

“It used to be called an old man’s game”: Masculinity, ageing embodiment and senior curling participation

By KRISTI A. ALLAIN¹ & BARBARA L. MARSHALL²

Abstract

The sport of curling, popular among older populations in Canada and conventionally imagined as a sport for older people, offers an important window into what it means to be an older man participating in sport. While researchers have extensively studied expressions of youthful masculinity in sport culture, scholarship about the confluence of gender expression and old age in sport is much rarer. Using Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity, and drawing on 19 interviews with older men who curl in mid-sized Canadian towns, we argue that later-life men negotiate complex models of appropriate masculinity that borrow from hegemonic exemplars available in earlier life, deploying certain forms of intellectual, class and gender privilege to do so. At the same time, they disrupt these hegemonies through an emphasis on interdependence, caring relationships and the acceptance of bodily limitations.

Keywords: ageing, Canada, caring, curling, embodiment, hegemony, masculinity, men, sport.

¹Kristi A. Allain, Department of Sociology, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

²Barbara L. Marshall, Department of Sociology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

Given men's potential struggles to meet hegemonic models of masculinity in late(r) life, how do men in midlife and beyond understand and represent themselves as men, particularly in the charged and often hypermasculinised spaces of sport culture? In this article, we consider expressions of masculinity in the sport of curling as a case study of late(r)-life masculinity, exploring the ways that these old(er) men express themselves as men (Hearn 2004; Matthews 2016) through their participation in the sport and its culture. We argue that although some hegemonic standards of masculine expression may be more achievable in earlier life, particularly those linked to the body, late(r)-life men negotiate complex models of appropriate masculinity that both draw from those hegemonic exemplars available in earlier life and disrupt them.

Beginning in the 1970s, critical gender scholars began to explicitly study men and expressions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Most significantly, scholars were keen to illuminate the ways that gender, and expressions of masculinity conveyed by men, worked to secure and reproduce men's social power (Whitehead 2002). In this regard, gender scholars have extensively researched expressions of masculinity in youth and early adulthood, examining the intersections of masculinity within the education system, legal system, family and labour force (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), while often focusing on so-called problematic expressions of masculinity (Hearn 2019). In spite of this robust field of scholarship, researchers have sometimes overlooked expressions of masculinity throughout the life course (Calasanti 2004; Drummond 2008; Hearn 2019; King & Calasanti 2013; Spector-Mersel 2006), especially expressions of ageing masculinity in cultures of sport and physical activity (Drummond 2008). Academics readily accept that dominant modes of masculinity in the West today are tied to the bodies of younger men, physical competency and one's success in the labour force (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This connection between youth and masculinity is particularly evident in sociology of sport scholarship.

In particular, critical sports scholarship (e.g. Atkinson 2011; Gee & Jackson 2017; Messner 1992) has explored sport as a site where normative expressions of masculinity are developed, sustained and celebrated through young men's athletic participation. In spite of the fact that men in late(r) life still engage in sport and athletics in large numbers (e.g. Statistics Canada [n.d.] reports that in 2016 and 2017, approximately 45% of men

It used to be called an old man's game

aged 65 years and above were physically active for at least 150 minutes a week),¹ scholarship addressing issues associated with ageing, masculinities and sport is rare (Drummond 2008). For example, a search of two of the most prominent sociology of sport journals over the past decade finds extremely limited scholarship in the field, with the *Sociology of Sport Journal* publishing only three articles and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* publishing only six. While scholars in ageing studies more frequently take up the experiences of men and physical activity (e.g. Clarke et al. 2018; Phoenix & Smith 2011), it is often from the perspective of health, exercise physiology and psychology, leaving issues associated with late(r)-life masculinities underdeveloped and undertheorised. As Murray Drummond (2008) asserts, "Too often sports and physical activity are championed as being the domain of only the young, and the fit – with virility and increased masculinity often associated with those qualities" (p. 34). Given the significance of sport to young men's understandings of themselves, their masculinity and the gender expressions of others, it is important that we consider both how the construction of hegemonic masculinity stands up in later life and how men understand themselves as men at this stage of the life course. In this regard, the sport of curling provides an interesting venue for investigation.

Curling is a sport that is growing in popularity worldwide. Reuters reporter Alan Baldwin (2018) even declared it the "world's fastest growing winter sport" (para. 1). Curling, which requires teams of players to slide heavy stones down a sheet of ice towards a target at the other end, is an important site of scholarly analysis for a number of reasons. First, sport, in general, is a significant social space for expressing gender and producing exemplars of masculinity (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 2002). Second, curling, in particular, is one of only a few sports that popular culture links to the bodies of older people. The press lauds curling as an activity for those in later life (e.g. "Best Age-Friendly Sports" 2016; Blevings 2014), perhaps, in part, because curling is a sport where older men (and women) can compete at elite levels. Russ Howard, for example, competed at the Olympic Games at 50 years of age, marking him as the all-time oldest Canadian Olympic gold medallist ("Russ Howard" n.d.).

1 Notably, these numbers are much lower for women, where only 37% are active for 150 minutes a week (Statistics Canada n.d.).

The Scottish curler Robin Welsh, who won gold at the 1924 Olympics at the age of 54, holds the record for being the oldest gold medallist in Olympic history ("Russ Howard" n.d.). Furthermore, as our participants confirm, senior men have a significant role to play in the administrative and physical care of their clubs and their members. It was senior men who managed the clubs we visited, facilitated our research, provided contacts with club members, organised community events and, on more than one occasion, were seen conducting physical maintenance in the curling clubs. At one of our research sites, curlers from the senior men's program took on mentorship roles with adolescent boys from a local high school, teaching them to curl as part of their physical education curriculum. The existence of mid- and late(r)-life men more physically competent than their youthful protégés is yet another unique feature of the curling club, and further makes it an important space for this kind of investigation.

Curling's significance as a site for study goes beyond its association with old(er) adults; historically, it has also celebrated a unique form of sports masculinity (see Allain & Marshall 2018). Beginning in the early modern period, curling and its expressions of masculinity were often tied to the bodies of late(r)-life curling men and their wise, thoughtful and moral expressions of masculinity. The media and public noted that curling men could have stout bodies, instead of the fit, hard bodies of other athletes, but importantly required them to demonstrate a commitment to high moral character (see Mott 1983). One member of the press in the 19th century reported, "It is among the older players ... that the present strength of the club lies" (cited by Tate 2011: 54).

Today, curling's somewhat unique gendered standards continue in other forms. For example, men and women curl in both gender-segregated and gender-mixed competitions, with mixed doubles curling joining the Olympic roster in 2018, one of only a handful of mixed-gender Olympic sports. Finally, curling offers an important case study because it uniquely welcomes a wide range of physical abilities. This is evident in the abundance of stick and wheelchair curling leagues present in curling clubs. Stick and wheelchair curling are modified versions of the sport, with slightly different rules, designed to allow those who cannot get into and out of a lunge position to continue curling. Although stick and wheelchair curlers have their own leagues, many stick curlers (and some wheelchair curlers) also compete with, and alongside, those able-bodied curlers who

It used to be called an old man's game

get down in the hack to throw the curling stone.² Because of its accessibility to those of different ages, abilities and gender expressions, curling offers scholars a unique place to investigate expressions of sports masculinity in late(r) life.

In this study, we show how men who curl assert a unique form of late(r)-life sports masculinity that aligns with hegemonic ideals of youthful masculinity while also sometimes articulating alternative expressions of masculinity. We argue that curling culture offers our participants' institutional spaces that celebrate deep care in social relationships among men, where men can spend time discussing their life, their health and, importantly, their ageing bodies. The curling club also provides space for the celebration of people with cognitive disabilities. However, given the nature of hegemony, these counter-hegemonic tendencies are unsurprisingly not total (Demetriou 2001; Donaldson 1993). The curlers we interviewed also used curling as a way to assert a privileged form of masculine expression. This expression, tied less to their ageing bodies and instead linked to their intellectual pursuits, is also variously linked to heteronormativity, the privileging of men's sport practices over women's, the disavowal of certain limits for their ageing bodies and the privileging of particular class positions.

Masculinities and sport

For the past several decades, the sociological examination of masculinities has owed much to the efforts of Raewyn Connell. Connell's development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity produced an analytical tool that attends to the ways gender, specifically masculinity, is "practised" – or the ways it becomes ascendant and maintains power at a given cultural location and time, working to marginalise women and subordinate other expressions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Much like the gender analysis conducted by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) and Judith Butler (1990), Connell (1987) asks that researchers consider how people "do gender," stating that gender should be viewed as a "verb" (p. 140).

² The hack is an object, similar to a starting block in running, that curlers playing the unmodified game push off of to slide forward and throw the curling stone ("Glossary of Curling" n.d.).

Gender scholars have widely accepted hegemonic masculinity as a conceptual framework for understanding the gendered lives of individuals, cultural representations of gender and ways that various institutional structures reproduce a dominant gender order (see Messner 2002). However, these scholars have also subjected hegemonic masculinity to discussion, reformulation and critique (see Anderson 2008; Messerschmidt et al. 2018; Schippers 2007). Demetrakis Demetriou (2001) and Mike Donaldson (1993), for example, identify potential flaws in the ways scholars have taken up hegemonic masculinity, arguing that the concept requires counter-hegemonic gender expressions, and that hegemony needs to account for these expressions in order to build consensus. Demetriou (2001) asks scholars to be attentive to the ways counter-hegemonic movements originating from men and women, producing internal and external challenges, may impact what becomes hegemonic. In this regard, it is important that examinations of hegemonic masculinity address hegemony directly, looking for the ways that hegemonic gender expressions subsume changing social ideas and norms. Spector-Mersel (2006) argues that research conceptualised through the lens of hegemonic masculinities has ignored how gender changes throughout the life course. She contends that scholars discussing gender hegemony fail to consider what is hegemonic about masculinities in later life. She proposes that scholars take into account the “existence of various hegemonic masculinities *across time*” (p. 71). Despite these critiques, examining masculinities through the lens provided by Connell, while staying alert to counter-hegemonic tendencies, is fruitful for analytic discussions about the ways men, in this case old(er) men, understand themselves and their bodies through their participation in sport.

Sport is an important site for expressing and producing hegemonic exemplars of masculinity, particularly in terms of celebrating the bodies of young, middle-class boys and men (Burstyn 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 1992). Although not all sports secure celebrated masculine expressions equally in the bodies of their participants, popular Western representations of most male athletes (especially those who participate in aggressive or violent team sports like hockey, American football, rugby, etc.) include traits linked to dominant expressions of masculinity. In Canada, cultural exemplars of appropriate masculinity

It used to be called an old man's game

circulate in a number of ways, but men's elite-level ice hockey³ is an especially important symbol of hegemonic masculinity, especially among middle- and working-class white men (Gruneau & Whitson 1994) – or men frequently occupying the same class positions as Canadian curlers. As will become clear in the analysis below, our participants frequently compared hockey and curling as expressions of sporting masculinity.

Mike Donaldson (1993) reminds us that even the surest positions of masculine expression are fraught and contradictory. Predicting the challenges associated with hegemonic masculinity in old age, he uses the example of an athlete, asking if compromising one's body in service to one's sport is hegemonic if it leaves the athlete disabled in later life (p. 647). In spite of the numerous examinations of men's sports participation and their alignment with dominant masculine gender expression, scholars have often overlooked the gender expressions of old(er) men who participate in sports.

In Murray Drummond's (2008) examination of sport, masculinity and ageing, he argues that although sport is socially produced as a space where young men develop normative expressions of masculinity (especially those gender expressions privileging toughness, physical aggression and force), later-life physical activity also creates an important social space for old(er) men. Lamenting that popular culture views physical activity as solely belonging to the young, he asserts, "Physical activity and sport offer older men the opportunity to affirm their masculinity in addition to making them feel empowered about engaging in health-related behaviors" (p. 34). Given this, our analysis picks up this neglected field of inquiry, examining the experiences of older men who participate in curling, and exploring how curling informs their (sometimes contradictory) expressions of late(r)-life masculinity.

³ Within Canadian sports culture, elite-level men's hockey is most frequently associated with the nation and its national character (Adams 2006). However, Canada has a long history with the sport of curling. Scottish settlers brought curling to Canada in the 18th century (Wieting & Lamoureux 2001). Although many different nations play the sport, with the World Curling Federation currently ranking the men's curling programs of 60 countries ("World Ranking" n.d.), its popularity in Canada is unmatched. Within Canada, the state, culture makers, and the public often position the sport, like hockey, as a natural outgrowth of the country's status as a northern nation.

Methods

The research for this article comes from a larger project on age and gender representation in Canadian winter sports, part of which explores men's curling. In Canada, it is winter sports that are most widely associated with the nation and national imaginaries. This larger project seeks to understand the place of old(er) Canadians within Canadian national identity formation, and therefore discusses sports like curling, hockey, skiing and ice-skating. Given that curling is the only national sport that openly celebrates the contributions of old(er) athletes, we focused specifically on this sport in the early phases of the project, beginning with media and institutional analysis of the representations of masculinity in curling. During this analysis, we found that both the North American media and curling institutions, such as Curling Canada, had appeared to shift towards an emphasis on more youthful and athletic forms of curling masculinity. The most striking example of this was the institutional, public and media celebration of Canada's Olympic championship men's curling team, Team Brad Jacobs, in 2014 (see Allain 2018; Allain & Marshall 2018). Their rigorous training regime and athleticism had them dubbed the "buff boys" of curling, and the media and many in the curling community celebrated the team for shifting images of curling masculinity to those more closely aligned with other popular expressions of sporting masculinity. To further our understanding of this shift and its implications for old(er) men who curl, we obtained institutional research ethics board approval (St. Thomas University Research Ethics Board #2016-08) to conduct 19 semi-structured interviews with men who participated in senior men's curling, attending to the ways this changing curling culture impacted their gender expressions and understandings of themselves as old(er) men who curl.

The research participants in this study were men enrolled in senior men's curling programs at curling clubs in one of two Canadian midsized cities, one in Ontario and one in Eastern Canada. The authors chose these communities because of their notably large populations of old(er) people. The participants ranged from 57 to 86 years of age, with a mean age of approximately 68 years. Participants' experiences with curling varied. One participant was relatively new to the sport, taking it up in later life, while most (12) had actively participated for decades, learning to play in elementary or high school. The time participants devoted to curling

It used to be called an old man's game

also varied. Most participants curled multiple times per week, on several teams, both in mixed- and single-gender leagues. A few were involved in competitive curling at some point in their life, four of the curlers had competed at provincial and national curling tournaments, and many travelled for various recreational weekend curling tournaments, better known as bonspiels.

The first author obtained informed consent from all participants before conducting the interviews. The interviews, conducted at times and in locations selected by the participants, took between 45 minutes and 2 hours to complete. Research assistants transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. The researchers then loaded the transcripts into the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. Drawing on Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) work, we conducted a conventional content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon note that this type of content analysis is especially appropriate "when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (p. 1279). To do this, we read the transcripts multiple times, noting our initial impressions and then selecting thematic content to code into "meaningful clusters" (p. 1279). The clusters were as follows: personal involvement with the sport over the life course; institutional and cultural structure of the game; media representations of curling; gender expressions; and ageing and the body. In line with Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) description of conventional content analysis, we moved from these clusters to identify the relationships between the clusters, focusing our analysis here on the ways late(r)-life curlers expressed masculinity through their participation in the sport. We gave the participants pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

"It's a lot harder than it looks" (John [76 years]): maintaining an active body.

The majority of the participants in this study positioned ageing curling masculinity in contrast with a more youthful hockey masculinity, which, as noted above, is one of the most widely celebrated forms of masculine expression in Canada (see Adams 2006). Specifically, many of the men actively rejected dominant Canadian national tropes that linked appropriate expressions of masculinity to the rough, tough and aggressive sport

of ice hockey (see Allain 2008; Robidoux 2002). Instead, they celebrated alternative forms of masculine expression and embodiment, legitimating these as a superior form of ageing masculine identity. For example, Arthur (60 years) stated, "It is just a different mindset. Hockey is very aggressive. The nice thing about curling is it's aggressive in a different way. It is not physically aggressive. It is mentally aggressive." Sam enjoyed how the structure of curling enabled curlers to reach an elite level in an extremely short time, saying, "It is the only sport I know where I can draw you a diagram, and you could become a world champion next year. Because ... [with] men's hockey ... you have to go through the barriers." The parity that Sam saw in the sport of curling allowed him to imagine (and potentially enact) a competitive sport environment where 80-year-old curlers had the capacity to beat much younger competitors.⁴

Drummond's (2008) argument that "older men do not appear to be as concerned with aesthetic issues associated with the body ... [but] are more concerned with the way in which the body functions" (p. 33) rings true in our curlers' critique of old-timers hockey. Although many participants had played hockey earlier in their lives, they did not continue with the sport beyond midlife. Many of these men saw sports like hockey as misaligned with both successful ageing and dominant forms of masculine expression. Participants frequently associated hockey with serious injury, disability and even death. Harry (73 years) bluntly stated, "Well, I don't want to go ... to hockey heaven." These curlers felt it necessary to avoid playing hockey, due to the risk it posed to the functionality of the body, potentially leading to head and spinal injuries, heart attacks, backaches and other impairments that would obstruct their ability to engage meaningfully in other active ageing activities. Charlie (78 years) claimed that those who curl do so because they "don't want to get involved in ... hockey ... a sport where they're going to get hurt." Curling, unlike other more aggressive and physically demanding sports, offered a significant opportunity for its athletes to assert a unique form of late(r)-life

⁴ Brooks, Barnes, and Stevens (2017) have argued that the social distance between community and national-level curlers is increasing, with community-level curlers having little or no knowledge of national-level athletes and national-level programs. This study did not support Brooks et al.'s (2017) finding, likely as a result of the age, gender, and experiences of our participants. Almost all curlers had knowledge of the national program and had competed as, with, or against elite-level curlers in their home clubs.

It used to be called an old man's game

masculine expression. However, one retired medical doctor pointed out that falls in curling could also be deadly, suggesting that there were "a lot safer things to do" (Wayne [76 years]).

As Cheryl Laz (2003) points out, the ways that one "does" ageing are closely linked to the ways that they understand their corporeal body. She states, "As we accomplish age, we draw on the physical resources of the body, but our actions and choices simultaneously shape the corporeal resources available" (p. 508). Laz's work demonstrates that ageing embodiment draws directly on notions of "activity, fitness, and health" (p. 510), where participants are drawn to engage in activities that are "not-too-young [and] not-too-old" (p. 512). While participants in this study generally viewed hockey as an activity for the young, their discussion of modified curling practices such as stick curling, discussed below, suggested a more complex understanding of embodied ageing.

"A kick to the ego" (Wayne): staying in the game

Within the sport of curling, men in middle and late(r) life asserted a normative style of masculinity in various ways. As discussed above, they maintained their sense of normative and often hegemonic masculinity through their critique of sports like hockey. However, they also embraced the functionality of their bodies through both their celebration and rejection of modified curling techniques, specifically stick curling. Some curlers celebrated stick curling as an appropriate modification of the game that allowed either themselves or others to maintain functional fitness and practice active ageing strategies. Many commented that curlers simply needed to "drop their pride" (John) and pick up the stick. As Wayne and others pointed out, the celebration (and destigmatisation) of stick curling allowed old(er) men to embrace a style of play that they may one day need to adopt themselves. Wayne stated that he would never disparage a stick curler "because it may happen to me one day. Oh no, no, no [I] can't go along with that."

Alternately, some curlers used curling to practice boundary work, distinguishing themselves as members of the young-old, or as able-bodied participants who could continue playing the game as they had done in their earlier lives. These men felt that stick curling was not an appropriate or "true" version of the sport. They likened modified curling to shuffleboard, a game they associated with old-old age. However, they

did recognise that curlers who played with a stick could be both aggressive and highly competitive. One stick curler even bragged, "I think I can go out there with my stick and make shots that you see on television" (Jim [86 years]).

Although none of the participants disparaged stick curlers directly, and many explicitly praised this modified version of the game, it was often those who were actually participating in modified curling, or felt that they would have to do so in the near future, who spoke most positively about it. John remarked, "For me, [playing with the stick] is an A-plus factor that allows [older curlers] to keep going ... If you ... use a stick you can go forever." However, others felt that they should delay moving to stick curling for as long as possible. Larry (67 years) stated, "You know what? I'm not ready for the stick yet and I don't want to be ready for the stick. ... For me, I'd prefer not to go there until I absolutely have to." Wayne, who spoke in detail about the importance of his appearance and maintaining a youthful look, commented, "If I have to go to a stick, I won't keep curling. Well, everyone has to cross that bridge when you get to it and see what your ego allows you do." An almost equal number of men celebrated and/or participated in stick curling as those who criticised and/or refused to consider moving to this modified game. Interestingly, it was those in the best physical health who seemed to struggle the most when imagining themselves participating in modified curling. Don (69 years), who had introduced sticks to his club, explained the intersection between a refusal to use the stick and normative expressions of masculinity:

This was probably a male reaction ... [Some men claim,] "If I have to use one of them I am going to quit the fucking game." And I heard that from probably five or six senior male curlers who are quite competitive. So [the curling sticks] sat there for maybe a year, maybe even two. ... The ladies started using them the odd day. Then a couple of men started using them on a regular basis. There wasn't the same stigma attached to them [for the women]. ... It took a bit of tugging ... to get the senior men to buy into it.

In their unique ways, many old(er) men who curled failed to fully let go of hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Many still conceptualised their sporting practice as hegemonically masculine, even in opposition to other sport practices more widely conceptualised as hypermasculine. As ageing men frequently struggle to maintain the corporeal markers of hegemonic masculinity that might have been more achievable in earlier

It used to be called an old man's game

life, the participants in this study found different ways of asserting hegemonic masculinity, some conditionally accepting diverse or modified expressions of the sport like stick curling. As Dionigi (2015) explains, stereotypes about what ageing bodies can do impact both how those in late(r) life view themselves and how they view others.

"I like the cat and mouse game" (Arthur): thinking it through

In spite of their differing and sometimes contradictory ways of conceptualizing adaptive curling and its position as a legitimate form of the game, many of the men considered curling to require important mental and physical skills. These curlers asserted that the sport demanded a complex physicality that made it different from other kinds of men's team sports. Arthur explained that it was difficult "to slide on one leg and keep your balance and throw the rock, or release with either the inturn or the outturn." Gary (57 years) stressed the elite-level physicality necessary in curling, saying, "Regular Joes don't have the flexibility needed, and balance is number one in curling really. If you don't have the balance, you can't progress." Some curlers even emphasised how curling strained the muscles, leaving inexperienced curlers sore after a match, in much the same ways as other athletic activities. Larry described curling as "more physically demanding than perhaps it appears." Sam even proudly declared that "Sidney Crosby,⁵ or some of those other people who do sports on the ice, they would fall down too." While popular culture suggests that curling is a game for "the rest of us" (Applebome 2010: para. 2), old(er) male curlers were eager to assert its status as a physically challenging activity, requiring corporeal skills, including balance and muscle work.

Likewise, participants differentiated curling from other hypermasculine sports due to the intense mental work it demanded. This was one of the most widely supported and robust themes in this study, with curlers consistently speaking about the importance of curling's mental game. As Wayne stated, "It is kind of like a chess game on ice with physical activity." Curlers frequently told lengthy stories about game strategy and complications, including the ice conditions, environmental factors, and

⁵ Sidney Crosby is an elite-level Canadian hockey player, widely conceptualized by the press and public as an exemplar, albeit a contested one, of hegemonic masculinity.

the play of their teammates. One curler even noted that at a provincial curling club located near the ocean, the rink closest to the outside wall was unplayable due to the influence of the salt water and ocean tide. These stories helped position the participants, and curlers in general, as intellectual elites. Sam explained:

I came to [curling] in high school, left-handed with an engineer's brain. ... And there is that spatial arrangement of stones, and how you hit that stone and how it rolls into there. ... You draw a rock through a port, you know between two other rocks, and it buries and you see it disappear. ... If you ask ... "What is your background?" you'll find a lot of accountants, engineers, technical people - they love the sport. There is something that appeals to them.

Although there is little doubt that all sport requires a blend of physical proficiency and mental strategy, curlers worked to position themselves as intellectually superior to other athletes who participated in sports widely considered to be more strenuous. Don clarified, "Hockey is a little more physical than curling. Curling is a little more mental." Many participants were also concerned that their intellectual prowess was not fully appreciated by casual fans of the game, especially given new celebrations of curlers and their buff bodies. Wayne explained, "They see the ripped muscles, and you know ... athletic-looking shapes and sizes and all that good stuff. I'm not sure that they see the brain power that is really behind it all."

Although hegemonic masculinity is often located in the body (see Bordo 1999; Gill et al. 2005), within white middle-class cultural practice, old(er) men can work to diminish the importance of bodily expressions of masculinity (like muscularity, strength, athletic prowess, etc.) by privileging the mind over the body. In our work here, curling men, who were often white and middle or working class, attempted to maintain their socially hegemonic positions by negotiating embodied gender norms in ways that privileged the mind. Jeff Hearn (2003) has explained that due to shifts in Western labour markets towards service work and away from manufacturing, "Aging does not necessarily reduce the value of labour, and may indeed in some cases increase it until death or close to death" (p. 100). Curling is not part of the labour market, but the ways these men worked to position it against sports involving a physicality of violence and aggression demonstrates their deployment of a kind of intellectual privilege common among ageing (white) men, to maintain (ageing) hegemonic masculinity.

It used to be called an old man's game

"It is easier for the guys to show off their physical strength" (Max [67 years]): heteronormativity and gender difference

Curlers also sometimes worked to align expressions of ageing hegemonic masculinities with other, more youthful, hegemonically masculine gender expressions. They did this by often emphasizing heteronormativity, dating life and gender differences between men and women. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have argued, heterosexuality is deeply connected to normative expressions of masculinity. Likewise, social actors often produce notions of masculinity and male gender identities by putting them in conversation with various expressions of femininity, or by disavowing the embodied gender expressions of women (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Importantly, gender segregation in sport structurally maintains normative gender expressions that are physically embodied and culturally produced (Messner 2002). However, many of these curlers participated in mixed curling, a form of the game that pairs two men with two women on each team. Given that this form of gender integration is rare in the sporting world, it is clear that the physical structure of the game of curling can shape gender expressions in unique ways.

Many of these participants began mixed curling as young men, playing with their wives or intimate partners. Notably, all of the men interviewed for this research were currently married or had been married to women. A few thought curling was an important way of maintaining romantic relationships, especially when parents had young children at home. Jim, for example, stated, "It became a date night. ... My wife was working. I was working. We were both very busy. We joined curling. ... So you'd go for dinner, maybe a drink afterward." Frank (76 years) mentioned that he met his wife curling, while Sam opined that curling was a great place for men and women to meet, given that curling norms prevent aggressive body contact and even extraneous touching. He explained, "To me it would be a great environment, if you are a shy young woman or young man, to meet other people. ... Because again the etiquette is very important, and so with that etiquette there is a certain distance. ... It's not like you're making a bold advance by asking to shake my hand." One participant even argued that curling was more conducive to forming heterosexual relationships than hockey, emphatically claiming, "I couldn't have a date night playing hockey" (Larry).

Sam noted that the curling club's culture of communal eating meant that women partners took on an increased burden of labour, stating, "It is [a] blue collar [sport] and the age of the men curlers [means that they] are used to the traditional ways of doing things. So if it's a potluck, you're asking your partner to make a casserole."

Interestingly, discussions of heteronormative dating were not the only times interview participants produced hegemonic understandings of gender difference. When asked about their perceptions of mixed curling, several curlers explained that men were more competitive and more aggressive than women. For example, Don commented that the women were "not near as intense," while Wayne remarked that the women brought "more finesse to the game than some of the men." One curler even chalked this up to biological difference, stating, "Women don't like [yelling on the ice] generally, because men yell more. It's the testosterone [that] is a bit higher" (Sam). Another participant, drawing on both differences in the style of play favoured by men and women, and emotional differences between the competitors, commented, "When men and women curl together, it is the messiest form of curling out there" (John). While Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) has noted a tendency among scholars to see those in later life as somehow less gendered, the men in this study drew on gender difference as an important part of their understanding of themselves and others within the field of sport.

Some of the old(er) men perceived differences between men and women as emanating from muscular differences in the bodies of men and women, resulting in strategic differences in game play. Some curlers believed that women were incapable of throwing the curling stones and sweeping in the same aggressive style as the men, imagining that men could throw heavier weights, resulting in more dramatic takeout shots and harder sweeping than female competitors could produce. John argued that with regard to sweeping, "There are physical limitations to what women can do." He concluded, "Those big guys, they have 50% more body mass." Charlie stated, "The women will very seldom throw a take-out." Some curlers also drew on normative understandings of masculinity and femininity, claiming that women's curling was more organised (John; Sam [63 years]), less committed (Larry), less intelligent (Gary) and more emotional (Gary) than the game played by men.

It used to be called an old man's game

Although most of the curlers believed in normative gender differences, after they listed off many dissimilarities between men and women, they often came around to a more egalitarian and nuanced understanding of these differences. For example, Arthur suggested that those who believed that men were better sweepers than women were being deceived, noting, "It is easier for the guys to show off their physical strength in sweeping, not that female curlers don't have good sweepers because they do. I think it's just the men look more muscular. It's perception." John recounted a story about a mixed provincial curling tournament that saw his team in the semi-finals. In the locker room between matches, he had confided in his male curling partner and friend that he was concerned about the ability of his female teammates. In the end, he laughingly recalled, "I [had] to eat my words. Not any of the four women ever missed a shot in the whole game. ... I missed the one shot and that lost the game." Larry hinted at some gender discrimination, claiming, "Frankly, some of the women curlers ought to be skips. ... I think it's pretty much fifty-fifty. So you see some rinks that are led by women and some rinks that are led by men. ... Nobody really cares one way or the other about that."⁶ Unlike most team sports, curling's unique structure, which sometimes involves men and women playing together, may work to cultivate this kind of understanding, although it clearly does not eradicate normative masculine privilege entirely. Contrasted with other team sports, where appropriate gender identities are negotiated in isolation from those of different genders, curling allows for men to come to understand their sports gender identities in conversation with gender difference. We argue that this unsurprisingly does not result in a fully counter-hegemonic masculine identity for old(er) curlers; it does, however, work to challenge the curler's own perceptions of appropriate gendered sports identities, leading to a more equitable understanding of gender difference.

"This is what's keeping this club going ... the senior people"
(Charlie): interdependence and the curling club

As social and institutional environments shape gender expression, so too does the curling club itself prove to be an important place for facilitating

⁶ The skip is the leader of a curling team, the person responsible for calling the shots and devising the game strategy.

unique expressions of ageing masculinity. For our participants, the curling club was a space that reaffirmed a normative sense of masculinity through the celebration of heteronormativity, intellectual prowess and functional fitness. However, it also was a space that explicitly facilitated alternatives to dominant sports masculinity, allowing men to celebrate modified sports practices (like stick and wheelchair curling), the achievements of women, and a kind of nurturing not often reported in other men's team sports. Curling's unique culture, cultivated in the spaces of local curling clubs, proved to enable its participants to perform masculinity in unique ways. Importantly, we believe that it is the actual space and culture of the curling club – one encouraging members to spend time with both their teammates and competitors before and after matches, privileging the work of ageing men through their prominent positions in the club, and creating networks of masculinity built on caring and closeness – that really allows for the development of this unique expression of masculinity. Curling etiquette, which emphasises friendliness and good conduct, also reflects this kind of distinctive sports contact. As one research participant remarked, "Etiquette is huge in our sport. Etiquette, sportsmanship, fair play ... It's a gentleman's sport" (Gary).⁷ This comradery is embedded in the culture of the game and the structure of its rules, and is reflected in a physical space that allows friendship and care to develop. Another participant asserted:

The men don't usually curl here until 11:00 [a.m.]. The earliest men will probably be here at 9:30 [a.m.]. And from 9:30 through 11:30 you have a steady stream of people, and there are usually two or three tables that you can't get a chair around. There is a big intense conversation about nothing ... it could be about curling, it could be about politics, it could be about grandchildren. (Don)

Clubs are frequently constructed with large kitchens and bars and contain ample communal seating at round tables overlooking the playing surface.

⁷ Etiquette is an important part of many sport practices, including golf and tennis. Even sports characterized by their toughness and aggression, like men's ice hockey and rugby, align themselves with a particularly gentlemanly etiquette through strict moral codes that dictate off-field conduct, privileging being well mannered. Expressions of curling etiquette are unique in the Canadian context because they strictly sanction aggressive and hostile physicality, and they are connected to a culture of conviviality and friendship forged in curling clubs.

It used to be called an old man's game

As pointed out by Brooks et al. (2017), the curling club, particularly in Western Canada, was constructed as not only a sporting space but also as a community centre. This structure, one that encourages curlers to linger before and after matches, enjoying coffee or beer (depending on the hour), appears to generate a different kind of sporting culture than other sports spaces. Charlie explained how the availability of an onsite meal was particularly important for him and his wife:

[My wife and I] curl Friday afternoons. It's called Friday Afternoon League and there's a Friday Evening League too. ... We curl and have dinner after here. So the ladies don't have to go home and make dinner. And what they do ... they'll put on a special for us. Or we can go down and order from the kitchen. ... So the ladies enjoy that, they don't have to go home and cook supper.

Although Charlie's comments evidence a heteronormative perception of the division of labour in the family home that sees wives cooking for their husbands, curling's culture embodies some distinctive celebrations and expressions of masculinity that also appear transgressive.

In this regard, many of the men valued the social time that came with curling culture as a time to reflect, discuss their ageing bodies and to celebrate diverse ways of being older men. Similar to Aske Lassen's (2014) findings about billiards in Denmark, curling allowed these Canadian men to conceptualise new ways of being active community members in later life. Several participants remarked on the oldest members of the curling club, celebrating with awe the achievements of late-life curlers, coming to the club in their 80s and 90s. Many sociologists have troubled celebrations of active ageing, which generally involves a commitment to avoiding the physical markers of ageing (such as ill health, cognitive decline and other age-related health issues) by engaging in constant activity (see Katz 2005; Lamb 2017). Dionigi et al. (2013) found that although some masters-level athletes tended to support active ageing strategies, not all did and those who did often did so in unique ways – such as supporting adaptive sport strategies. They state, "Through sport, participants were seen to avoid, resist, redefine, adapt and/or accept the aging process" (p. 381). Likewise, the sort of active ageing expressed by curlers did not always disavow old-old age. Instead, it often found room to celebrate diverse ways of being active and *actually* ageing. For example, members

from both clubs celebrated teammates who continued to come to the club and curl with cognitive impairments. William (62 years) discussed a teammate who had been diagnosed with dementia. He explained that the man's wife had trained a few curlers to curl with her husband. He commented, "If you curl with him, you know, [you] remind him what colour his rock is." George (63 years) celebrated curling with men of differing abilities and health concerns. He commented, "The first year doing it, they paired me up with someone with Alzheimer's, which was interesting. Now, I am with another guy who's got some health issues. I knew him and we went away to a couple of stick bonspiels, and it was the first time he'd ever done something like that, so he thought it was great!" Don, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease several years before our interview, spoke with great pride about the relationship he had with another member of his curling club, one where they could meet in the morning and talk about their health, their medications and how they were doing that day. Echoing the findings in Linda Heuser's (2005) work on old(er) women's experiences in lawn bowling, Don liked the idea that he might be able to continue curling in a wheelchair as his Parkinson's progressed, and came to the curling club for coffee and conversation even on days when his sciatica made curling impossible.

Conclusions

In this article, we have used curlers as a case study to explore the gender expressions associated with late(r)-life masculinity and the various ways that these men enacted particular forms of late(r)-life sports masculinity. Although our case study is marked by a small sample size (19 participants) and its very specific sports context (i.e. Canadian curling), it nonetheless provides important insights about the potential for masculine expressions by men beyond midlife within the context of sport. In this regard, curling is a worthy analytical site for scholars interested in examining the embodied experiences of those in late(r) life, given its immense popularity among old(er) adults and its reputation as a sport for those in late(r) life. Furthermore, an examination of late(r)-life curlers enhances scholarly understandings of how sport can both produce and disrupt dominant expressions of masculinity. Finally, it provides insights into the ways that hegemonic sporting masculinities may change when men move beyond

It used to be called an old man's game

midlife. Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) argues that the absence of examinations of masculinity in late(r) life is likely the result of scholars problematically viewing those in late(r) life as being "ungendered" (p. 74), but this work explicitly challenges that assumption, demonstrating that late(r)-life men express masculinity in ways that are both aligned and misaligned with hegemonic masculine norms that frequently celebrate youthfulness.

As Spector-Mersel (2006) has reminded us, "While in relation to early and middle adulthood, we find clear models of dignified masculinity, these become vague, and even non-existent, when referring to later life" (p. 73). As a result, ways of being an appropriately masculine old(er) man are culturally open, potentially allowing for diverse, contradictory and different ways of expressing masculinity. In this regard, cultural spaces that celebrate the experiences of late(r)-life men, such as the local curling club, have the potential to be important sites of healthier, less aggressive and more supportive sporting masculinity – a notion that the curlers in this project repeatedly expressed. Although these curlers' ageing expressions of masculinity were sometimes tied to the functionality of their bodies, their disavowal of modified curling practices, their difference from women and their intellectual superiority, curlers also expressed expanded notions of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, many of these curlers expressed counter-hegemonic masculine identities, built on caring, close relationships with other men, the celebration of diverse abilities and interdependence.

Importantly, late(r)-life curlers also began to challenge the culturally pervasive active ageing discourses that reject old-old age, embrace independence and rigorous exercise, and suggest that to age well one must emulate the body styles associated with youthful activity (see Lamb 2017; Timonen 2016). In curling's focus on inclusive physical activity, in its celebration of diverse bodies and, importantly, in the structure of the curling club, which encourages interdependence instead of independence, we might see diverse ways to celebrate both later-life masculinity and ageing.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research assistants Stephanie Dotto, Victoria Kyle and Cristi Flood for their important work on this project. This research was made possible by the support of a Social Science and Humanities Research Council, Canada, Insight Development Grant (430-2015-00135).

Corresponding Author

Kristi Allain, Department of Sociology, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, E3B 5G3. Email: kallain@stu.ca.

References

- Adams, M. L. (2006). The game of whose lives? Gender, race, and entitlement in Canada's national game. In D. Whitson & R. Gruneau (eds.), *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce* (pp. 71–84). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Allain, K. A. (2008). "Real fast and tough": The construction of Canadian hockey masculinity. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(4): 462–481.
- Allain, K. A. (2018). Taking slap shots at the house: An examination of the consequences of representing curlers as hockey players. In J. Anderson & J. Ellison (eds.), *Rethinking Hockey: Repenser à Hockey* (pp. 217–230). Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Allain, K. A. & Marshall, B. (2018). "Buff boys" with brooms: Shifting representations of masculinity in men's curling. *NORMA: International Journal of Masculinity Studies* 13(2): 119–135. doi:10.1080/18902138.2017.1400148
- Anderson, E. (2008). Inclusive masculinity in a fraternal setting. *Men and Masculinities* 10(5): 604–620. doi:10.1177/1097184X06291907
- Applebome, P. (2010). Newcomers flock to curling clubs. *The New York Times*, 24 February. Available on www.nytimes.com/2010/02/25/nyregion/25towns.html (Accessed: March 04, 2018).
- Atkinson, M. (2011). *Deconstructing Men & Masculinities*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Baldwin, A. (2018). Rocking from Scotland to Saudi Arabia, from Canada to Qatar. *Reuters*, 16 January. Available on <https://ca.reuters.com/article/sportsNews/idCAKBN1F51JV-OCASP> (Accessed: March 23, 2018).
- Best age-friendly sports for older adults. (2016). *Senior City*, 2 January. Available on <https://seniorcitylocal.com/best-age-friendly-sports-for-older-adults/> (Accessed: April 03, 2018).
- Blevings, S. (2014). School of rocks. *Inspired: Senior Living Magazine*. Available on <http://www.seniorlivingmag.com/articles/2014/01/school-of-rocks> (Accessed: January 03, 2017).

It used to be called an old man's game

- Bordo, S. (1999). *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Brooks, D. J., Barnes, M. & Stevens, J. (2017). What happens at the national level stays at the national level: A case study of community curling. *International Journal of Sport Management* 18: 1-24.
- Burstyn, V. (1999). *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Calasanti, T. (2004). Feminist gerontology and old men. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 59B(6): S305-S314.
- Clarke, L. H., Currie, L. & Bennett, E. V. (2018). "I don't want to be, feel old": Older Canadian men's perceptions and experiences of physical activity. *Ageing & Society* 1-18.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Connell, R. W. & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829-859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639
- Demetriou, D. (2001). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique. *Theory and Society* 30(3): 337-361.
- Dionigi, R. A. (2015). Stereotypes of aging: Their effects on the health of older adults. *Journal of Geriatrics* 1-9. doi:10.1155/2015/954027
- Dionigi, R. A., Horton, S. & Baker, J. (2013). Negotiations of the ageing process: Older adults' stories of sport participation. *Sport, Education and Society* 18(3): 370-387. doi:10.1080/13573322.2011.589832
- Donaldson, M. (1993). What is hegemonic masculinity? *Theory and Society* 22(5): 643-657.
- Drummond, M. (2008). Sport, aging men, and constructions of masculinity. *Generations* 32(1): 32-35.
- Gee, S. & Jackson, S. (2017). *Sport, Promotional Culture and the Crisis of Masculinity*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gill, R., Henwood, K. & McLean, C. (2005). Body projects and the regulation of normative masculinity. *Body and Society* 11(1): 37-62.
- Glossary of Curling. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Available on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_curling (Accessed:December 12, 2018).

- Grunneau, R. & Whitson, D. (1994). *Hockey Night in Canada: Sports, Identities and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hearn, J. (2003). Imagining the aging of men. In M. Featherstone & A. Wernick (eds.), *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (pp. 97–114). London: Routledge.
- Hearn, J. (2004). From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Feminist Theory* 5(1): 49–72. doi:10.1177/1464700104040813
- Hearn, J. (2019). So what has been, is, and might be going on in studying men and masculinities? Some continuities and discontinuities. *Men and Masculinities* 22(1): 53–63.
- Heuser, L. (2005). We're not too old to play sports: The career of women lawn bowlers. *Leisure Studies* 24(1): 45–60.
- Hsieh, H. F. & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research* 15(9): 1277–1288.
- Katz, S. (2005). *Cultural Aging: Life Course, Lifestyle, and Senior Worlds*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview.
- King, N. & Calasanti, T. (2013). Men's aging amidst intersecting relations of inequality. *Sociological Compass* 7(9): 699–710. doi:10.1111/soc4.12064
- Lamb, S. (ed.). (2017). *Successful Aging as a Contemporary Obsession: Global Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lassen, A. J. (2014). Billiards, rhythms, collectives: Billiards at a Danish activity centre as a culturally specific form of active ageing. *EthnologiaEuropaea: Journal of European Ethnology* 44(1): 57–74.
- Laz, C. (2003). Age embodied. *Journal of Aging Studies* 17(4): 503–519. doi:10.1016/S0890-4065(03)00066-5
- Matthews, C. R. (2016). The appropriation of hegemonic masculinity within selected research on men's health. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 11(1): 3–18. doi:10.1080/18902138.2015.1063761
- Messerschmidt, J. W., Martin, P. Y., Messner, M. A. & Connell, R. (2018). *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research*. New York: New York University Press.
- Messner, M. A. (1992). *Power at Play: Sport and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the Field: Women, Men and Sports*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

It used to be called an old man's game

- Mott, M. (1983). One solution to the urban crisis: Manly sports and Winnipeggers, 1900–1914. *Urban History Review* 12(2): 57–70. doi:10.7202/1018957ar
- Phoenix, C. & Smith, B. (2011). Telling a (good?) counterstory of aging: Natural bodybuilding meets the narrative of decline. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Science and Social Sciences* 66(5): 628–639. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbr077
- Robidoux, M. A. (2002). Imagining a Canadian identity through sport: A historical interpretation of lacrosse and hockey. *Journal of American Folklore* 115(456): 209–225.
- Russ Howard. (n.d.). Wikipedia. Available on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russ_Howard (Accessed: December 12, 2018).
- Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society* 36(1): 85–102. doi:10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4
- Spector-Mersel, G. (2006). Never-aging stories: Western hegemonic masculinity scripts. *Journal of Gender Studies* 15(1): 67–82.
- Statistics Canada. (n.d.). *Physical Activity, Self Reported, Adult by Age Group. Table 13-10-0096-12*. Available on <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310009613> (Accessed: May 3, 2019).
- Tate, M. A. (2011). The urban brethren of the broom: Curling in nineteenth-century America. *Journal of Sport History* 38(1): 53–73.
- Timonen, V. (2016). *Beyond Successful and Active Ageing: A Theory of Model Ageing*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1(2): 125–151.
- Whitehead, S. (2002). *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Wieting, S. G. & Lamoureux, D. (2001). Curling in Canada. In S. G. Wieting (ed.), *Sport and Memory in North America* (pp. 140–153). London: Frank Cass.
- World Ranking. (n.d.). *World Curling Federation*. Available on <http://www.worldcurling.org/> (Accessed: December 12, 2018).

