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Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport

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Cheerleading occupies a contested space in American culture and a key point of controversy is whether it ought to be considered a sport. Drawing on interviews with college cheerleaders on coed squads, as well as five years of fieldwork in various cheerleading sites, this paper examines the debate over cheerleading and sport in terms of its gender politics. The bid for sport status on the part of cheerleaders revolves around the desire for respect more than official recognition by athletic organizations; cheerleaders recognize the prestige associated with sport, a function of its historic association with hegemonic masculinity, and they claim that prestige for cheerleading by highlighting its recent transformation into a more athletic, competitive activity that is no longer “just for girls.” However, the support function of college cheerleading, combined with its “feminine” performance demands, make the bid for sport status controversial. Male cheerleaders in particular distance themselves from the feminine elements of cheerleading because they want to avoid being perceived as gay. The gender politics at work here illustrate both the elasticity of gender categories and the limits of that elasticity, as gendered boundaries are drawn and redrawn between what gets to count as sport and what does not, and as cheerleading simultaneously challenges and reinforces the notion of sport as a male preserve. Because masculinity and femininity are performed side-by-side in coed cheerleading, this research underscores the importance of relational analyses for examining and critiquing the construction of gender and sexuality. Keywords: gender, sport, performance, hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity.

Assumed to exist on the margins of sport (and sport on the margins of “real” life), cheerleading might seem an unlikely subject for academic research. Yet forms of popular culture like cheerleading and sport reveal a great deal about social relations, particularly relations of inequality. Sport has been widely acknowledged as a key institution for examining the production, reproduction, and sometimes contestation of gender inequality. The organization and unfolding of gender relations in a given institution is its “gender regime” (Connell 1987), and, until recently at least, the gender regime of sport tended to buttress notions of male superiority. Scholars generally agree that organized athletics have been central to the construction of what R.W. Connell (1987) calls “hegemonic masculinity,” helping to socialize men into business, politics, and war (see Crosset 1990; Kimmel 1990; Messner 1992).

If sport is an arena in which men express and sustain hegemonic masculinity, cheerleading is said to embody the qualities associated with “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987), notably supportiveness, enthusiasm, and sexual attractiveness (see Kurman 1986). Cast as a feminine auxiliary to sport for the latter half of the twentieth century, cheerleading has served as an icon of normative—meaning white, heterosexual, middle class, and American—girlhood, as well as a ready target for those contesting that ideal (see Adams and Bettis 2003; Hanson 1995). There is a kind of “fit” between emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity because the adaptive orientation of one exists in relation to the power of the other (Connell 1987).

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While institutions help bring order and stability to social relations, they are not impervious to contradiction and challenge (see Friedland and Alford 1991), and as institutions change, so do their gender regimes. The dramatic entry of women and girls into a wide range of sports since the passage of Title IX is well documented (Festle 1996).¹ Cheerleading also changed. It shifted from a primarily female, sideline activity to a more gender mixed, athletic, competitive activity in recent decades. The 1990s witnessed the rapid rise of what is known as all-star cheerleading—private, for-profit cheer programs devoted exclusively to competition and operating independently of schools. There is much debate, both in the media and in the cheer world itself, about whether or not cheerleading should be recognized as a sport in its own right. At the same time, change is never simple or simply progressive, and the debate over cheerleading and sport is about more than increased athleticism; it is also about the gender regime of sports and the historic status of sport as a male preserve.

Gender is not merely an individual attribute that one has or enacts, it is something accomplished in interaction with others, “an emergent property of social situations” (West and Fenstermaker 1995:9; see also West and Zimmerman 1987). Likewise, people do not simply import their gendered selves into neutral institutions; rather, institutions are themselves gendered (Acker 1990; Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Messner 2002). Sport has been one of the most masculine of institutions, and despite recent gains by women, it is still largely organized by and for men. This is particularly true at its “institutional core” (Messner 2002), where masculinity—assumed to be heterosexual—is linked to socially sanctioned aggression and physical power (Griffin 1998; McKay, Messner, and Sabo 2000; Messner 1992, 2002; Messner and Sabo 1990; Theberge 1994, 1993; Trujillo 2000).²

Historically, women—and middle class white women especially—have found their greatest popular acceptance in the periphery of sport, specifically in “feminine” sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, which are deemed socially acceptable for women but trivialized by the sports establishment (Bryson 1994; Feder 1995). “Feminine” sports mesh neatly with taken-for-granted assumptions that women are “naturally” smaller, slower, and weaker than men but more graceful, flexible, and inclined toward aestheticized or sexualized bodily display—assumptions that work to suppress the actual gender diversity that exists in sport (see Cahn 1994; Kane 1995; Lenskyj 1986). However, sport is far from coterminous with hetero-masculinity and the “female athlete” is no longer an oxymoron but an increasingly visible cultural icon (see Heywood and Dworkin 2003).

This paper draws upon ethnographic data to argue that cheerleading, particularly coed college cheerleading, provides a powerful lens through which to examine the relational construction of gender and sexuality in both sport and in society at large. The richness of cheerleading for sociological analysis stems less from the way cheerleading “fixes” gendered meanings once and for all than for the way it negotiates contested terrain and transgresses a series of gendered boundaries, notably those between sport and performance, athletics and aesthetics, and competitiveness and supportiveness. These phenomena, like gender itself, exist (and coexist) along a continuum despite being invoked in oppositional terms. As a social phenomenon, cheerleading does not simply express agreed upon definitions of emphasized femininity or hegemonic masculinity in isolation from one another. Rather, it is an activity where the very terms of femininity and masculinity are constructed and worked through side-by-side, and the question of what is “emphasized” (or hegemonic) along the way is a matter of empirical investigation. To draw on Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), cheerleading is a space where young women and men “do” (and “undo”) gender in the

1. Title IX, passed in 1972, is a federal law prohibiting gender discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funds. The law prohibits high schools and colleges that receive federal funds from discriminating on the basis of gender in the provision of any educational activity, including athletics.

2. In the United States, the institutional core of sport, in terms of money, resources, and media coverage, is men's football, basketball, and baseball (Messner 2002).

service of producing particular social arrangements. Our goal is to make sense of the *workings* and not just the *existence* of those arrangements.³

Methods

Our research is ethnographic, relying on interviews and observations in the field. We aim for a fruitful dialectic between experience and interpretation, a continuous tacking back and forth between what James Clifford (1988) describes as the “inside” and “outside” of events: “on the one hand grasping the sense of specific activities empathetically, on the other hand stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts” (p. 34). We examine what male and female cheerleaders say and do in the context of creating and sustaining the contemporary “gender order” (Connell 1987). We focus on coed college teams because we are interested in the construction of masculinity as much as femininity (rates of male participation being highest in college cheerleading) and because, in the coed context, the relational dimension of gender is underscored.

Sustained periods of fieldwork took place in three phases. During the 1998–99 academic year, my co-author Emily West and I observed a 16-member coed squad (5 men and 11 women) at a large northeastern university called “Stanton.” We attended biweekly practices and at-home sideline performances during both football and basketball season, and we interviewed the coach and team members. Although the Stanton cheerleaders had competed in the past, at the time they were a non-competitive sideline squad housed under the athletic department—a fairly typical college squad. During the 2002–03 academic year, I observed a 14-member coed squad (5 men and 9 women) at “Fairview College” in Northern California. This team was comparable in skill level to the Stanton group, with a similar practice and game schedule. I conducted interviews with a subset of 12 Fairview cheerleaders (7 women, 5 men).⁴

For the third and most intense phase of fieldwork I shifted my focus to a more highly skilled competitive college team. This was crucial to the study because increasing numbers of college teams in the United States are competing and because competition is central to both legal and lay understandings of sport. During 2004–05, I observed and conducted interviews with a large, 22-member competitive coed team (11 women, 11 men) at “Delta Valley State University” (“Delta State”), also in Northern California. As with most competitive college teams, it has a dual identity, performing on the sidelines of school sports events as well as training for competition.

At all three schools, the racial composition of the squads tended to mirror that of the larger student body, with Fairview and Delta State being more racially diverse than Stanton.⁵ However, given that ours is a qualitative study and that the numbers within any one racial group (including white) are small, no clear patterns in the doing of gender by race emerged.⁶

3. Thanks to Sarah Fenstermaker (personal communication) for helping to articulate this point.

4. The membership of the Fairview team was less stable than the other teams observed. Roughly half of the twelve were on the team the year I observed it, three were on the team the year before I started my observations, and three were on the team the year following.

5. While the Stanton squad had no men of color and only two women of color (one African American and one East Indian), the year that I observed the Fairview squad there were four white women, three Asian American women, and two black women; of the five men, three were white, one was Mexican American, and one was Asian American. Delta State was similarly diverse, with six white women, five women of color (three Latina and two Asian American), five white men, and six men of color (two black, two Mexican American, one Asian American, and one Arab American).

6. Whenever we asked about race, participants insisted that cheerleading was “color-blind.” Nevertheless, college cheerleading was acknowledged to be “whiter” in the South and Midwest than on the two coasts and southern teams dominate the most prestigious national competitions at the college level. As for participants’ sexual orientation, we did not ask directly but some cheerleaders volunteered this information and discussions of sexuality—specifically, the visible presence of gay men in cheerleading—surfaced regularly in the interviews.

I also engaged in more episodic fieldwork targeting summer training camps and national competitions. In the summer of 2003, I attended three summer training camps for college cheerleaders, one each in Kentucky, Texas, and Southern California. I observed cheerleaders in classes and evaluation sessions, attended daily seminars and informational meetings for coaches, and had many informal conversations with cheerleaders, coaches, and instructional staff.⁷ I chose the California camp because it was the one attended by both the Fairview and Delta State squads; I chose the Kentucky and Texas camps because the American South is widely considered the “heartland” of contemporary cheerleading. The camp in California was hosted by the Universal Cheerleading Association (UCA), the largest and most profitable of the country’s many cheerleading companies. Those in the South were run by the National Cheerleading Association (NCA), the oldest and second largest cheerleading company.

As for competitions, my co-author and I attended UCA’s national college championship together in January 2003 and I attended NCA’s national championship in April of that same year.⁸ In February of 2005 I attended a third national competition in Las Vegas hosted by the United Spirit Association (USA), a smaller, regional company that attracts teams primarily from the West and Southwest. I targeted events run by these three companies because, despite being owned by the same parent corporation, each boasts its own cheerleading style based largely on how strongly the roles of men and women are differentiated, and, related to this, how “showy” or “performance oriented” (to use the terms employed by our interviewees) the competition routines are. As we discuss later, these stylistic differences have implications for how participants understand the gender politics of cheerleading.

This more sporadic, event-centered fieldwork not only afforded me the opportunity to converse informally with many people, it gave rise to additional interviews with college cheerleaders and coaches beyond those affiliated with our three core squads, as well as with representatives of the cheerleading companies. In particular, I sought out individuals from the South to help compensate for lack of sustained fieldwork in that region, as well as individuals from teams affiliated with the NCA, to help offset the fact that all three of our core squads were affiliated with UCA and one also with USA. We include as part of our data “supplementary” interviews with 17 cheerleaders, 4 coaches, and 3 industry representatives, with men and women represented in roughly equal proportion.⁹ Because members of the same team were sometimes interviewed together, the total number of people interviewed for this paper (72) is greater than the actual number of interviews tape-recorded and transcribed (52).¹⁰

7. The teams at the camps varied in terms of size, gender composition (some were all-girl, some were coed), racial composition (a few were all-black, most were racially mixed or predominantly white), type of squad (some were competitive, some were not), and type of school (ranging from two year junior colleges to four year universities). Several foreign countries were represented, including Canada, Taiwan, Norway, and Mexico, and a few teams were outside of the college framework altogether, being community-based adult performance squads such as the one I belong to.

8. These two competitions are widely considered the most competitive and prestigious among all those held for college cheerleaders. We were spectators at these events, sitting in the stands watching teams execute their routines alongside thousands of other spectators. In each case, the competitions lasted three days and featured approximately 150 teams (3,000 cheerleaders) from schools across the country.

9. The supplementary interviews are broken down as follows: one with five members of a competitive Georgia team nicknamed “True Grits” (two white women, one Latina, and two white men); a dozen with individual cheerleaders from mostly southern states (three white men, one black man, two black women, one Latina, one Asian American woman, and four white women); four with coaches, one white woman from Texas, one white man from Georgia, and two black men from different regions in Louisiana; and three with representatives of the “cheer industry,” all white men, one from UCA, one from NCA, and one from USA.

10. Interviews generally lasted from one to three hours and covered a range of issues in addition to the question of whether cheerleading should be considered a sport. We were interested in why and how participants got involved in cheerleading; the extent and content of their cheerleading experience; what they liked most and least about the activity; whether they viewed cheerleading as a sport; how friends, family, and peers responded to their involvement in cheerleading; how they perceived and negotiated the sex–gender assumptions of cheerleading; and whether or not cheerleading “fit” with their own views of gender and sexuality. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and then coded and analyzed for emergent patterns and themes.

Per ethnographic tradition, we use pseudonyms for our individual participants and the squads we observed on an ongoing basis.

Although I did the bulk of the fieldwork and interviewing for this study, the analysis was a joint effort. Collaboration is somewhat unusual in ethnographic research, but a key benefit is that the observations and interpretations of one scholar can be “checked” against how the second scholar sees and makes sense of the same data. In our case, consistent with a “grounded theory” approach (see Glaser and Strauss 1967), categories of analysis arose from the data as evidence of general patterns of meaning to be explored thematically rather than evidence to be measured or quantified (see also Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The theme most pertinent to this paper—whether or not cheerleading is a sport—emerged at multiple junctures simultaneously: in interviews when we asked subjects to define cheerleading, to discuss why they got involved, or to defend cheerleading against popular stereotypes; during practices and summer camp sessions as we observed the physical demands on participants; and at national competitions whose very existence is predicated upon a sport model (complete with ESPN television coverage in some cases). As our study progressed, the question of whether cheerleading is a sport was increasingly taken up by the news media as well as by cheerleaders themselves in various online forums, further highlighting the significance and salience of the debate.

We elaborated on the “sport question” in interviews by asking subjects what criteria they applied to sport, whether they saw cheerleading as a sport across all contexts, and whether their private views differed from the public stance they took when discussing cheerleading with outsiders. This latter distinction underlines the importance of “sport” as a marker of legitimacy for those who might resist defining any activity associated with femininity as a sport. That sport and competition are gendered for our participants was revealed in the comparisons they made between cheerleading and “core” sports like football, as well as in the distinctions they imposed between the “sport-like” features of cheerleading and those linked to supportiveness or performativity. The key categories (athleticism, competition, performativity, supportiveness) that drive our analysis of the gender regime of contemporary coed cheerleading emerged out of these conversations.

In Search of Respect

Although cheerleading was once an all-male activity (“invented” in the late 1800s to increase spectator involvement in collegiate football), it was gradually feminized throughout the nineteenth century and has been female dominated since the 1950s (see Adams and Bettis 2003; Hanson 1995). Female involvement changed the nature of cheerleading, shifting emphasis away from character building and leadership to notions of physical attractiveness and sex appeal, which led to a white, middle class bias in the selection of female cheerleaders in the aftermath of desegregation (Grundy 2001; Hanson 1995) and the trivialization and devaluation of cheerleading overall (Hanson 1995). Icons of “ideal” femininity notwithstanding, cheerleading is often considered a trivial activity and female cheerleaders have been negatively stereotyped as dumb and/or sexually promiscuous, particularly as traditional gender ideologies underwent significant change in the wake of second wave feminism (Adams and Bettis 2003; Hanson 1995).

In a real if only partial sense, it was the shift toward sport that “saved” cheerleading from obsolescence and secured its contemporary popularity. If cheerleading lost ground in the post-Title IX era with the rise of feminism and women’s sports, it was partly because cultural scripts about femininity expanded during this period to incorporate notions of toughness and physical strength.¹¹ Cheerleading reclaimed its lost status with women by bringing its

11. Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for *Social Problems* for helping us to elaborate on this point.

performance of femininity up-to-date, combining enthusiasm and sex appeal on the one hand with hard-body athleticism on the other (see Adams and Bettis 2003). The transformation of cheerleading has drawn more men to the activity as well. As a UCA executive put it, “the idea of picking the cutest girl to be on the cheerleading team is so far gone now that guys can migrate back into it and feel good about it.”

Today, cheerleading routines incorporate advanced tumbling, stunting, and pyramid building as well as cheering and (sometimes) dance. Cheerleaders call themselves “cheer athletes” and the term “team” is used interchangeably with “squad.” While the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) does not recognize cheerleading as a sport, and while only about half of the nation’s high school athletic associations do (Dodd 2004), individual schools may classify cheerleading as a varsity sport if they wish. Some—including Delta State—award partial scholarships to cheerleaders. In 2003, to much media fanfare, the University of Maryland used its competitive “all-girl”¹² team to demonstrate Title IX compliance (the legality of this move is pending). Even the slogans on t-shirts and other cheer apparel reflect the bid for sports status: “Girl + Athlete = Cheerleader”; “Hold my weights while I stunt with your girl-friend”; “Other sports use one ball, we use two.”

For cheerleaders themselves, the question of whether college cheerleading is a sport, or ought to be classified as a sport, is a complicated one because of the diverse ways that people define sport, the diversity of school cheer squads that exist (coed versus all-girl, competitive versus sideline), the disparate ways that individual schools classify and treat cheerleading,¹³ and the difference between believing cheerleading to be a sport and wanting it to be “officially” recognized as such by the NCAA. Regarding this last point, some interviewees were aware of, and supported, the stance of the major cheerleading companies in opposing the classification of school cheerleading as a sport by the NCAA both because of the increased regulation that would ensue and because the sport classification might phase out non-competitive cheerleading altogether.¹⁴ What emerged in the fieldwork and interviews, then, was not a neat calibration of positions for or against the sport designation across all types of cheerleading, much less unanimous support for classifying cheerleading as a sport in a legal sense, but ways of talking about and negotiating the gendered relationship between cheerleading and sport in the search for greater legitimacy. Indeed, the issue of whether or not cheerleading is a “real” sport is a proxy for the issue of respect.

For all the participants in our study, the term “sport” signified high status; cheerleaders knew that playing sports was more prestigious than cheerleading, especially for men, and they complained about being disrespected by the collegiate athletes for whom they cheered. This was true even at Delta State, where the cheer team was the only team in the school’s recent history to win a national title. Most of the cheerleaders we interviewed, male and female alike, strongly resented their second class status both in their schools and in the culture at large; recognizing the cultural legitimacy of sport, they wanted that legitimacy for cheerleading. One Delta State cheerleader was quite blunt about this: “I want it to be considered a sport,” she said, “so people can’t trash it.”

12. The term “all-girl” is commonly used within cheerleading to specify squads that are exclusively female, regardless of participants’ ages (that is, little girls, adolescents, and young women are all considered “girls”). At some competitions, the term “all-girl squad” may also be used to describe squads that have one or two male participants.

13. The distinction between cheerleading and “real” sports can be quite pronounced at some schools. Cheer squads may be housed under “activities” rather than “athletics,” they may have little or no access to school resources, and they may lack adequate coaching and advising.

14. All three of the cheer company representatives that we interviewed emphasized that, despite the increasing emphasis on competition, sideline cheerleading was still the most ubiquitous form of school cheerleading. If the NCAA were to recognize cheerleading as a sport, not only would squads be forced to compete on a regular basis because the legal definition of sport foregrounds competition, but the competition squads would likely be all-girl rather than coed (further marginalizing men in cheerleading), because only all-girl teams “count” toward Title IX compliance.

Coed college cheerleaders attempt to bring cheerleading under the umbrella of sport in two main ways: by focusing on the competitive nature of cheerleading, and, related to this, by emphasizing the skill or athleticism of cheerleading. The majority of our interviewees, particularly those on competitive teams, drew firm boundaries between competitive and non-competitive cheer, believing that the former qualifies as a sport but the latter typically does not. The following quote from Jack, a competitive cheerleader on the east coast, is illustrative: "I'm going to say that, for cheerleading to be a sport, it goes from squad to squad. A squad that competes, that has competed in the past, they want to compete in the future, and they're working to compete. I'll say that squad is a sport." Repeatedly we heard phrases such as "a sport is anything where you compete against someone else" (Stanton cheerleader) and "if you're not competing, it's not a sport" (Fairview cheerleader).

At the same time, participants recognize that it is not a competitive orientation alone that puts cheerleading in league with sport, it is also the athleticism and skill presumed to go along with that orientation. Participants routinely characterized competitive cheerleaders as "phenomenal athletes" and emphasized the hard work, dedication, and training required. "If you look at the people who do it, they're not just random people walking in off the street with no ability," said Ruby, a Delta State cheerleader, "they've all been athletes and their bodies are trained. We work hard, it's very dangerous, and we deserve that title [i.e., sport]." Sometimes we heard that cheerleading was *more* demanding athletically than other sports. While interviewees most often compared cheerleading to gymnastics and diving, some also invoked sports in the institutional core. It was Ruby's opinion that "anyone can be a football player, anyone can run with a ball or throw a ball. Not everyone can do a toss-lib" (a type of partner stunt). Her teammate, Lars, said that his "hardest football practice ever" was still easier than a "mediocre" cheer practice. A young man I met at the Kentucky camp compared cheerleading to his experience playing rugby, hockey, and baseball: "each of those sports is tough," he said, "after practices, you are sore for a bit; [but] after an intense cheer workout, your body is sore for two to three days. Every muscle in your body is used." Because of the premium placed on training and athleticism, a minority of participants questioned competition as the litmus test for sports classification, insisting that sideline-only teams were also engaging in sport if they were highly skilled.¹⁵

The criteria of competition and athleticism were important for distinguishing squads that "deserved" the sport label from those that did not, and for enabling interviewees to distance themselves from the feminine stigma they associate with earlier generations of cheerleading. Interviewees expressed frustration that outdated, 1950s-era stereotypes persisted and were applied indiscriminately to the whole of cheerleading. Manuel, captain of the Delta State team, insisted that assigning the label "sport" would make little difference unless people also stopped thinking of cheerleading as "just a bunch of ditzzy girls on the sidelines who jump around and entertain the crowd." He and others in the study believed that greater knowledge of the activity would breed greater respect. Ben, one of Manuel's teammates, said that "ninety-five percent of the people you meet don't know anything about it . . . as much as cheerleading has changed within the cheer community, for someone on the outside looking in, cheerleading is still the rah-rah skirts and pom-pons kind of thing." Liz, the captain of a competitive Louisiana team, said much the same thing: "People are not willing to accept cheerleading in their brains as a sport. This is based on pure ignorance. They can't accept what they don't know. People think that cheerleading is just a girl's activity or something only girls do."

15. This minority of interviewees also saw sport designation as hinging on structural similarities between cheerleading and other school sports, such as regular practice and training schedules, getting a varsity letter, being governed by the athletic department, and having scholarship programs. According to Shoshana, one of the Stanton captains: "It's a varsity sport at [Stanton]. It takes a lot of time . . . we work just as hard as a sports team. And if you go to the Midwest for college cheerleading, they do recruit. People go to school to be cheerleaders, they get scholarships."

Cheerleading has had a difficult time gaining recognition and respect not just because people are ignorant of what it is really about but also because certain feminine elements of the cheerleading canon continue to compromise its legitimacy. As much as college cheer has incorporated the traditionally “masculine” qualities of competition and athleticism associated with sport, these qualities have combined with, not replaced, the more traditionally feminine qualities of supportiveness and performativity. That school cheerleading has retained key elements of its feminine legacy complicates the interpretive struggle over the meaning and status of the activity, as cheerleaders construct and deploy “common sense” notions about gender and gender difference in an effort to make sense of their own involvement.

Obstacles to Respect: The Supportive Function of Cheerleading

Despite the move toward competition and greater athleticism, cheerleading is still strongly associated with its supportive function, best captured by the image of female cheerleaders on the sidelines of (male) sporting events. This image is not as outdated as the cheerleaders we interviewed liked to think. Industry representatives are quick to point out that the “bread and butter” of the business are sideline squads that do little or no competing; since girls and women dominate cheerleading overall, most of these squads are all-girl.¹⁶ Competitive school squads, both coed and all-girl, also uphold the sideline tradition by cheering at sports events, appearing at pep rallies, and performing at school or community functions. The sideline paradigm suggests that cheerleading is central to doing gender in ways that conflate femininity with emotional supportiveness. Insofar as the role of cheerleaders is to express through ritualized performance support for other athletes, they are doing the same kind of “emotion work” in the context of organized sport that middle class women have traditionally done in the interpersonal context of heterosexual marriage (see Cline and Spender 1987; Hochschild 1983).

The sideline function of cheerleading constitutes a major obstacle to its bid for sports status not only among outsiders but also among cheerleaders themselves. As Tarek, one of the Fairview cheerleaders, observed: “how can a sport be something that encourages other sports? Like, if you’re there to supplement sports how can you yourself be a sport?” Tarek, like other sideline-only cheerleaders in our study, did not see sideline cheer as a sport because of its supportive dimension, but he also did not see supportiveness and athleticism as mutually exclusive necessarily. Some of the competitive cheerleaders we interviewed disagreed, making comments like, “sideline cheer is easy,” “sideline teams don’t train like athletes do for other sports,” and “they’re just out there looking pretty.” While we did meet a few competitive cheerleaders who embraced the “spirit” function of cheerleading wholeheartedly, most downplayed their sideline performances as mere practices, or as obligations to fulfill in order that they might participate in the “real” cheerleading that occurs at competitions. When asked whether her cheerleaders would get rid of their sideline obligations if they could, the Delta State coach said, “Oh yeah. Maybe one or two of ‘em would say, ‘Aw, we don’t get to do that anymore?’ But the majority of them . . . these kids are all here to compete, and do the things on the side that they have to do.”

At Stanton and Fairview, where the cheer teams were non-competitive, the denigration of sideline cheer was accomplished more subtly, by arguing that cheerleading was not just—or even primarily—about supporting other athletes, but an opportunity to display one’s skills, improve one’s skills, and even compete with the opposing cheer squad on the other side of the field or court. They were not alone in employing such arguments. As the coach of a coed squad

16. Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis (2003) estimate that school cheerleading is 97 percent female. This figure seems quite high for college cheerleading, however, where men have the highest rates of participation. The major cheerleading companies do not keep gender statistics on college cheerleaders but I estimate that the ratio of women to men at the camps and competitions I observed was roughly 3:2.

in Louisiana put it, “when we go to games, there’s a whole competition going on that most of the people in the crowd don’t even realize. We believe the football game is just a backdrop for our performance.” Male cheerleaders also spoke of competing against male teammates when throwing stunts and basket tosses. “We’re competitive,” said Heiko, a former member of the Fairview squad. “I used to compete with some of the guys on the team, you know, ‘if you drop a stunt you owe me a beer.’” Thus cheerleaders can and do distance themselves from the supportive dimension of cheerleading, assumed to embody outdated expectations for women, by interpreting the sideline role in unexpected and even creative ways that cast cheerleading as competitive and athletic in its own right even in a sideline context.

The gender politics of sideline cheer are further manifest in how strongly male cheerleaders chafe against the sideline component compared to their female counterparts. To be sure, some female cheerleaders expressed deep ambivalence about their supportive role, recognizing its links to an outdated and devalued version of femininity, and, as indicated above, most insisted that their sideline performance was as much “for themselves” as for the athletes they supported. But their ambivalence paled in comparison to the men’s, for whom supportiveness is not just devalued or outmoded but gender transgressive. The following comment from Forest, a Delta State cheerleader, is illustrative: “What I don’t like? I *hate* the games, *so much*. I hate games. I hate games because I hate being out in front of people in uniform. I’ve gotten better . . . like, my first year—trying to get the crowd pumped up for some other guys, it was a little weird.” Over and over we heard similar comments, even from the men on sideline-only squads. According to John, a Stanton freshman, “if it were up to me, I’d come here and practice three times a week and never ever go to games . . . they want me to do arm movements, do you know how bad that is? They want me to run with the flag and be happy, and that’s just horrible, horrible stuff.”

Male cheerleaders communicated discomfort with their sideline role in the way they acted during games, holding back from yelling and expressing less enthusiasm than their female teammates. This was true for the men on all three squads observed as well as on teams at the summer training camps (getting men to embrace the sideline function of cheerleading was one of the topics covered in the coaches’ seminars that I attended at the camps). At Delta State, roughly half of the men had been on high school cheer teams where they were excused from cheering games altogether. According to Diego, one of the Delta State cheerleaders and a long time UCA instructor, this arrangement had much to do with the successful retention of male cheerleaders at his school: “all we did was compete. And so that made it a lot easier to retain the guys . . . guys hate cheerleading. We hate going to games and standing there and doing motions or yelling. We just want to put the girls up [in stunts].”

Coaches routinely lament the difficulty they face recruiting and retaining boys and men. Some schools, including Fairview, use the term “stunt team” instead of “cheer squad” in an effort to downplay the supportive function and emphasize the athleticism of cheerleading, thereby making it sound more masculine and sport-like. But the part of college cheerleading that involves supporting other teams, whether on the sidelines or when demonstrating crowd skills in a competition setting, undermines its status as a “true” sport, even for participants and coaches who value its athleticism.

More Gender Trouble: The Performative Aspects of Cheerleading

Also opposed to conventional understandings of sport and closely related to the supportive dimension of cheerleading are its aesthetic, performance demands, which are not unlike those of figure skating (see Baughman 1995; Feder, 1995). As Abigail Feder notes (1995), the theatrical elements of figure skating—costume, makeup, gesture—that provide opportunities for feminine adornment and display also “soften the athletic prowess required for executing triple jumps and flying sit-spins” (p. 24), in effect masking or “apologizing” for the skater’s athleticism.

The same is true for cheerleading, where the performative elements, undeniably coded as “feminine” by participants, over-determine femininity for the women involved and provide further opportunities for boundary work for the men.

While the term “performance” is arguably gender neutral (as in the phrase “high-performance athlete”), in cheerleading it is used interchangeably with “performativity”—meaning theatrical, energetic, and entertaining—and is understood both as a feminine construct and in contrast to sport. This is evident when cheerleaders speak of performance and sport as opposing tendencies and in the characteristics they associate with performance. According to a Stanton cheerleader, “[the physical training] is similar to what other sports teams do . . . but [cheerleading] is hard to define because, at the same time, you’re performing . . . and I think that’s where the question comes in . . . I think of cheerleaders as performers as well as athletes.” A member of the Fairview squad invoked the same opposition when she compared cheerleading to gymnastics; whereas the latter was “certainly a sport” in her view, she hesitated to characterize cheerleading in the same way because “cheerleading is a spectacle, which is like more performance than sport.” Dance figured centrally in these distinctions, with dance representing the performance part of cheerleading and other skills such as a tumbling and stunting representing sport.

The supportive and performative dimensions of cheerleading are closely related, both in fact and in the eyes of cheerleaders. Appearing before a crowd requires that cheerleaders be enthusiastic, energetic, and entertaining. This is accomplished not just through dancing, tumbling, or eye-catching stunts, but also through the bubbly, peppy, performance of “spirit” in cheerleading—what we call “informal cheerleading.” Informal cheerleading is what participants do to express enthusiasm and “rally the crowd,” whether on the sidelines or competition mat. It includes smiling, “facials” (exaggerated facial expressions), being in constant motion, jumping, and executing dynamic arm, hand, and head motions—all considered feminine terrain. Performativity is also defined in terms of appearance: how female cheerleaders should look when in front of crowds. In the words of a Stanton cheerleader, “we’re told to be in full makeup, to do our hair. Because we’re performing. If you’re not wearing lipstick, that’s the first thing [the coach] will say to you, ‘why isn’t your lipstick on?’” Being petite is part of the “appearance aspect” for women on coed teams, as is wearing the conventional cheerleader uniform, whose short skirt, tight-fitting shell top (often cropped, exposing the midriff), and hair ribbons suggest a combination of youthfulness and sexual availability. As Connell (1987) so aptly observed: “[emphasized] femininity is performed, performed especially to men” (p. 188).

As a group, the young women we interviewed accepted these feminine accoutrements as “just part of the show,” “just for entertainment,” and “necessary to please the crowd”—in other words, a taken-for-granted necessity in an activity focused on entertainment and bodily display. While a couple of interviewees expressed discomfort with this state of affairs (as one of the Stanton women put it: “how can it be a varsity sport if you have to have makeup?”), most clearly enjoyed the “girly” aspects of cheerleading and had little interest in trading their short skirts, hair ribbons, and makeup for more gender-neutral attire. Ruby’s comment is illustrative: “I think it’s fun quite honestly, as a girl I like to do my makeup kind of fun and sparkly and get out there . . . I like wearing ribbons in my hair, it’s a girly feminine thing and I think it’s something that shouldn’t be lost.” Regarding the “skimpy uniforms,” her teammate, Sidney, said, “I guess it goes back to the whole heterosexual thing, the pretty girls . . . the skimpy uniforms. The guys enjoy it . . . and us looking cute attracts the audience to look at us.” She insisted that cheerleading was no different than the rest of popular culture in this regard: “It’s the same with being on TV, like, or being a singer. You want them to be cute, you’re watching them, you know . . . If you gotta wear the short skirts to make people look at you, then I guess that’s what you gotta do.” Other interviewees pointed out that cheer skirts are no shorter than skirts worn in tennis or field hockey, and that cheerleading uniforms are modest compared to gymnasts’ leotards or swimmers’ Speedos. “All sports have kinky outfits,”

observed Sarah, one of the Stanton women, "why pick on cheerleading?" Female cheerleaders are well aware that cheerleading is trivialized in the larger culture, but they attribute this trivialization not to the short skirts and makeup *per se* but to people's over-valuation of these elements when assessing the "worth" of cheerleading.

Rather than view the combination of performativity and athleticism as somehow unique to cheerleading, we suggest that female cheerleaders have absorbed the lessons of a culture that strongly emphasizes the display of sexy, athletic bodies (see Heywood and Dworkin 2003) and that this marriage of seemingly contradictory elements is one of the hallmarks of contemporary emphasized femininity (see Adams and Bettis 2003). In absorbing this lesson, female cheerleaders may be little different than female athletes in more "legitimate" sports or post-Title IX women more generally. As Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin (2003) argue, "for much of the younger demographic, exhibiting a hot body is an intense sign of valuation . . . not . . . devaluation," because being sexualized "no longer carries the social stigma it once did" (p. 89). What makes the femininity of cheerleaders "emphasized" relative to that of many other female athletes is the fact that, for cheerleaders, artifice, adornment, and sexual display are not optional characteristics to be adopted off the field or court: they are part of the sport itself. Moreover, the heteronormativity of the girly-girl aspect of coed cheerleading is no small part of the activity's appeal for female participants, as this creates a "safe" outlet for their athleticism—safe because the issue of sexuality appears resolved in the "right" direction. It is telling that while gay men are an acknowledged part of coed cheerleading, lesbians are rarely mentioned and are virtually invisible.

Male cheerleaders are much less sanguine about the performative nature of cheerleading, the increasing sexual commodification of male athletes in the media notwithstanding (see Miller 2001). Commenting on the gender inappropriateness (for men) of cheerleading's "obsession with appearances," Rulond, a Fairview cheerleader, said "never before in my life had I ever been involved in anything where I was so carefully monitored for my [appearance] . . . But image is everything in cheerleading. People were 'Rulond, you need to shave. You need to go in there and comb your hair, young man.'" He explained that this was a turnoff for men. "Usually aesthetics and hygiene and appearance are kind of tertiary and you would rather have your words and actions make your statement about you. I think that's just a nice way of saying cheerleading is too fluffy." As further evidence of his view, Rulond observed, somewhat disdainfully, that "a game face for a cheerleader is a big smile." Indeed, Rulond was one of several men in our study who denied the sport label to competitive as well as sideline cheerleading because the competition is indirect, occurring through the medium of judging, and because the criteria for judging are partly aesthetic. Significantly, these same objections are also raised by male critics of competitive cheerleading in the news media (see Dodd 2004; Morrissey 2004). Thus feminine performativity can prevent competitive cheerleading from gaining legitimacy both when people question the presence of performativity in sport and when this performativity necessitates a "subjective" mode of evaluation.

The performance demands of cheerleading not only undermine its status as a "real" sport, they also expose male participants to homophobia. Male cheerleaders recognize the tension between conventional notions of performativity, coded as feminine, and conventional notions of heterosexual masculinity (also noted by Davis 1990). This tension makes straight men, as well as gay men invested in maintaining a straight image, initially resistant to the more feminized elements of cheerleading, including dancing and jumping, certain cheer motions, and the repertoire of gestures and facial expressions in the informal performance of spirit. Men on coed teams facilitate the visual spectacle of cheerleading, particularly through stunting, tumbling, and pyramid building, but they generally are not asked to smile constantly, bounce up and down, shake pom-poms, or wiggle their fingers in the air (a gesture known as "spirit fingers"). To do so would risk being labeled gay, a scenario described by one male cheerleader as "the gay cheerleader syndrome."

“Nothing with Hips”: Managing the Male Cheerleader’s “Image Problem”

According to Connell (1987), hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality. Thus a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual (or not heterosexual). To the degree that cheerleading is coded as feminine, and to the degree that femininity (for men) is conflated with homosexuality, male cheerleaders are concerned about managing their gender image. *Everyone* we encountered in this study spoke of the gay stereotype for male cheerleaders. As Ben put it: “most people assume, if you say ‘I’m a male cheerleader,’ they assume you’re gay. It happens all the time. That’s why I don’t even tell people [that I cheer]. People always ask me if I play football, and so I just tell ‘em ‘yeah.’ It’s not even worth getting into a conversation about.” Mandy, a junior on the Stanton squad, spoke of a teammate who was pledging a “hard core, really masculine” fraternity. She predicted he would “quit before rush” because the existing members would never initiate a cheerleader. When asked why, she replied: “because they look at it like, excuse my language, they think it’s such a fag thing to do.” Sean, a competitive cheerleader from Texas summed up the reaction he gets when people find out that he cheers, saying, “well um, ‘less masculine than most,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘fairy’—I’ve pretty much heard it all.”

Male cheerleaders manage the gay cheerleader syndrome in a number of ways, most of which reinforce the notion that being strong and being straight “naturally” go together. For example, some mentioned the importance of throwing impressive stunts as a way to “prove” they weren’t gay. “The taunting, I’ve had it at games,” said Jack, a competitive east coast cheerleader. “They call me a fag, and I’m like, ‘come on!’ and I just shove it in their face. And do a great stunt that they could never do, and shut them up.” Others compared themselves to football players—not surprisingly, since football players are widely understood to epitomize hegemonic masculinity. The men on a competitive squad I met at the Kentucky camp lifted weights on the same schedule as their school’s football team specifically to impress upon the other athletes their comparable strength. Likewise, Ben, of Delta State, dismissed the assumption that football players were stronger, superior athletes. In his words: “the fact of the matter is, these guys [on the football team] can’t do what I do in the gym. Like, I’m more athletic. I have more strength than these guys. It’s just, people look at you differently when they find out you’re a cheerleader; it takes away from who you are.” Sean provides another variation on the football theme when defending his decision to cheer, in the process displaying what we call “compensatory hypermasculinity”—the explicit assertion of heterosexuality in the face of the “discrediting” fact of being a male cheerleader (see Goffman 1963 on the concept of discreditable identities). “Football players roll around in the grass with other males, shower with each other, and slap each other on the butt,” he said, “and then you look at me, I’m hanging around with some of the hottest, in-shape young ladies that the school has to offer. I’m touching them and holding them in places you can only dream about. Now let me ask you, who’s gay?”

The male cheerleaders in our study knew what gender appropriate reasons to offer in order to justify taking part in a feminine activity. Unlike female cheerleaders, whose gender identity is confirmed (though not uniformly respected) as a result of their participation, male cheerleaders feel compelled to prove they are “real” men despite being cheerleaders. They do this on as well as off the field by embracing certain parts of the cheerleading repertoire (stunting, pyramid building) and resisting others (smiling, cheering), and in their general demeanor. According to Tom, a freshman on the Stanton squad: “I think if you’re a male cheerleader, you tend to try to act more masculine . . . You know, you kind of push out your chest, draw up your shoulders a little bit, look like you’re big and tough.”

Thus it is not that male cheerleaders refuse to be performative at all while on the sidelines or in competitions, but that they seek out gender-appropriate modes of performance.

In fact, when male cheerleaders' performance of masculinity is successful, it arguably enhances the image of cheerleading as a tough, athletic activity. Forest described how his attitude toward performativity changed over time, as he came to discover an acceptably masculine approach. He said that in high school he was reluctant to smile and "sell the routine" because he saw that as feminine. "But the more mature I got the more I realized—I saw other [guys] doing it, and you didn't have to do it in a feminine way, you could do it, like, kind of cocky and all pumped up . . . you know, [after a great stunt] hit the crowd, show 'em your guns" (lowering his head toward his biceps in a classic muscle man pose). His teammate, Ruby, who was listening, agreed: "I think the guys, they don't play it up physically with makeup, but their job is to look good. Like, you have big, strong guys that are muscular and athletic. And they know how to work it in front of an audience."

These comments reveal a "different but equal" perspective on gender relations (including gender performance) that resonates with the views of the young people in our study generally: that the roles of men and women are equally important but organized differently according to gender appropriateness, understood in relation to common sense notions of what looks good for whom. This is underscored in their assessment of male cheerleaders who violate these common sense notions by adopting a feminine—even hyperfeminine—mode of performativity. Bruce, a Delta State cheerleader, explained that it was "okay to be really showy" and to "make the faces," but "only to a certain extent." "[Cheerleaders] do that stuff to make the routine seem more energetic," he explained, "but then there's some people who take it to another level. I mean, they're so flaming the flames are flying off the stage and hitting you on the head!" These "flaming" cheerleaders are, of course, assumed to be gay, and are sometimes resented by other men for perpetuating the "wrong" image of male cheerleaders. According to Ben, "I don't have a problem with gay people, I know a lot of gay people . . . but you get a cheerleader who's, like, flaming, and they take it way too far. Like, the girliest girl I know is not as flaming as guy cheerleaders that are flamboyant about it. It's beyond feminine." When asked why that should bother him, he said, "there's no reason for it, especially if you're going to be in an open forum where it's not just your personal life anymore. Like, this is my life too; this is my cheerleading if you're going to be at a competition I'm at."

At issue here is the *performance of gender* not sexual orientation per se. And the public nature of cheerleading, combined with the fact that cheerleaders are considered ambassadors of their schools, mean that the performance of masculinity is monitored and controlled not just by male cheerleaders but also by coaches, school administrators, and alumni. Diego, of Delta State, said that cheerleading coaches at the college level were under pressure from alumni to avoid any appearance of homosexuality and that this pressure can lead coaches to pass over men "who don't fit the image of the program." Once a team is constituted, other forms of impression management can occur. Ruth, the veteran coach of a Texas squad, mentioned having a talk every year with the gay men on her team about being too "obvious" with their sexuality during performances, as she believed this to be "a threat to the squad's respect." Lionel, coach of a Louisiana squad, took a similar approach with the gay men on his team and successfully "toned down" their behavior through "conversations about image."

The doing of masculinity in cheerleading is therefore no less a conscious production than the doing of femininity, despite the greater emphasis on artifice and sexual attractiveness for female cheerleaders. What is different is the degree of variation one sees: performances of femininity are far more consistent across squads and across the different cheerleading companies than performances of masculinity, suggesting that within coed cheerleading at least, masculinity is a less coherent, more polyvalent construct. In Judith Butler's (1990) terms, if gender is produced through "a stylized, repetition of acts . . . that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity" (pp. 140–41), the *discontinuity* in the production of masculinity in cheerleading works to expose the contingency of that ground.

What version of masculinity a team embraces is shaped by which cheerleading company a team affiliates with. Despite the commitment to hegemonic masculinity expressed by many of

the male participants in our study, it was also understood that, because different companies promote different styles of cheerleading at their camps and competitions, “there is something for everyone” when it comes to male participants, although not in equal proportion: the largest and most profitable company, the UCA, is also the most gender conservative. As one long-time UCA instructor from the South explained it: “UCA stipulates no toe touches [for men], no girl motions and moves, nothing with hips, no dancing. At camp, the instructors get yelled at if we’re just horsing around and the guys are doing those things.” She added: “once you cross that line and let the guys dance like girls you start losing the masculine image you want to project.” Participants describe the UCA style as “traditional,” “collegiate,” and “clean-cut,” but also “boring” and “conservative.” Dylan, a freshman on the Delta State team, likened the gendered division of labor on UCA squads to a traditional marriage: “In UCA, the guys, they pretty much do the ‘men’s work.’ It’s like, the guy goes out and throws the garbage away in a family and the woman cooks dinner. It’s like that kind of thing.”

This is in contrast to the style of cheerleading promoted by the other two companies, where male cheerleaders do dance and jump, albeit often in a “masculine” way that differentiates them from their female teammates: no twirls, spins, or leaps, no bumping or grinding, “nothing suggestive,” was the way the coach of an NCA-affiliated squad at the Texas camp put it. Generally speaking, the NCA style is considered more “performative” than the UCA style, and the USA style is considered the most performative of all. Interviewees used adjectives like “showy,” “flashy,” “gaudy,” and even “cartoony” when describing USA teams, because of the heightened theatricality of the face, head, and hand gestures, as well as the greater attention to choreography.¹⁷

Within the world of cheerleading, then, the UCA could be said to represent hegemonic masculinity, with the other two companies representing different subordinated masculinities. What image of masculinity a team projects and how male cheerleaders feel as individuals are not always aligned, however, as is implied by the efforts of coaches to either “tone down” or “amp up” the level of performativity of particular men on their squads. Although the majority of the male cheerleaders we met from UCA-affiliated teams strongly supported the company’s efforts to “keep male cheerleading a masculine thing” (to quote a Kentucky cheerleader), not all did. Bruce, of Delta State, who earlier we quoted chastising “flaming” male cheerleaders for taking the performativity of cheerleading too far, himself so enjoyed dancing, smiling, and expressing enthusiasm that he declined employment with the UCA. “I’m definitely a performer,” he said. “I was in drama before I was ever in cheerleading.” Reese was another Delta State cheerleader who didn’t shy away from emotional expressiveness: when the team was revamping its UCA routine for the USA national competition, he grew impatient with certain male teammates for resisting the flashier, more expressive USA style. Of course, the reverse was also true: men on teams affiliated with “performance-oriented” companies did not always express gratitude for the opportunity to dance and jump, instead they tolerated these elements as a necessary part of “what is a predominantly female driven sport” (Texas cheerleader).¹⁸

17. USA cheerleaders, primarily but not exclusively the women, smile, pout, wink, and blow kisses during routines. Because routines are set to music, participants act out simple scenarios compatible with the lyrics (lassoing a horse, for example, or blowing smoke from the tip of a gun). Also, self-congratulatory gestures are common for men after a tumbling pass or stunt sequence.

18. Coaches may also exert a strong influence on what their male cheerleaders do in routines, despite the norms of the company. One NCA-affiliated coach I interviewed at the Kentucky camp does not incorporate any dancing whatsoever into his competition routines because he considers that “too girly” even for female cheerleaders. Jasper, a coach based in Louisiana, told me that his male cheerleaders “can really perform, can really dance good,” but at NCA summer camp they refrain from dancing because “that’s not the all-American pie image.” Likewise, Monty, a former Texas cheerleader (now an NCA employee) and one of the few openly gay men in our study, spoke of dance in terms of image management: “We did not dance, we were very careful about making that delineation as a matter of fact . . . ‘cause let’s face it, historically there’s always the concern on the part of male cheerleaders that ‘I’m going to be seen as feminine’ . . . and so they go out of their way not to invite criticism.”

What all this suggests is that cheerleading is a contested space for the performance of masculinity. The doing of masculinity in cheerleading is a complicated business both because there is latitude in how masculinity gets expressed and because cheerleading continues to be understood as feminine terrain, an inappropriate activity for “real” men to pursue. This makes cheerleading a welcoming space for men who do not care to prove their heteromascularity, while at the same time prompting compensatory behavior from men who do. Because cheerleading is a public ritual, staged before an audience, it renders the codes by which gendered identities and practices are constructed particularly visible, both to spectators and to cheerleaders themselves, who otherwise might be less conscious of how, exactly, gender gets done. In this sense, the public “display” of gender (see Goffman 1976) provides the occasion for reflecting on and negotiating the everyday doing of gender in a broader sense.

As West and Zimmerman (1987) note: “to do gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment” (p. 136). For the majority of cheerleaders in our study, however, most of whom identified as straight, living up to normative gender expectations played a key role in their attraction to cheerleading. The contrasting appearance of male and female cheerleaders and their different physical performances were necessary both to participants’ enjoyment of the activity and to their continued participation. Such differentiation serves to “masculinize” cheerleading for men and to “feminize” it for women. Yet these two tendencies clash when it comes to legitimation as a sport: while masculinization helps cheerleading gain credibility, feminization renders it vulnerable to trivialization and ridicule. Feminization excludes cheerleading from the “institutional core” of sport (Messner 2002) and from getting the kind of respect that cheerleaders desire.

That feminization is an obstacle to legitimacy—and, conversely, that “masculinization” helps secure it—is nothing new (see Feder 1995; Theberge 1993; Williams 1995). Interviewees speak dismissively of all-girl sideline squads (both past and present), while at the most elite levels of competitive college cheerleading coed teams occupy the highest status at camps and competitions. At Delta State, the more prestigious coed squad supported men’s sports while the less prestigious all-girl squad supported women’s sports, and Stanton had a similar allocation for its varsity (coed) and junior varsity (all-girl) squads. Participants spoke of the ability of coed teams to “build higher and stronger” and “do cooler stuff that girls just sometimes can’t do” (Delta State cheerleader) and of the fact that “people take us more seriously” when guys are involved in cheerleading (Fairview cheerleader). Tarek, of the Fairview squad, said that the presence of “big guys” was “a huge part” of the transition to sport, but that the predominance of young girls in cheerleading was sabotaging this effort: “These programs where it’s all 12-year-old girls . . . I mean, it’s understandable, but as long as that’s around, I think it’s going to be hard to classify ourselves as a sport . . . it’s got the stigma of an all-girl thing still.”

His point is underscored by interviewees who insist that, access to “hot girls” notwithstanding, what really draws men into cheerleading is the presence of other, “masculine” men who send the message “it’s okay to be a male cheerleader.” According to Diego: “when you have a strong tradition of big guys being on the squad it becomes way easier [to recruit men]. It’s hard to break the barrier when you have a guy on the team who’s more feminine. Guys kind of shy away from that.” Thus the emphasis on big, strong men who make the “cool stuff” possible is part of the gender regime of coed cheerleading and central to its bid for legitimacy at an institutional as well as individual level.

Conclusion

Cheerleading is a space where the doing and displaying of gender are particularly visible, and where the gender regimes represented by hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are being negotiated and resecured in the face of alternative regimes. It is a place

where the boundaries of gender difference are crossed as well as preserved. To quote Rulond (ironically, one of the men in our study seemingly most committed to hegemonic masculinity): “[cheerleading] is a way, kind of, of men and women maybe trying on each other’s clothes a little bit.” Coed college cheerleading is neither a bastion of gender conservatism nor an unfettered space of gender nonconformity; rather, as a mainstream, “feminine” activity seeking legitimacy as a “serious” sport, it expresses and exposes the gender politics at play in a shifting institutional context. In examining these politics, we have been less invested in demonstrating that cheerleading *is* or *should be* considered a sport than in observing the boundary work of participants as they struggle to “match” their doing of gender in cheerleading with their gendered identities and beliefs.

The process of protecting sport from feminization has been an ongoing one in which masculinity and femininity must be continuously differentiated in order to keep the latter at bay (see Messner 1992). When male cheerleaders distance themselves from the sexualized, performative dimensions of cheerleading, for example, they contribute to the perception that femininity and performativity are “naturally” intertwined and that both are the purview of women (and gay men). Indeed, sport is a powerful site for naturalizing gender difference because it appears to harness “nature” rather than “culture,” reflecting biological differences between men and women rather than particular gender regimes. Because gender is defined and performed *relationally* in coed cheerleading, with masculinity and femininity being constructed simultaneously within the same cultural field, the activity warrants special attention for the ways in which it expands gender regimes (e.g., allowing women to embrace athleticism and men to embrace performativity, within limits) while at the same time reinforcing traditional conceptions of gender difference (e.g., assuming that athleticism and performativity differ—and should differ—by gender). While few other sports provide the opportunity for examining gender politics as they play out in this side-by-side manner, sport typically being organized according to separate spheres, the importance of relational analysis for understanding the “gendering” of society more broadly is widely acknowledged (Connell 1987, 2002; Kimmel 2000; Lorber 1994; McKay, Cole, and Messner 1997; Thorne 1993).

The coexistence of gendered opposites—sport and performance, athletics and aesthetics, competitiveness and supportiveness—both captures the relational quality of coed cheerleading as a whole and the gender performance of female cheerleaders specifically. This performance helps to construct and enact a contemporary script for emphasized femininity. Indeed, cheerleading is a key site for the production of emphasized femininity insofar as it allows women to “add” valued, masculine qualities to certain traditionally feminine ones. That the athleticism of cheerleading is packaged in a sexually appealing way and combined with aesthetic or performative demands means that female cheerleaders do not have to exhibit the same degree of “apologetic behavior” (Felshin 1974) as their male counterparts. The apology for their participation is built into the activity itself—in the grace and flexibility of their athleticism, and in the premium placed on adornment and (hetero)sexual display. At the same time, because the “emphasized” elements of femininity in cheerleading are not selling points in the world of sport, they are not foregrounded by participants invested in garnering for cheerleading greater status and recognition. Female cheerleaders well understand at which end of the gender continuum legitimacy as a “serious” sport lies.

For their part, male cheerleaders generally tolerate the marriage of aesthetics and athleticism for their female teammates, but not for themselves, as the most valued form of masculinity—hegemonic masculinity—is understood to preclude the feminine qualities of supportiveness and performativity. Hence, you have the compensatory behavior of male cheerleaders and the gendered division of labor on many squads, including a separate, masculine mode of performance. The construction of masculinity within cheerleading is contested, however, because the alternatives to hegemonic masculinity, no less a part of cheerleading for being less popular, are so clearly on display. In the feminine world of cheerleading, aesthetics and performativity threaten to (and do) spill over into male terrain, making masculinity a diverse and hotly

contested construct that gets institutionalized in different ways. The performance of gender in cheerleading, particularly for men, exists along a continuum that is anchored and secured by the concept of hegemonic masculinity but is not exhausted by it.

Whether cheerleading reflects or helps constitute a change in the status of subordinated masculinities in everyday life is an open question. Connell (1987) argues that actual masculinities in western culture are less diverse than actual femininities because there is greater pressure on men (compared to women) to negate alternative forms, given that men generally hold more social power and there is more at stake to lose. But the rigidity of masculinity in the past may have facilitated an accelerated "opening up" of masculinity now, such that what is considered normative for men is undergoing a significant shift. Toby Miller (2001), for example, argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is weakening as men are increasingly subject to the same objectifying media practices formerly associated with women. While our study suggests that hegemonic masculinity is still very much alive, male cheerleaders' efforts to carve out a gender appropriate space for themselves do not simply demonstrate men's allegiance to hegemonic masculinity or secure the dominance of this type of masculinity over and against its alternatives, they also underscore the fragility and tenuousness of the dominance itself.

Of course, no paper is exhaustive, and significant issues remain undeveloped here. One key arena for future analysis is competitive all-girl college teams where, because girls "base" as well as "fly," the division of labor is determined by size and strength rather than gender. Although female bases are subject to the same overdetermined feminine appearance and performance demands as flyers, their more "masculine" role complicates their performance of gender and the public construction of gender difference. Other questions pertain to the impact of "serious" coed cheerleading on younger teams, both scholastic and all-star. Will boys start entering cheerleading at younger ages? Has the rise of coed cheerleading influenced the way younger participants think about the activity?

Another set of questions relate to the impact of cheerleading on other sports, including whether the renewed popularity of cheerleading makes it more difficult for women in traditionally "masculine" sports to define themselves as both athletic and feminine. In other words, do female cheerleaders indirectly reinforce homophobia for other female athletes? And how do the various modes of masculinity performed in cheerleading affect men taking part in other "feminine" sports such as figure skating, diving, and gymnastics? Specifically, does the performance of hegemonic masculinity in cheerleading make it easier for men to participate in such sports or does it simply reinforce heteronormativity?

There are also questions of race. Although the participants in our study insisted that cheerleading is color-blind, the performance of femininity supported by coed cheerleading historically has been associated with middle class whiteness (see Adams and Bettis 2003) and representations of cheerleading in much fictional media reinforce this association (Hanson 1995). Consequently, women of color are not cultural icons of cheerleading the way white women are and outsiders may see their involvement as less "natural" and "authentic."¹⁹ Finally, there is the question of how public and private gender performances influence each other. What are the consequences of "doing gender" in cheerleading for the doing of gender in other realms of life such as school, work, and interpersonal relationships, and vice versa? This last question is significant because forms of popular culture like cheerleading are part of, not separate from, everyday life, helping to reflect, create, and sustain its practices and ideologies.

19. Our own research suggests that this may be the case for black women but not necessarily other women of color. Two of the five black female cheerleaders we interviewed reported having their participation viewed by others as racially inauthentic; they said it was other African Americans who took this view because members of their black community believed cheerleading to be a "white" activity. The coach of an all-black squad in the South said that his female cheerleaders had a similar experience in that other black women on campus questioned the racial authenticity of their participation. However, none of the black *men* or other women of color (Asian American and Latina) in our study reported having their participation questioned by others on the basis on race.

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