexual pedophilia and child molestation within the structure of Canadian junior hockey in which coaches take advantage of young boys using their status as hockey fathers. Even though the structure of those toxic coach/player relationships are similar to the ones described in this body of work, that form of abuse requires its own space to be analyzed and unpacked.

It is my hope that this body of work has not generalized all hockey coaches and players, but rather pointed out the larger sub-cultural phenomena that have contributed to real gender identity formation education which has subsequently affected thousands of men throughout the history of organized youth hockey in North America. It is important that coaches understand the power they have over their players which lies not only in their conduct and the treatment of their players, but also in their language use and non-verbal behavior as well. A significantly higher amount of coaches’ time should be dedicated to the social issues of hockey, especially if they are coaching the younger players who are experiencing masculinity through hockey for the first time. Acknowledging that hockey is a metaphor through which life skills are learned is key to changing how coaches devote their time to teaching lessons that go beyond the immediate application of the game. Through hockey, children can learn how to work together in groups, how to make calculated game plans to improve their skills, how to face adversity, either immediate like a difficult opponent, or long-term like how to balance school work and hockey commitments. Along with those productive lessons, it is also possible that players can learn dominant masculine
values and negatively form their identities around them. Coaches and parents need to be aware of the risks involved, therefore, they cannot lose sight of their goals of being positive role models for their children when they are prioritizing winning at all costs and moving up the hockey pyramid.

To conclude, I want to offer one more story of my own that encapsulates the difficult work ahead of the hockey community to change the institutionalized (in)formal education of hegemonic masculinity, but just how rewarding that kind of change can be. Growing up in St. Louis, I had the privilege of being surrounded by former professional players who taught me everything I know about how to play the game. One ex-pro and I were sitting together, ironically in a locker room, and he was reflecting about the ways in which hockey let him live his life as he put it, “outside everyone else’s rules.” He joked constantly that it was possible that he has several more children that he has no idea about, referring to his promiscuous, rambunctious, and quite misogynistic sexual history. He tells stories of abusing alcohol with his teammates and their youthful shenanigans in a fond manner. Stories of violent bar fights, run-ins with police officers, wild group sex, near-death experiences…you name it, he has a story about it. The stories are a part of him, they make up a significant portion of his masculine identity. However, there is another part of him that knows he should regret the things he and his teammates did, this part of him is the one that recognizes the damage hockey culture, not just the game itself, did to his body, his mental health, and his identity. Looking at me intensely, he asked me genuinely: “What happens if I go to the grocery store and someone takes the parking spot I am about to pull into?” He said, “every instinct in my body is telling me ‘get
out of the fucking car and beat the shit outta that guy,’ but my kids are in the car and that guy didn’t really do anything wrong.” He is suggesting that he was raised within the hockey culture which mandates that if someone embarrasses you, whether you are on the ice or off the ice, you use violence to solve your problems. You reaffirm your dominance in the most hyperbolic way possible. He told me that it took a long time for him to figure out how to calm that impulse down, but that it still haunts him every time he is faced with anger, fear, or jealousy to not act out in violence. The same thought process goes for using sexist language. After being married and having a daughter of his own, he realized just how much misogyny he spoke in hockey language, how much he let his friend do the same thing. It is quite hard to tell men that they are wrong, that they need to keep women’s feelings in mind when they are talking shop in the sacred space of the locker room. Taking these struggles to heart, he has dedicated himself to teaching hockey to young kids in order to be a positive, emotionally available role model for them and the coaches in the community that will eventually have them on their teams. He uses his status as a former professional to bring in as many kids as he can to his clinics so that he can affect as many lives as possible. He makes sure the kid’s locker rooms are staffed at all times with trained coaches to make sure that there is no violence, linguistic or otherwise, happening at his practices. As my mentor, I have learned so much from his bravery and wisdom. That conversation was the moment that I decided to work on the academic side of his progressive coaching campaign. This new paradigm will help boys everywhere have meaningful and fun hockey experiences that will teach them how to be thoughtful, strong men without changing the game of hockey as it is played.
Research in the future needs to find avenues into the private spaces of the locker room as well as find ways to learn about marginalized men’s experiences inside of hockey culture. Combining these investigations with research on emotionality and masculinity will provide ample evidence to build a curriculum that USA Hockey can use to teach coaches how to coach their players not just on the skills of hockey, but the skills of productive problem solving techniques in hockey too. Emphasis on changing misogynistic and homophobic hockey rhetoric and motivational tactics is key. This thesis hopefully can provide an ethnographic lens to begin the process of finding empirical data about the ways in which masculinity is really inculcated within the structure of youth hockey. There is much work to do, and as we say in the hockey community, “the only thing we can do is chip away, one goal at a time.”
References:


Harvey, B. (Writer). (2016). Ice Guardians In S. Dodds (Producer). Canada, Ireland, USA.

