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21st Century Jocks: Sporting Men and Contemporary Heterosexuality, Eric Anderson, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, 241 pages (inc. index), £65, ISBN: 978-1-137-37963-4 (hbk.)

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Eric Anderson's *21st Century Jocks* takes the format of an extended research report, combining findings from a wide range of qualitative interview/ethnographic case studies and quantitative surveys exploring the lives of young men involved in school, college and university-based sport. Drawing from a large body of empirical work conducted between 2000 and 2013 (40 separate studies are listed in the introduction), the book centres on issues surrounding gender and sexuality, providing detailed accounts of the lived experiences and discursive constructions of masculinity prevalent among contemporary male scholastic athletes and their peers in the USA and the UK (along with the inclusion of some data from Australia).

The book begins by detailing the historical context out of which the cultural figure of the 'jock' emerged in the twentieth century, showing how socio-political changes affected the gradual association of masculinity with stoicism, violence, risk-taking, misogyny and homophobia, particularly within sport settings. It then turns to addressing the theoretical material underpinning the analysis central to this and Anderson's other work in the area, largely constructed here around the concept of 'homohysteria'. Put simply, this encapsulates the gendered cultural imperative to self-present in ways which distance oneself from suspicion of being gay; a phenomenon found within societies where homosexuality is recognised as being both a widespread and stable category of identity, and at times when homophobia is rife. Following this, the subsequent chapters explore a range of behaviours observed among the heterosexual jocks of the twenty-first century, which are presented as evidence of both declining homophobia and homohysteria in the USA/UK since the 1980s/90s. These include the growing acceptance of gay teammates; the changing meanings of ostensibly 'homophobic' language; the emergent recognition and acceptance of bisexuality; the expression of love for other men; kissing other men; dancing with other men; cuddling and sharing beds with other men; negotiating cheating and monogamy in their relationships with women; and watching pornography, masturbating with and/or having sex with other men. Together, these substantive chapters reveal much about the organisation of masculinity and heterosexuality among male school, college and university-based athletes today.

Perhaps the first thing one notices when reading this text is its overtly political nature. From the outset, Anderson does not shrink from either locating himself personally within his work nor pinning his own colours to the mast, letting his readers know where he stands in the moral and political struggles associated with changes in sexual and gendered behaviours. For

instance, when discussing the ‘culture wars’ waged among ‘Generation X’ during the 1980s, and their consequences for young men of the new millennium (referred to here as ‘iGeneration’) he states:

Men of *iGeneration*... are the first to benefit from the victory won by left-leaning citizens of Generation X, those who were marginalized in the 1980s but, using logic and reason, came to the fore the day after George W. Bush was voted out of office. This book vindicates those members of Generation X who fought for social change; the evidence I provide in it proves that their vision of culture was better than that which conservative politicians and religious leaders imagined. (7)

Within this political framework, the book’s intellectual purpose is elaborated as intending to show that young male athletes today have radically different relationships with sexuality, emotional intimacy, and other aspects of gender than did those of previous generations. Clearly designated as ‘*progressive changes*’ (11, original emphasis), the book’s substantive content thereby continues to develop the thesis Anderson has been building throughout his academic career, perhaps previously best exemplified in the earlier book, *Inclusive Masculinity* (2009). With its chapters detailing evidence collected from among an extensive number of jock groups, the book provides a compelling case in support of his central argument: contemporary masculinities are no longer being defined around homophobia, overt homophobia, anti-femininity and the repression of same-sex intimacy/desire; they are becoming far more inclusive of sexual minorities in the process; and as such are beneficial to all men in numerous ways. In this respect, the framing of the findings as ‘progressive’ seems entirely justified.

Moreover, Anderson argues that today’s jocks, rather than shoring up a conservative, ‘hegemonic’ gender order, may in fact be helping to accelerate wider societal change towards more inclusive and less personally/socially harmful visions of heterosexual masculinity. Beyond the research discussed in the book, this thesis resonates well with contemporary popular discourse surrounding ‘out’ celebrity athletes as important role models for young people, as well as the increasing visibility of pro-LGBT sport-activist movements such as the American-based group, Athlete Ally. The role that (heterosexual) male athletes are taking in helping to advance progressive sexual politics is an important contemporary phenomenon, and *21st Century Jocks* documents this well at the level of young men’s own lived experiences. While careful to note throughout the book that such a process (as it manifests both within and outside of sport) is uneven and incomplete, Anderson shows how the noted changes are sufficiently well-evidenced to support the contention that a meaningful shift in the behavioural norms of heterosexual masculinity is underway – with athletes helping to blaze trails for other men to follow.

Because of this empirical focus, the book makes an important contribution to knowledge for anyone interested in young men and contemporary sport. In this respect, the ‘take-home message’ of *21st Century Jocks* is a far more optimistic one than scholars of sport, masculinity and sexuality may be used to hearing, either through their engagement with older studies of jock culture, or other contemporary work in the area (e.g. Pappas, 2012). Many of the stories shared in this text present a very human side to these young athletes, detailing the

intimacy of their friendships, their empathetic understanding, and overtly inclusive behaviours, often related in poignant and sometimes humorous ways. In doing so, Anderson confronts readers with a reality which confounds common stereotypes of jocks, although one which those personally familiar with young British or American men in college/university sport today will likely find much to relate to.

However, while its central argument is developed in an articulate and persuasive way, the book is not without limitations. Firstly, the sampling of young men in relatively exclusive educational establishments (colleges/sixth-forms; universities) primarily in the USA and UK impacts on the generalisability of the research – a point accounted for in the book's introduction, wherein the middle-class location and 'whiteness' of the various studies' samples are detailed (20-21). Interestingly though, Anderson points out that this sampling limitation means the findings, while socially specific, are nevertheless located among a group whose privileged position vis-à-vis the ability to accumulate social and cultural capital warrants specific attention. He claims that the sample '(accounts) for a demographic that is likely to have significant influence in shaping the culture of heterosexual masculinity in the future' (21). While I would agree that this is a reasonable assumption with respect to social class, it is perhaps a little more problematic regarding issues pertaining to ethnic diversity.

Indeed, the intersections of gender/sexuality with ethnicity, religious affiliation, cultural identity and multiculturalism are not addressed in much detail here; cultural sensitivity is only really evident in the analysis of data through the reference Anderson often draws to the 'lag' between changes observed in the UK and the USA. Evidently, while his samples do include some ethnic diversity, ethnicity did not feature as a salient point of difference among these groups of athletes regarding the themes addressed in the book, yet this does not seem to have been explicitly or systematically measured as part of the broad research aims. As such – and while criticism of things that were *not* specifically done applies to any research endeavour – this book might have benefitted from purposively sampled data which expands the reach of its analysis beyond an important, but nevertheless limited, mostly white, apparently irreligious and largely middle-class core.

A similar point to make here is that while *21st Century Jocks* offers much detailed discussion of men's changing relationships with other men, there is comparatively little attention given to their relationships with women. Admitting this gap in the concluding chapter, Anderson '(concedes) that I do not have answers to all of the pressing questions about what it means to be a jock today... I have not investigated enough as to whether these athletes remain highly sexist or not' (221). The attention to their relationships with women which does feature in the book comes mainly through the chapter which discusses monogamy and the prevalence of jocks' sexual infidelity. Here the analysis points to the paradoxical cultural veneration of monogamy alongside the normalisation of casual sex, particularly within university environments. Here, 'cheating' – as opposed to seeking non-monogamous relationships – becomes the most logical accommodation of the desire for multiple sexual partners with the cultural imperative of being monogamous, reflecting arguments Anderson has developed elsewhere (Anderson, 2012). Interestingly, he adds that in a context where jocks are 'capable of having their emotional needs for empathy, disclosure, bonding, and love met with other men' (184), and are likely to be able to have sex with various women fairly easily because of their high heterosexual capital as athletes, long-term monogamous

relationships with women may become less appealing. Thus, in some cases, the threat of breakups becomes less effective as a deterrent to cheating on girlfriends.

This economic cost/benefit approach to heterosexual partnering is well developed within the confines of one chapter, but an exposition of how contemporary jocks think about and relate to the women in their lives beyond sexual relationships would have made for a worthwhile addition to the book's overall discussion. Indeed, were it not for the acknowledgement offered in the conclusion that more needs to be said in this respect, then this relatively narrow focus may infer to readers that sexual partnering is the only relevant thing about women in the lives of jocks today. Either way, this issue represents important questions about the extent of 'progressive' changes in masculinities which the book does not address in much detail. As such, readers should bear in mind that *21st Century Jocks*' account of masculinity and heterosexuality is primarily framed around evidence of men's changing relationships with other men.

However, in spite of these limitations, this text doubtlessly represents an important contribution to the knowledge base in the sociology of sport, bringing together findings from multiple studies which should significantly revise many common-sense beliefs about sport, young men, masculinity and sexuality. Anderson consistently situates his findings within their specific historical context, justifying his politicised arguments through the presentation of ample data. Furthermore, being purposefully written in an accessible style, the book is certainly suitable for, and should prove popular with, undergraduates studying sport and gender; the clarity of theory and the consistent provision of data excerpts are particular strengths in this respect. Also, since it represents a concise collation of the findings of numerous studies otherwise published across a vast range of academic journal papers, this makes the book a useful resource for colleagues wishing to draw on Anderson's wider body of work in their teaching. As such, I would argue that this book represents a necessary addition to the literature on young men, sport and masculinities, even if it is not alone sufficient for answering all of the questions emerging from this dynamic and problematic aspect of contemporary social life.

References

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