A gang of ironworkers with the scent of blood: A participation observation of male dominance and its historical trajectories at Swedish semi-professional ice hockey events

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Abstract
Ice hockey has traditionally been a male-dominated culture that has both promoted and legitimised masculine dominance and gender inequality. The question is, how might ice hockey games, or other male-dominated sports, be organised differently and thus become more gender equal? Our ambition in this article is to initiate a discussion about how the construction of gender in ice hockey events operationalises or opposes the dominance of men and the marginalisation of women. The specific purpose is to identify techniques that configure men/masculinities as dominant in the ice hockey culture. Taking critical studies of men and masculinities as the point of departure, with a specific focus on the situational aspects of gender construction, this case study makes use of participatory observations of eight qualification games in Swedish semi-professional ice hockey. Our results show that men and certain types of masculinity dominate in the events framing the game and how this links the ice hockey players and the club with the local body-worker culture and its industrial, economic and historical context. Identification with these men is ideally created amongst male spectators, given that children and women do not have the same obvious place in the event's narrative. Some clubs seek to include women and children in their matches, which affects both the atmosphere and the situation. By focusing on the events' introductions and general narratives, and how they make use of a (masculine) version of the place's past in the present, we discuss how the ice hockey culture contributes to the current hegemony of men and masculinities.

Keywords
gender inequality, gender intervention, ice hockey, power, sport event

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Introduction

Ice rinks are not simply the stage upon which class or gender inequalities play out, rather they help to structure them. Moreover, social relations of class and gender are among the conditions that made ice rinks possible. The space of the rink is not simply that which can be measured in square meters, it is also symbolic and, hence, ideological and political. (Adams, 2004: 58)

During a sports conference, a member of the International Ice Hockey Federation’s (IIHF) organising committee asked how the (male) world championships in ice hockey could become more inclusive as an event. This question sowed a seed and pointed us to what we had thought of as a sometimes tacit or unreflective legitimisation of gender inequality at ice hockey games. Ice hockey is a male-dominated culture (Allain, 2008; Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Robidoux, 2001) that is both produced and promoted by men and masculinities. In other words, what happens on the ice is permeated by symbolic, ideological and political powers that help to produce a stable order that is difficult to change and has become big business. The committee member’s question inspired us to initiate this case study guided by the broad question of how ice hockey or other male-dominated sports could change cultural ideals and eventually become more gender equal. By observing Swedish, semi-professional, male ice hockey games, our ambition is to initiate a discussion about how the events’ constructions of gender operationalise or oppose the dominance of men and the marginalisation of women. To use Adams’ (2004) words, we are interested in how gender and class inequalities play out at local, male ice hockey events. The specific purpose is to identify techniques that configure men/masculinities as dominant/superior in the ice hockey culture. The empirical research questions are:

1. How are men/masculinities, in relation to other genders, manifested during ice hockey events?
2. Is there anything that can be interpreted as contributing to the upholding of men’s hegemony?
3. Are there initiatives that challenge this, and, if so, how can these be critically interpreted?

Theoretical framework: masculinities, power and place

Studying a sporting event raises theoretical concerns about place (where the event is located) and relations (between place and people). Given that ice hockey is a masculinity-entrenched culture (e.g. Allain, 2008), how can events be approached from a critical perspective on men and masculinities? By initiating a discussion about masculinities and their relation to structures and situations (‘situation’, ‘place’ and ‘atmosphere’ are used synonymously in this article), we provide a theoretical understanding of our observations.

In *Masculinities*, Connell (2005) presents a theoretical analysis of men and masculinities (in the plural) as a *configuration of social practice*. Although the book has had a major impact in and on the social sciences, it has also been severely criticised. Some of this critique is addressed in Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), where the theoretical concept or perspective of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is partially revised. In this article we
are inspired by both the instigator(s) and the critics and pay specific attention to the importance of the situational in the configuration process.

At one level, Connell (2005) describes ‘masculinity’ as individual, inherently relational and something that points beyond categorical sex differences. At another level, the act of describing or ‘speaking of masculinity at all’ is an act of doing gender (Connell, 2005: 68; see also West and Zimmerman, 1987). Connell goes on to explain that definitions, descriptions and characterisations labelled as masculine, feminine or gendered are actions that also produce gender. In other words, each description contains a standpoint. We will return to this aspect later when describing what could be perceived as a problematic aspect of the ice hockey culture. This means that any transhistorical ‘truth’ about masculinity or ‘real’ manliness is a strategy that characterises a person or culture as masculine, rather than provides (essentialist) facts about them, and is tied to broader social practices. According to Connell (2005), several attempts have been made to capture the essence of masculinity, where perhaps risk-taking, aggression, responsibility and irresponsibility are the most common characteristics, and that an overall socio-biological understanding of true manliness is something that includes hardness and heaviness. The weakness of these findings lies in their arbitrariness, or, to quote Connell (2005: 69): ‘Claims about a universal basis of masculinity tell us more about the ethos of the claimant than about anything else.’

Connell (2005: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’. But how can hegemonic masculinity be maintained if only a few men practise or embody it? The short answer is that gender is more than a fixed set of social norms that individuals (more or less) passively internalise. With the concept of hegemony, which has its roots in a Gramscian analysis of the stabilisation, mobilisation and demobilisation of social classes (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, for a discussion about the roots of ‘hegemonic masculinity’), Connell (2005) includes power and historical change in the analysis and defines meanings of masculinity as inevitably linked to a system of gender relations:

‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. (71)

The system of gender, as manifested in bodily experiences and cultures, is central in Connell’s work and in the understanding of patriarchy. In relation to this, researchers sometimes tend to regard what they call ‘men on or at the margin’ as problematic, especially when working-class men and the masculinities they embody are portrayed as regressive, and that homophobia, sexism and other violent actions are used as symbols to gain status in the working (or labouring) class (see e.g. Hochstetler et al., 2014). However, this way of describing working-class masculinities has been criticised (Roberts and Elliott, 2020). Somewhat simplified, a physically vibrant and aggressive definition of masculinity is not only valid for the working class. Men from the other classes can also be violent. The characteristics of the working class, which should be understood as a diverse
social category, tend to be perceived as problematic from a middle-class or bourgeois perspective. Echoing Connell’s words that there is no description without a standpoint, Forth (2009) examines this struggle between authoritative versions of masculinity and places it in a historical context of modernity and the ‘civilisation process’. As for the role of sport in this conflict, boxing, as a working-class sport, occasioned a debate in the 18th century as to whether men should be polite and refined, or aggressive and robust. Given ice hockey’s content, which is described by many as aggressive, risk-taking and tough, much of that debate also applies to this sport.

The support for and encouragement of masculinities and femininities in sport are interpreted by Connell (2005) as key upholders of the current hegemony. What is interpreted as masculine is thus an action, not an isolated phenomenon, and a configuration (or a process of configuring practice) that can last over time. Connell (2005) regards ‘heroic’ masculinity as an example of a long-lasting configuration. In our study, this refers to how positions of normative or culturally ideal notions of masculinity, practised in ice hockey games, constitute a configuration of social practice. However, this does not necessarily mean that all the practices identified as masculine in the ice hockey arena are configurations of social practice. They can simultaneously be positioned in different social and economic trajectories (Connell, 2005). We will show how this function can be used strategically; the main point being that masculinity and the gender structure are configured with other societal powers, such as social class, and that gender inevitably interacts with class, history, local identity, modernity and the so-called ‘civilisation process’.

This definition also implies that what is perceived as masculine involves a conflict and can vary from place to place and situation to situation, and that men and women will experience similar situations differently (Massey, 1994). In Massey’s (1994: 179) words, and in terms of situations/places, this means that ‘(t)he limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination’. In a place or a city, spatial and social control through fear or anxiety can become obvious in attempts to limit women’s mobility patterns (Massey, 1994). This dimension of power and its relational effects are central in Connell’s (2005) analysis.

Power is about dominance and resistance, subordination and marginalisation. In short, men dominate women in a patriarchy, which also means that in general men have a vested interest in defending their positions, whereas women are more interested in changing the current order. In other words, the overall consequence of hegemonic masculinity is the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). However, the key point of the hegemony concept is that it describes how subordinated groups contribute to and partake in their own subordination, and in this way stabilise the prevailing social order. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832) maintain that superiority can be achieved through culture, and not necessarily through violence.

In Masculinities, Connell (2005) writes that the main function of hegemonic masculinity, which is most often characterised by male whiteness, heterosexuality, violence and even criminality, seems to be to uphold patriarchy. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) nuance this by emphasising the (pacifist) culture as an upholding force. Demetriou (2001) has also called for a more nuanced understanding of the configurations of masculinities. Showing how so-called ‘gay masculinities’ have been able to reproduce patriarchy in, for example, the western film and media industry, Demetriou
(2001: 354) concludes: ‘Rather, many elements of the latter (gay masculinities) have become constitutive parts of a hybrid hegemonic bloc whose heterogeneity is able to render the patriarchal dividend invisible and legitimate patriarchal domination.’ In this way, Demetriou (2001) argues that changes in hegemonic masculinities are deceptive and even unrecognisable, in that ‘softer’ forms of masculinities (such as wearing earrings) might appear less dominant but could actually mask subordination. This means that the possibilities for real change – for instance, in the ice hockey culture and its events – must be carefully and critically considered, because what appears as progressive could in fact be regressive. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 256) captivatingly put it: ‘Privilege works best when it goes unrecognized.’

Doan (2010) argues that hegemony informs our expectations of how we experience a situation. As expectations are carried from one situation to another, configurations of masculinities expand over and permeate diverse situations in a society, which means that ‘new’ situations are never experienced as completely unique (we experience them through ‘old’ senses and expectations). This means that a body is part of a broader and total environment (Pink, 2011). Dimensions like these, and their ‘unrecognisable’ potential to stabilise the hegemony, are important to identify if the aim is to organise more inclusive ice hockey events. Therefore, the ambition in our case study is to nuance what is here termed ‘the gendering of an ice hockey event’; that is, the interactions of gender, place and techniques that frame the event. For example, Doan (2010) shows how heteronormativity permeates diverse spatial contexts and examines how gays and lesbians navigate public and private spaces in different ways depending on the categorisation of and expectations from their own gender. With reference to Bondi (2004), the connotations of gender are thus extended from internal bodily factors (emotions, perceptions, expectations and so on) to external surfaces and situations. Doan writes: ‘The experiences of particular situations that we obtain through our bodies both shape and are shaped by the public and private spaces in which they occur’ (2010: 638). In this way, experiences of an atmosphere during an ice hockey game are dependent on the bodily and environmental prerequisites that condition the experience differently for different individuals.

Previous research on sport/ice hockey, gender and events

Ice hockey – and sport in general – has long been promoted as an arena in which men are given opportunities to exhibit characteristics that can be interpreted as powerful, heroic, courageous – and masculine (Allain, 2008; Alsarve, 2018; Gilenstam et al., 2008; Kidd, 2013; Lorenz, 2016; Messner, 1992). By highlighting how phenomena like muscularity, aggression, toughness and fearlessness are interpreted as expressions of ‘real’ masculinity, researchers have argued that sport, as an institution or place, upholds men’s hegemony (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2007; Tivers, 2011). Researchers have critically analysed how male athletes at all levels are often allowed to excel at the cost of others, primarily females and deviant men/masculinities (Messner, 1990, 1992). This means that in sport we find examples that, to paraphrase Connell (2005), are an answer to the (re)production of patriarchy or a legitimation of gender inequality (Adams, 2004; Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018). Despite – or perhaps thanks to – (some) sport’s distinctive gendering, sport can also be interpreted as an arena in which cultural ideals of gender are challenged
and renegotiated (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2015; Buzuvis, 2017; Fink et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015).

In an effort to be specific about masculinity ideals in the ice hockey culture, MacDonald and LaFrance (2018) studied the Gongshow magazine, a lifestyle-based journal (like GQ and Men’s Health) that aspires to sell the ice hockey lifestyle. The texts and images can thus be interpreted as navigational orientations for boys/men to adapt to masculinity norms. MacDonald and LaFrance (2018: 14) contend that the magazine is ‘supersaturated by stereotypical representations of hockey players’ that glorify ‘arrogance, irresponsibility, excessive alcohol consumption, partying, and the objectification of women’. Being able to demonstrate physical domination (i.e. violence) in adequate situations also seems to be expected from men in ice hockey and other sports settings (Allain, 2008; Kidd, 2013; Lorenz, 2016; MacDonald, 2014; Messner, 1990, 1992)

Again paraphrasing Connell (2005), as a gender system containing configurative, social practices, the ice hockey culture routinely gives hockey-playing men (more) opportunities to carry out actions that can be interpreted as risk-taking, tough and aggressive. Incitements like this fuel Connell’s (2005: 54) argument that sport ‘serves as symbolic proof of men’s superiority and right to rule’.

Previous research on ice hockey has identified a reproduction of hegemonic notions of men and masculinities (Allain, 2008, 2011, 2014; MacDonald, 2014). However, ice hockey can be played in different ways. Depending on the tactics and players’ roles, coaches, parents, spectators and the media will expect and praise different behaviour. From a broader perspective, Stark (2001) has compared how the masculinity of Swedish ice hockey players was constructed in contrast to Canadian and Soviet ice hockey players’ ideal characters. This means that several masculinities are reproduced, spanning from the fast skater, creative playmaker with great technical skills, to the big, strong and rugged ‘penalty killer’ or simply ‘the fighter’. This variation and one-sidedness of masculinities permeate Gruneau and Whitson’s (1993) comprehensive study of North American ice hockey, which also touches on male ice hockey players’ views of women as passive and sexually available objects (see also Allain, 2008). However, their key finding is how business and political interest has promoted aggressive masculinities in professional ice hockey. As a consequence of this upholding of gender inequality, female ice hockey has been perceived as less ‘natural’. That is, given ice hockey’s associations with masculinity, female ice hockey players have not been given the same opportunities and recognition in the sport (Dicarlo, 2016; Gilenstam et al., 2008). In other words, women and femininities are sometimes perceived as less able, weaker and more fragile than ice hockey-playing males (Burke, 2004; Dicarlo, 2016; Hoeber and Kerwin, 2013). (It should be noted that some males are also perceived as weak and fragile and some female players as aggressive and tough.)

According to Doan (2010: 648), ‘(d)ifferent types of gendered places have varying potential for confrontation and transformation’. Traditions, cultures and spectators’ values and attitudes, often with the National Hockey League (NHL) as a key influence, contribute to what is expected from ice hockey games and players. For instance, Crawford (2001) found that male ice hockey audiences were attracted by the sport’s atmosphere, rapid pace and aggressive nature. The gendering of ice hockey situationally creates views or attitudes about what is acceptable or appropriate behaviour, and what can be regarded
as an openness to diverse performances (cf. Sartore and Cunningham, 2007; Sparkes et al., 2010). If you do not live up to certain expectations, you might be regarded as a sissy, or even a cheat (Allain, 2008; Alsarve and Angelin, 2020; Robidoux, 2001).

As noted above, individuals’ expectations and their political and financial interests condition ice hockey’s transformational potential. Given that spectators expect and applaud players’ aggressiveness, it becomes harder for them to show humility or weakness. However, players should not only be seen as marionette puppets. There is much to gain by aligning with the sport’s dominant masculinity configuration (Messner, 2007; Robidoux, 2001), in that the masculine ‘capital’ that is provided through sport often enhances a player’s status as a citizen (Kidd, 2013; Messner, 1990, 1992).

In many sports events, males tend to dominate as players, coaches, referees, volunteers (Skirstad and Hanstad, 2013) and spectators (Lagaert and Roose, 2016); a phenomenon that is embedded in the broader context of societies’ gender equality gaps. In short, this means that if a country’s societal gender gap is wide, fewer female spectators will attend sports events. In addition to this macro-level explanation, research shows that some women perceive sporting events as unsafe (for example, due to the occurrence of misogynist and sexist language) and that participation must be negotiated with other feminine ideals, such as motherhood and taking care of children (Crawford and Gosling, 2004; Lenneis and Pfister, 2015).

Methodology and limitations

Our research interest is on the ice hockey event as a gendered atmosphere. The game is interpreted as a situation in which spatialities, players, spectators and volunteers configure gender ideals that interact with other societal structures. Below, we describe how this theoretical knowledge is operationalised into the method of participation observation.

Observation as a method and the data it produces

The empirical data in this article is based on observations of ice hockey matches. Observation as a method aims to follow the flow of events, with the observer trying to blend in and not affect any of the ongoing actions (Adler and Adler, 1994). Specifically, eight qualifying matches were observed from February to March 2019 and February to March 2020 (before the COVID-19 virus disruptions). All the matches were played by men and all the teams’ coaches and leaders were men. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, one match was watched by over 1000 spectators and another by only 100. The qualifying matches we observed determined which two teams (the best placed) would play in Division 1 and Division 2 in the following season (the third and fourth highest series in Sweden and a general cut-off point between professional and amateur levels). Each game was therefore of great importance and had the potential to generate ‘atmosphere’ and commitment.

Another and more practical criterion for our selection of which teams to follow was that the matches were played relatively close together geographically (within a 200 km radius). All the places have a long industrial history and are still dominated by manufacturing, steel and metal industries. Although these industries have formed the local identity,
the towns also try to attract all kinds of companies. On average, about 13,000 people live in the visited municipalities (fewer in the main city). Sport is given a lot of coverage in the local media (we subscribed to digital newspapers when the matches were observed), with regular articles about players and teams both before and after matches.

**Why observations?** Observation was chosen as a method because it allowed us to study the actions, spectator reactions and events as a whole. It also had the potential to ‘reveal’ indicators of a gender system. We chose a so-called ‘hidden observation’ technique, which involves capturing what is authentic (as nobody knows which events are being observed). In an open observation, where people are aware of the observer, certain actions might be avoided (see e.g. Holme et al., 1997). A hidden observer can sometimes get closer to a group than an open observer, which can result in more authentic data about how the group *really* functions. It also means that socially sensitive data can be obtained. However, for ethical reasons we have chosen not to process sensitive information and do not use the players’ or clubs’ real names.

With this type of method, it is important that the observer, as a participant, ‘blends in’. We therefore chose the second author as the observer, because she had grown up in the neighbouring geographical area and spoke the same dialect as the place’s inhabitants (cf. Holme et al., 1997). However, in the text below we write ‘we observed’, as here we include a presence at the actual events and our joint interpretation of the observations.

**How themes were derived from the observations.** Before the first observation, we discussed approaches and possible places in the arena where examples of power, norms and the doing of gender could be identified. That is, how men/masculinities and women/femininities are ascribed meaning, status or significance. For example, we thought that places where money was exchanged (entrances, restaurants, etc.) would be particularly interesting to observe. Examples of our initial questions are:

- Who receives the ticket fees?
- Who is in the cafeteria?
- Who is in the secretariat? (The secretariat consists of the off-ice officials who act as goal judges, timekeepers and official scorers and sit between the two teams’ penalty boxes.)
- What kind of music is being played?
- Are there any pictures? If so, what is embodied in them?
- What characterises the talk in the stands?
- Both in general and prejudicially, how many women and men are there in the arena?

Photographs were taken in order to recreate, map and discuss the event afterwards. The main challenge with the observations at this initial stage was to ‘find’ what we were looking for and thus limit our data. Notes (memos) were made on a mobile phone during the observations in order to attract minimal attention and be easily accessible afterwards (cf. Holme et al., 1997: 116).
The methodological approach was thus open and broad, with the overall aim being to structure how the situational configuration of gender practices was played out during the ice hockey events. The observer moved around the arena during a game to position herself in different places and be close to people so that their conversations, expressions and behaviour could be studied.

After each game the authors jointly discussed the observations and interpreted the generated data within the theoretical framing of gender, masculinity, hegemony and eventual contradictions. To some extent, this step is the equivalent of ‘attributing’ or ‘pasting’ (what is interpreted as) masculinity as a characterisation to certain behaviour, statements or other actions (Connell, 2005). In short, the initial observations (prejudicially) identified where the men were, what they were doing and what their attributes were. This material quickly became extensive, given that men were everywhere in the arena, performed a variety of actions, had different roles and so on. At a symbolic level, men were also explicitly represented in photographs and implicitly via the sponsoring companies’ logotypes on the sideboards. Thus, we could see how the symbolic and economic dimensions merged with the masculinity configuration in the arena (cf. Connell, 2005), which at the same time underlined the need to sort and categorise our data.

The observations generated a significant amount of data. We discussed the data together and considered how we could best make meaning of it in terms of the portrayal of men, the place, social class and possibilities for change. The empirical themes that we decided to focus on were: (a) the introduction of the event; (b) how music and other media were used; (c) how a situation could change from a relatively good mood to an almost threatening one, and how this change interacted with events on the ice and in the stands; and finally (d) a different atmosphere at one of the matches, which was partly due to the home club’s marketing of the game. These themes were chosen to show typical, recurring sequences in the matches (themes a–c), and to highlight a unique observation that stood out (d). Subsequently, these four empirical themes were interpreted using the theoretical framework and previous research as analytical tools. Through these themes, we try to show how the situational gendering of sport is a configuring and complex process that can both uphold the status quo or change it. As the theoretical literature argues for a contradictory content of masculinities, we also illustrate such contrasts. The themes thus contain techniques that contribute to men’s and masculinities’ privileges that ultimately configure the conditions for gender (in)equality in the arena.

Findings

Turning ice to fire – the match intro as a narrative of the body-working men in the place’s past

According to Connell (2005) and Massey (1994), the situation constitutes gender perceptions and the place’s content in terms of how gender and sexuality affect the individuals’ (possibilities of) passing through a place (Doan, 2010). Inspired by their research, we paid special attention to the ritualisation in the match intro; an action that in our interpretation helped to produce a certain atmosphere and raise adrenalin levels. By using different media (music, film, history, pyrotechnics, etc.) in the intro, the clubs set the agenda
and the norms for the game and its atmosphere. The match intro was remoulded by the clubs into a narrative in which the team, as the narrative’s main character, not only fought for the club, but was portrayed as a representative of the local place in general, and its body of working men in particular. In this way, the match intro situation became temporally and spatially extended to other situations by addressing the working-class body in the stands. This indirect positioning of men in society’s production adds to what Connell (2005) describes as the interaction of the configuration of masculinity with components beyond gender.

At the beginning of one home match a song was played entitled ‘Oh, you old mill’, in which a male voice described the mill as ‘it thumps and bangs, I grew up around the mill, I was 14 when I started to work there’. In more theoretical terms, the function of this narrative and its song exemplified how the configuration of masculinity interacted with social class, a working place and nostalgia. It meant that the ice hockey event was portrayed as something more than just a sporting event, in that it included a narrative of ice hockey and the gendered history of place (cf. Doan, 2010; Massey, 1994).

Another example that forged a link between present and past, the club, the place and the bodies of working men was a match intro in which a film was shown on a large screen before the home team’s players came onto the ice. The film depicted the place’s factory, a steel industry, accompanied by an (old) man’s voice proclaiming:

Steel is a fantastic witches’ brew, bubbling up from the rock’s sparks and roars. Since time immemorial, fire, sweat and soot have permeated the forests of (Region’s name). Fires that have never gone out, century after century, day and night, that in flaming scripts have told of men’s tenacious and silent wrestling with the iron. And in the middle of the old iron bearing country lies (the place’s name) the city of steel and workers.

The film showed male workers going to and from the mill. Another scene showed a large fire and melting, flowing and glowing iron. In a third scene, the whole town is viewed from the mill’s highest point. Here the mill appears as the place’s centre, with the town and the forest as surrounding elements. Finally, the film ends with three quotes on the screen:

A gang of ironworkers with the scent of blood.

A black machine.

A beloved child has many names.

There was then a countdown from 10 to zero, during which the ice was filled with smoke. The audience counted aloud too and on zero the home team’s players skated onto the ice at the same time as yellow spotlights transformed the smoke into (what looked like) flames. In this way, the place and the ice – with its yellow spotlighted smoke – mimicked the glowing iron in the film. This strengthened the association between the home team’s players and the film’s working men, the present and the past. The intro also indicated that over centuries the men from the place had wrestled with the mountain’s
interior; a struggle that created certain characteristics and that was now transferred from the mill’s men in the past to the ice and the present home team’s players.

The match intro narratives teach us that place per se seems to timelessly foster and demand certain characteristics from its (ideal) men. Skills, they proclaim, can be chronologically reproduced from one generation to another and stretched from a working to a competitive situation. This exemplifies, in a sophisticated and spectacular way, the interaction of ice hockey masculinity with the historical trajectories of a place (Connell, 2005). The strategy echoes an essentialist approach that constructs these men as blood-scenting, machine-like and beloved subjects that embody strength and muscularity. In other words, they are popular and worth the audience’s applause, but are not necessarily hegemonic. By depicting body-working men, the match intro produces a symbolic practice that stretches the construction of ‘heroic’ men and masculinities over time and place. The ice hockey men can thus be said to be borrowing a past masculinity trait that configures their masculinity as a hybridisation (cf. Demetriou, 2001).

The total absence of women and femininities in these match intros is also important to highlight. As the narratives’ ideal characteristics are body-working men, here transferred to the ice hockey-playing men, they implicitly predict that only men can have such qualities. In a gender order that supports patriarchal dividends, Connell (2005: 82) contends that it is hard to avoid an understanding of women as an interest group concerned with change. In the match intros, the feminine absence can therefore be interpreted as having a stabilising effect on the gender order. This invisibleness can also be interpreted as a subordination of femininity, thereby adding to the culture’s gender inequality.

Research has shown that in addition to the general arena experience, a sense of home can affect the benignity of revisiting a venue (Lee et al., 2012). Given the match intro characteristics, these events do not facilitate such a sense amongst women because they are not addressed. The practice rather targets men who can identify themselves with the working bodies of the place’s present and past.

The use of music

A key point in critical studies of men and masculinities is how hierarchicalisation processes often appear in male groupings (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992). The strategic use of music related to such processes became apparent in our study when the away team’s players were sent to the penalty box to the accompaniment of a traditional children’s song from Astrid Lindgren’s fairy tale about Emil of Lönnerberga entitled ‘You dear little tool shed’. According to our interpretation, this was a way of diminishing the opponents and highlighting the penalty box as a place to which a naughty child is banished by his ‘father’ – in this case the referee. This can be interpreted as the ridiculing of the opponent, thereby sharpening the hierarchical distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Hierarchicalisation like this is to some extent portrayed by humour or irony, which research shows is often the case in men’s homosocial relations (Allain, 2008; Alsatve and Angelin, 2020; Connell, 2005; Robidoux, 2001). It also underlines that competing masculinities, albeit in different club colours, are in the making. In other words, amongst
men who stage dominance, strength and aggression, different techniques can be employed to distinguish their different status.

How an atmosphere can change during a game

The striving for dominance, which was most explicitly expressed in the desire to win the game, also seemed to legitimise different power techniques (such as diminishing, ridiculing, irony). This also reflects the results of previous research on men and masculinities (Allain, 2008, 2011, 2014; Alsarve and Angelin, 2020; Connell, 2005; MacDonald, 2014; Messner, 1990, 2007). Depending on the situation, such practices can be labelled as marginalising or subordinating actions with a striving for dominance, which were here played out in an atmosphere characterised by excitement and noise. The spectators were committed to what happened on the ice and critically followed the referee’s decisions, which at times were perceived as mistakes. The intensity increased towards the end of each game, especially if the result was a draw. At the end of one such game, the mood changed and degenerated into what appeared to be a spiteful atmosphere after (what the home audience perceived as) an ugly bodycheck on a player from the away team, where the home player fell heavily head-first against the sideboards. (It was later confirmed that the player in the home team had broken his jaw.) A fight erupted between the players on the ice and the mood of the audience immediately became aggressive. Someone shouted ‘Stand up!’ and the teams’ supporters screamed at each other. When the fighting stopped, the referee imposed a game penalty for each team. A man in the stand started to shout, banged on a rubbish bin and made rude gestures to the away-team player leaving the ice. A boy screamed ‘Stand up for fucks sake!’ while the woman next to him, most likely his mother, laughed and said ‘No you can’t say that.’ Another man next to them laughed and said ‘Who did he get that from?’

This particular match therefore changed from being a ‘good’ event with nerve, tension and cheering spectators, to what we interpret as a ‘bad’ one with booing, gestures, upset feelings and an unpleasant atmosphere. At a more theoretical level, the example shows that every atmosphere (and situation) has a potential for change in one or the other direction (Bondi, 2004). In this particular observation it was difficult to ignore the more internal or emotional aspects and how they related to external events (Doan, 2010). The violence on the ice, the spectators’ reactions and the overall unpleasant atmosphere that emerged made the second author feel uncomfortable and anxious (cf. Lenneis and Pfister, 2015). It can therefore be said that the inclination to return to such situations is somewhat minimal (Lee et al., 2012).

The composition of spectators as a potential for a change?

It is usual for the actions of the players, referees and spectators to affect the atmosphere during a match and, as such, become part of the configuration process. Compared to other social and cultural activities, it is interesting to note that ice hockey and other sporting events can facilitate situations that legitimise (usually, but not exclusively, adult men’s) screams and foul words directed at players, referees or other supporters (in the
main, other men). What makes these affective expressions interesting is how they relate to constructions of masculinity and gender inequality.

The fact that bodychecking was applauded in a similar way to the scoring of goals meant that scoring skills and physical domination were equally appreciated. The supporters’ reactions functioned as immediate feedback to the performances on the ice in terms of appreciation or disapproval. Understandably, spectators want to see their team win and most of the comments and reactions can be linked to this in terms of showing aggression or commitment, using phrases like ‘stand up’ (in tackles or bodychecks), expressing joy when a goal is scored or anger when fighting occurs (cf. Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Lorenz, 2016; Robidoux, 2001). Creativity and technical skills were also appreciated, which gave a certain breadth to the repertoire of appreciated practices. Contrary to these ideals, in principle the games offered no situations in which the ice hockey-playing men were able to express tenderness, love or care.

If these observations are interpreted through the lens of masculinity configuration and gender order, a delicate problem arises. The fundamental idea of ice hockey and its tactics seems to be based on a relatively limited and competitive masculinity trait (see also Allain, 2008; Robidoux, 2001). This means that the sport in itself can be said to contribute to patriarchal power (Connell, 2005), where the space for women/femininity and alternative masculinities seems virtually non-existent (cf. Dicarlo, 2016; Doan, 2010). (That is, we understand a sport with a broader masculinity and femininity repertoire to be more gender equal.)

However, during one match observation this pattern was broken and, in our view, showed what could be perceived as a potential for change. Prior to this game the club had announced special family activities like face painting and a lucky dip. These activities took place in the entrance hall, which led to children queuing to dip for sweets and have their faces painted. At this match there were significantly more children and women (probably mothers) in the audience, which resulted in a different atmosphere and language in the stands. As swearing and other foul words were largely absent in this game, the second author felt completely at ease.

The overall observation was that the composition of the audience affected the atmosphere in the match. Although it is difficult to draw general conclusions from our case study, other research also indicates that heterogeneous groups have certain democratic and qualitative qualities that homogeneous groups lack. For instance, research on the constitution of boards and committees has shown that a more equal or diverse representation affects the norms and conditions in the boardroom (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2012; Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2008; Sotiriadou and De Haan, 2019). It is partly in the light of such research that many sports federations have introduced quotas as a way of creating gender equality. The same could also apply in an ice hockey context. However, strategically including more women and children in an ice hockey arena as a way of organising and changing a gender-unequal atmosphere could be seen as problematic. Firstly, it might strengthen the notion that women and children have a closer and more ‘natural’ relationship than men and children. Secondly, such an inclusion might nurture an idea of women as primary change agents and thus diminish men’s responsibilities for progression (cf. Connell, 2005). Thirdly, in a worst case, such initiatives could risk reinforcing the idea of men as aggressive and women as having a
calming effect on men’s behaviour. The risk is that it could automatically be assumed that the presence of women and children would eliminate the problems caused by men. More research on this is therefore necessary. In the light of our observations, we can only highlight the possibility for clubs to contribute to change by strategically inviting new and under-represented groups to attend their events. Such initiatives may also have to be balanced with similar efforts in other ice hockey settings, as well as amongst board members, sponsors, coaches, etc.

Discussion and conclusion

By observing Swedish, semi-professional, male ice hockey games, the specific purpose of this article has been to identify techniques that configure men/masculinities as dominant/superior in the ice hockey culture. In general, our findings confirm the overall results of previous hockey research in Sweden and North America showing that the ice hockey culture is permeated by men in privileged positions with narrow masculinity ideals (see e.g. Allain, 2008, 2011, 2014; MacDonald, 2014; MacDonald and Lafrance, 2018; Robidoux, 2001; Stark, 2001). Even though variations and exceptions occur, there are ample opportunities for men to excel in ice hockey matches, with audience encouragement, game sequences, referees’ decisions and so on as co-creating factors. All this also helps to create an atmosphere that is tense and can easily develop into aggressiveness and unpleasantness. In this discussion, the aim is to connect our findings to previous research on ice hockey and other sports and link them to our theoretical framework in order to analyse how the ice hockey culture and its configuration of masculinities can be understood in terms of power and class.

Allain (2008: 466) describes how ice hockey, as a sub-culture, ‘tends to privilege a narrow vision of desirable masculine practices’ that to some extent are cut off from outsiders. Our observations support these results, together with what is interpreted as this sub-culture’s honouring of males’ physical contact, risk-taking, toughness and fighting. Despite ice hockey’s relative ‘uniqueness’ regarding such expressions of masculinity, this culture is supported, sponsored and recognised by ‘outside’ audiences, companies and the media. This exemplifies how the configuration of masculinities in ice hockey has links to and is to some extent dependent on surrounding societal powers in its reproduction (Connell, 2005; Hearn and Howson, 2020).

The relationship between the content of events and the surrounding community is worth analysing. In our observations, we note how the organisers use the working conditions in the mills and the masculinities of body-workers from the different places’ past to legitimise, normalise, praise and recognise the places’ and the ice hockey players’ traits. By using different media techniques, our observations show how the workers’ and the players’ masculine characteristics are emphasised. As Connell (2005) notes, social practices are generated in broader structures, and that a particular situation is understood as a concrete response to this process. Transferring this to our observations, it means that we were studying the materialisation of a construction defined as masculine. Given the ice hockey masculinities’ relative uniqueness, and as Forth (2009) argues, we need to aim at a deeper understanding of the relationship between violent, aggressive definitions of masculinity and sedentary and other contrasting traits. But how can we interpret these narrow versions of masculinity from a more critical hegemony perspective, and what, if anything, in this masculinity construction can be regarded as contradictory?
In this context it is important to look at the connection between social (working) class, the body-work itself, the men who have populated the place in the past and the men who populate it now. The homage paid to the worker, his practices and the qualities he portrays is basically a recognition of the working class. The match intros give the impression that the body-working man’s ideals, characteristics earned by the fires of the past, are chronologically transformed and converted to the present players on the ice. Toughness, risk-taking and physical endurance are thus recognised as desirable qualities in the past and in the present, outside and inside the hockey arena. To paraphrase Adams (2004), these chronologically endurable traits have made, and still make, the ice hockey culture and the place per se possible.

As indicated above, the effect of a match intro narrative is that the workers’ masculinities, exalted as ideals, can be transferred to other contexts; for example, from the factory of the past to the sport of today. However, since the continued glorification reproduces a continued normalisation of the exploitation of the worker and his body, it can be questioned as to whether there is anything that is transformative in these recognitions. Paradoxically, by applauding these narratives, the workers in the audience are also praising their own exploitation. As Demetriou (2001) indicates, such practices mask subordination to the extent that the recognition of masculinity ideals includes class-stabilising effects (see also Connell, 2005). The ice hockey players and the culture thus become part of this reproduction; a contradiction that Robidoux (2001) also identifies in the Canadian hockey context. Yet despite the exploitational content, these situations are productive in that they make this culture possible (Adams, 2004). Exploitation and productiveness thus appear to work in parallel at ice hockey events.

From a broader perspective, this also means that ice hockey, as a societal institution, contributes to the stabilising of the prevailing patriarchal and socio-economic power order. This way of interpreting social power (class) and gender from a hegemonic perspective illuminates how subordinated groups can contribute to their own subordination through cultural activities (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Here, the hockey situation plays a crucial role in the recognition of the worker’s qualities. Together with the working-class men/masculinities, the sport, the club and the team are placed in a local tradition in which men can measure their qualities with men from other places. A match is therefore not just a contest between two teams. Rather, the hockey culture can be said to channel the prevailing hegemony and thereby function as an upholder of patriarchy; a patriarchy that includes social, economic and historical stabilisation (Connell, 2005; Hearn and Howson, 2020). Research carried out on ice hockey in Canada has drawn similar conclusions (Allain, 2008; Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Robidoux, 2001). The absence of women and femininity in key aspects of the event can be interpreted as a sign of this, and our observations align with what Connell (2005) and Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) call a reproduction of gender inequality.

Finally, it is important to highlight the anxiety that the second author felt whilst observing a particular match. It is no secret that the content and masculinity ideals of the ice hockey culture have often been criticised for being misogynistic, brutal and problematic (Allain, 2008, 2014; MacDonald and Lafrance, 2018), and that this is not a new phenomenon. From a historical perspective, the struggle between authoritarian masculinities has been ongoing. Forth (2009) discusses how on the one hand modernity and the civilisation process expect men to be peaceful, enlightened and empathetic, and on the
other hand applaud aggression and to some extent brutality, as exhibited in ice hockey matches, thereby granting some men and players status and perhaps even financial independence. Both these masculinity traits effectively marginalise women and can make them (and other men) feel anxious and uncomfortable.

To conclude, challenging the current power and masculine structure in ice hockey not only involves a struggle against the existing masculinity and its stabilising forces, but also the transformation of the strong economic and cultural interests that help to maintain these very aspects (cf. Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Robidoux, 2001). Inclusion and a real transformation of the ice hockey culture involves much more than simply inviting women and children to take part in lucky dips and face painting. Therefore, not only is more research needed on the deeper meanings of aggressiveness and risk-taking in ice hockey and sport. The conditions for real inclusion and gender equality in sport also need to be examined.

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Note
1. The first edition of this book was published in 1995. A second edition was issued in 2005 and that is the version we use here.

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