Constructing Masculine and Athletic Identities: The Case of College Football Players

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CONSTRUCTING MASCULINE AND ATHLETIC IDENTITIES:
THE CASE OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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For Melanie

For mom and dad

For all the student-athletes
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ABSTRACT

Based on 17 interviews with college football players, this dissertation examines the construction of athletic and masculine identities among a group of young men who play “big-time” college football at a Division I-FBS university in the Southeastern U.S. College football is one of the most popular sports in the U.S. in part because it embodies the cultural ideals of strength, competition, aggression, physical contact, and “winning” that are highly admired in U.S. society in men and boys. College football athletes serve as useful informants about how their experiences in and in relation to football affect their efforts to create an identity as an athletic man. My analysis shows how college football players’ talk and accounts serve to self-identify themselves as “self-made” men. That is, they are responsible, have agency and achieve goals, face challenges and take risks, and provide for others. My informants also self-identify as men by saying they are opposite of that which our culture characterizes as feminine and homosexual. Playing college football helps young men identify as a particular kind of athletic man. The athletes say that playing college football takes a strong mind, “heart,” and a gifted body. Having a strong mind means being focused, smart and coachable. Having heart means being passionate about the game and having the guts to put your body on the line. Having a gifted body means being big, strong, or athletic. Results speak to the influence of the sport institution on gender identity and the (re)production of inequality, gender as an institution, hegemonic masculinity, embodiment and emotion, and identity work.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the masculine and athletic identities of players in Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS, formerly Division I-A; see below) college football in the U. S. Football is the most admired sport of U. S. men (Coakley 2007; Messner 2002) in part because it embodies the cultural ideals of strength, competition, aggression, physical contact, and “winning” that are highly admired in U. S. society in men and boys (Connell 2000, Kimmel 2006, Messner 1992). These ideals are referred to by Connell (1987, 1995) as hegemonic because they are the most highly celebrated and admired. Organized sports, or the sport institution (Chapter 2), and particularly U. S. football, provide a means and arena for celebrating the kind of masculinity that is hegemonic—or most admired—in U. S. society (see Connell and Messerschmitt 2005 on hegemonic masculinity; but also Schippers 2007 who disagrees with them). An understanding of how men who play this sport at a highly skilled level view themselves as men and as athletes can provide insights about the kind(s) of masculinities that are being created, or at least desired, in U. S. society in the early 21st century.

Successful football players are treated by many as celebrities and, by any standard, a player at a Division I-FBS university in the U. S. is a “hero,” more or less regardless of his character or success in non-athletic arenas, including academics. He has shown himself to be more skilled at football than almost anyone he attended high school with. In his eyes and in the eyes of family, friends, fellow students, and (at least some of the) coaches at Division I-FBS schools, he is a “winner” and Americans love a winner! He thus occupies a rare status in a society with over 300 million people. Millions know about, admire, and celebrate, one way or another, talented college football players.

Students who play college football at Division I-FBS schools can serve as useful informants about how their experiences in and in relation to football affect their efforts to create an identity as “men.” They can help us understand how an identity as an athlete bolsters or challenges their conceptions of what a man is and does. This study reports findings from in-depth interviews with 17 college football players at a National
College Football in the U.S.

The game of American football is played between two teams, each with 11 players on a field that is 120 yards long and 53.5 yards wide, marked in ten segments of ten yards each (this area is smaller in Arena football and larger in Canadian football, both versions of the American game) with an unmarked, 10-yard long “end zone” at each end of the field. The game is divided into four quarters of 15 minutes each (high schools have 12 minute quarters) with a “halftime” intermission of 20 minutes. The primary goal is to advance the ball toward your opponents “end zone” by running or passing the ball down the field and to prevent your opponent from advancing the ball by tackling the
player carrying the ball, forcing a fumble, or intercepting a pass. Points are scored in several ways. Advancing the ball into the opponent’s end zone is called a “touchdown” and is worth six points. After a touchdown, the scoring team can opt for a one or two point “point after touchdown” (PAT) attempt. One point is earned by kicking the ball through the uprights behind the end zone; two points are earned by advancing the ball into the end zone by a pass or run on the ground in one attempt from two yards away. Place-kicking the ball (when snapped, held upright on the ground and then kicked) through the uprights from anywhere on the field is called a “field goal” and is worth three points. Tackling an offensive player with the ball in their end zone results in a “safety” that is worth two points. Depending on the level of play, rules for games that end with a tied score differ. The National Football League uses a “sudden death” format where the first team to score wins; possession of the ball is determined by a coin flip. In college and high school football, each team is given at least one possession at a predetermined spot on the field where they attempt to score a touchdown or a field goal. Play continues until one team outscores the other in an overtime period.

At the start of each half of play and after a PAT or a field-goal, the ball is place-kicked from a predetermined spot (e.g., 35 yard line) to the opposing team. After a safety, the kicking team has the option of place kicking or “punting” the ball to the opposing team. Punting the ball requires the ball to be “long-snapped” to the punter, who then drops the ball from his hands and kicks the ball before it hits the ground. In each instance, the team receiving the ball has the option of catching and advancing the ball. The receiving team also has the option to fair catch the ball. In this case, the kicking team is not allowed to touch or hit the player catching the ball; the ball is placed at the spot of the catch to begin play. If the ball is place-kicked through the back of the end zone, is punted into the end zone, or is caught by a player in the end zone who “takes a knee,” a “touchback” is called and the ball is placed at the 20 yard line. Kickoffs caught in the end zone may be advanced by the receiving team.

As noted, the object is for the offensive team—the team with possession of the ball—to advance the ball toward their opponents’ end of the field in order to score points. This is done through a series of “downs” when the ball is in play for a short duration, outside of which the ball is “dead” and not in play. The ball is dead when the ball carrier
is “down” (tackled by the defense) or runs out-of-bounds. Rules about a ball carrier being down vary at different levels of the game. In high school and college, the ball carrier is down when any part of his (rarely her) body other than the hands or feet makes contact with the playing field. In many professional leagues, a ball carrier must be “down by contact,” i.e., an opposing player must make contact with the ball carrier.

The ball is advanced by running or throwing it across the line of scrimmage. A “forward pass” must be thrown from behind the line of scrimmage and caught by an offensive player without landing on the ground before the player is able to advance the ball. Forward passes can also be intercepted by the defense; this is called a “turnover,” after which the opposing team takes possession of the ball. A turnover can occur when a ball carrier drops or “fumbles” the ball before being tackled. When this happens the ball is “live” and any player can pick the ball up and advance it or fall on it to gain possession.

The offensive team is given four downs to advance the ball 10 yards, after which they are awarded a “fresh set” of downs to advance the ball another 10 yards. If the offense fails to gain 10 yards in four downs, the opposing team takes possession of the ball where the last play ended. For this reason, many teams choose to punt the ball to the opposing team on fourth down to force their opponent to move the ball further down the field. Each play begins at the “line of scrimmage.” This is the line between the offensive and defensive teams. No player may cross the line until the ball is snapped to the quarterback.

Offensive positions include the offensive line (center, guard, tackle, and tight-end), the backfield (quarterback, running back) and wide receivers. Members of the offensive line are positioned on the line of scrimmage near the ball and typically include a center, two guards and two tackles. The tight end usually lines up on one side of the offensive line, next to the tackle, depending on the play. The back field (directly behind the offensive line) consists of one quarterback and one or two running backs. Split wide on both sides of the offensive line are one or more wide receivers. Depending on the offensive scheme and the level of play, offensive formations vary considerably. A typical play evolves in the following manner: the center snaps the ball to the quarterback; the quarterback hands the ball to a running back, throws the ball to another player (usually a wide receiver or tight end but also a running back), or runs the ball himself.
Offensive linemen and others push and block defenders to allow the ball carrier to advance the ball down the field.

Defensive personnel include linemen (nose-tackle, tackle, end), linebackers (inside and outside), and defensive backs (corner and safety). Depending on the defensive scheme there are three or more defensive linemen, two or more linebackers, two or more corners and one or more safeties. When the ball is snapped, defensive players try to tackle the ball carrier, stopping his progress downfield.

The game is refereed by a crew of three to seven officials. Each game is headed by a referee who is in charge of the game and watches the action in the backfield; an umpire who spots the ball and watches action along the line of scrimmage; and a headslinesman who is in charge of the down-marker and the line-to-gain chains. At more advanced levels of play there may also be a line judge, field judge, back judge or side judge. Because football is a contact sport that strives to have a balance between the offense and defense, many complex rules aim to assist in the flow of the game, limit unfair advantages, and minimize physical injuries. A few of the common ones include: holding (usually called on offensive players attempting to block a defensive player), pass interference (called against defensive players who make contact with an offensive player before he is able to catch a pass), offsides (called against defensive players who moves across the line of scrimmage before the ball is snapped), false start (called against offensive players who move before the ball is snapped), and personal fouls (can be called against anyone for unnecessary roughness or unsportsmanlike conduct). Other rules deal with number and length of "time outs," the coaches’ ability to challenge a play, player substitutions, clock operation, and so on.

With origins in rugby, American football began to take its modern form in the late 19th century and early parts of the 20th century with the introduction of the line of scrimmage and down and distance rules. The introduction of the forward pass in the early 20th century proved to be a significant contribution to the game that is played today. Intercollegiate competition was the dominant form of the game for the first half of the 20th century. Professional play, while originating in the late 19th century, gained mass appeal only in the middle of the 20th century. Today, college and professional football

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1 Much of this information comes from the website: www.historyoffootball.net.
enjoy mass appeal as spectator sports. The National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl and college football’s many end of season bowl games are highly popular and have become multi-million dollar industries (Coakley 2007).^2

College football teams are affiliated with one of two national organizations: the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA).^3 The NCAA operates as a governing body for the largest and most affluent college football programs in the U.S. These programs are divided into three divisions. Division I is split into two subdivisions: the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) (formerly named “A” and most often referred to as “big-time” college football) and the Football Championships Subdivision (FCS) (formerly called “AA”). Division II and III are fiercely competitive but they do not receive the same amount of media attention as Division I teams do. I say more about the history, organization and purpose of the NCAA below.

The rising popularity of “big-time college football” has had significant impacts on host institutions, including both players and fans. Research suggests that Universities benefit from having a football program (especially at the Div. I-FBS level) because they increase admissions (number and quality of students) and alumni support and foster a sense of community and pride among students and fans. For example, having a winning Division I-FBS football team can positively affect freshman retention rates and graduation rates (Mixon and Trevino 2005) and also enhance the quality of the student populations (Mixon et al 2004, Toma and Cross 1998). Roy et al. (2008) suggest that universities moving up from Division I-FCS to Division I-FBS benefit by creating a more positive image for the university, fostering alumni involvement and enhancing school spirit. Borucki (2003: 477) argues that immediately following and since the Civil-War, college football has been a way to reaffirm a Southern sense of identity and excellence.

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^2 American football has long been played in other countries, including Mexico since the 1920s (www.onefa.org/historia/historia.htm), Japan since the 1930s (www.american-football-japan.com/index.htm), and much of Europe since the 1970s (www.ifaf.info/). The International Federation of American Football (IFAF) was organized in 1998 to regulate the more than 45 football organizations in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Oceania (www.ifaf.info/). Recent business opportunities and global technologies have led to increasing interest of American football overseas. The NFL saw some recent success with a six team league in Europe, but the league disbanded in 2007 (www.nfl.com).

^3 Because NAIA football programs are considered below NCAA programs in terms of talent and level of competition and because my study focuses on football players at a NCAA program, I limit this discussion to the NCAA.
In his bestseller book, *Friday Night Lights*, Bissinger (1990) tells of the significant and nearly overwhelming influence a high school football team has on the culture, pride and image of a small Texas town.

Players and fans are also affected by the popularity of college football. Players are affected both positively and negatively by media attention and fame (Adler and Adler 1989). Also, they enjoy playing the sport (Coakley 2007, Pedersen 2002). The success of a college football team also affects fans’ team identification (End et al. 2002), strength of in-group solidarity (Wann and Grieve 2005) and psychological health (Wann 2006). “Tailgating,” or picnicking before a game, is popular among big-time college football fans who enjoy a party atmosphere and sense of community. The culture surrounding college football also shapes the students’ identities. For example, Crosby et al. (2007) say that home football games affect the attire of women fans who want to display their fashion consciousness, uniqueness, and school spirit.

But college football has a dark side as well. As I discuss in the next section, college football is not all peaches and cream.

**Issues in U. S. College Football**

Despite its popularity, college football in the U.S. creates considerable controversy and criticism. Sociologists and other sports scholars have been at the forefront of examining the exploitation, racism, and sexism in college football (Coakley 2007; Eitzen 1999; King and Springwood 2001; Messner 2002). Eitzen (1999) argues that the inequalities and social injustices we see in the broader society also exist in sport, and particularly football. Football stands out for its racial and gender hierarchies (Lapchick 2008b) and masculinist and homophobic tendencies (Anderson 2002; Messner 1992).

The argument that universities and colleges exploit football players for gain and fame is regularly asserted. Some who make this argument say that college players should be paid as “professionals” (Byers and Hammer 1997; Sack 2008). The argument is that football players, particularly in Division I-FBS schools, are hired in all but salaries and “rights” to play the sport while devoting a minor proportion of their time to being
students. The term student-athlete implies that student status takes precedence. But most college athletes, particularly in Division I-FBS schools, say the reverse is the case. Their participation and success in football takes precedence over classes, studying, and excelling in the classroom. Although some students do excel, this seems to be a result of individual commitment more than a result of commitment by the athletic program. Players are signed with promises of college degrees and the chance to play at the professional level but neither of these outcomes is assured. Fewer than two percent of college football players go on to play any professional ball (www.ncaa.org) and graduation rates hover around 50 percent overall, with racial and institutional variations (Lapchick 2008a). Players who do graduate are often channeled into easier academic tracks so as not to take time away from football. At all 120 Division I-FBS programs, Black and White football players have a 50 percent and a 64 percent graduation success rate (GSR), respectively (Lapchick 2008a). But, as noted, institutions vary. For example, in the 2007 college football season, Boston College had a GSR of 90 percent for Black players and 94 percent for White players—well above the average and with a narrow disparity—whereas Black and White players at Georgia Tech had a GSR of 34 percent and 81 percent respectively.

All too often, the structure and organization of college football benefit the institution and leave players “out in the cold.” In addition to having little chance of on-field success after their college days are over, or the chance and encouragement to earn a solid or economically useful college degree, some players are left with debilitating physical injuries, and many live shorter and less healthy lives due to the constant pounding of their bodies on the playing field (Green 1996, Lemke 2007, Messner 2002). In addition to physical punishment, offensive and defensive linemen are expected to put on a great deal of weight to compete in college. Extra weight can lead to increased health risks (e.g., diabetes and obesity) and, compared to other positions on the field, linemen are twice as likely to die before the age of 50 (Araton 2007). In addition to increased health risks, many football players are pushed to their physical limits for training and conditioning purposes. This type of training often takes place under extremely hot

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4 I use the terms “Black” and “African-American” interchangeably. All but one of the players in my study self-identified as Black or White. One player identified as part Jamaican and part Puerto-Rican, but acknowledged that others mostly identified him as Black.
conditions (especially in the U.S. south) risking muscle cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke (Cooper, Ferrara and Broglio 2006), and, in some cases, death (Greene and Graham 2006; Barr 2006). In short, college football players are recruited to play football. This fact involves playing through pain, playing when hurt and continually putting their bodies on the line. As my informants say, if they skip practice, even when injured, their “spot” as a starter may be taken by someone else. Thus, even if coaches do not explicitly pressure players to play when injured, players’ recognition of their tenuous status prompts them to do so.

Next I report on race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation as additional contested issues in college football.

Race/Ethnicity and College football

African-Americans were not seriously recruited and given opportunities to play college football until the 1960s and even later at many colleges and universities in the South (Borucki 2003; News and Views 1998). Their entrance into the game was, however, marred with controversy and difficulties well into the 1970s (Borucki 2003). Today, 45.4 percent of all players at Division I-FBS football programs are Black whereas 47.7 percent are White and 6.9 percent are categorized as “Other” in race/ethnic status (Lapchick 2008b). But there are much larger gaps between the percent of Black and White football players at some colleges and universities, particularly those in the southeastern U.S.

This influx of African American players has prompted questions about the racial make-up of coaching staffs (Coakley 2007) and the problems that minority students often have in regards to poor academic preparation prior to entering college (Lapchick 1995). While the teams of many schools in the southeastern U.S. are dominated by Black players, their coaching staffs, athletic directors and university presidents are mostly White. Recent data show that all but five Division I-FBS head coaches, 94.9 percent of university presidents, 92.5 percent of Athletic Directors, and all Conference Commissioners are White (Lapchick 2008b). Black players are likely to be “stacked” in some positions on the playing field, often being denying opportunities to play other positions (Buffington 2005; Eitzen and Sanford 1979; Loy and McElvogue 1978). For instance, few quarterbacks, ostensibly the highest status position on the team, are Black
while running backs and defensive backs are almost exclusively Black. At first glance this may seem unproblematic, but some research suggests that future opportunities in sport (such as coaching) often hinge on the position one has played. For example, playing quarterback is more likely to lead to coaching opportunities later in one’s career (Anderson 1993; Brooks, Althouse, and Tucker 1993). Moreover, positions overrepresented by Blacks have shorter career lengths than positions occupied disproportionately by whites (Best 1987).

In my sample, three informants are White and 14 are Black. The beginning phases of this study asked questions about differences between White and Black players’ constructions of masculine and athletic identities but a lack of “admitted” differences and the low number of White informants led to my decision to not focus on racial differences. I did tell players that sensitive racial or ethnic issues might come up in the interview but I did not ask explicitly about them. I say more about the race of my informants, how race may have affected the interview process in Chapter 3, and I address some racial implications of my findings in Chapter 6.

Social Class and College Football

Research examining the relationship between social class and organized sports is gaining momentum. Washington and Karen (2001) call for a rich theoretical grounding based on and extending Bourdieu’s (1988; 1991) work on the relationships between social class, participation in sport, the reproduction of inequality, and the role of the body in manifesting social class differences. In this regard, my findings very likely reflect the influences of social class in the lives of the college football players.

Some research shows that as income, education, and social status levels increase, rates of sport participation and attending and viewing sporting events also increase (Coakley 2007). However, sport participation rates for some sports, especially football and basketball, are higher for Blacks and some Whites from lower income groups. For example, Messner (1992) examined social class differences among athletes and although his focus was not college football, he found that boys and young men from different class backgrounds “use” organized sports differently. Those from lower status backgrounds with fewer resources are more likely than their middle and upper class counterparts to see sport as an avenue for occupational or educational success and they tend to “put all their
eggs in one basket.” In contrast, middle and upper class boys have access to economic, educational and cultural resources that provide them with alternative pathways to success. As a result these young men are more likely than their lower status counterparts to invest in higher education and other pathways that lead toward non-sport professional careers.

Most informants in my study are from lower or working class backgrounds with only four of 17 describing their background as “middle class.” Eleven grew up in a two-parent home; six grew up in single-mother households. All grew up around sport and football, with most having dreams of “making it big.” Thus, my results can be said to represent the views and experiences of less affluent college football players and while I did not extensively address the role of social class in the players’ lives, I believe their hopes for economic success through a football career reflect their lower class status origins.

**Sexual Orientation and College Football**

As noted above, college football is popular, particularly among boys and men. The game and its players are viewed as paragons of athletic and masculine prowess. Being associated with football means being associated with hegemonic notions of contemporary manhood: aggression, competition, toughness, hard work, and heterosexuality. Along with the marginalization of women, hegemonic masculinity marginalizes and degrades homosexual men (Connell 1995). “Real men” are *expected*, in fact, *required* to be (or appear to be) heterosexual. Messner (1992) finds that gay athletes try to manage their reputations by pretending to have women girlfriends. Curry (1991) argues that athletes’ talk in the locker-room serves to reinforce traditional notions of masculinity that objectifies women and degrades homosexuals and homosexuality.

I assumed that my informants were heterosexual although I did not ask, thus I participated in the institutional construction of football as a heterosexual arena. I asked about girlfriends, women and how other players on the team talked about and treated women. As I show in Chapter 4, the players presented themselves as heterosexual men, often noting its importance for being a “real man.” They said explicitly that being a man entails embodying qualities and characteristics that are *not* associated with women and femininity nor with gay men and homosexuality.
The National Collegiate Athletic Association and Division I-FBS College Football

This section discusses the origin and purpose of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its football divisions. I do this to outline the influence the NCAA has on the lives of college football players as the regulating body that enforces rules regarding recruitment and participation at the largest athletic programs in the county. The NCAA was originally formed as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) in 1905 when President Roosevelt asked the leaders of athletic programs to reform the rules of college football. Roosevelt and others believed the game was too brutal and violent (often resulting in serious injury or death) but they did not want to discontinue the game. The organization changed its name to the NCAA moniker that is used today in 1910 and it soon began regulating intercollegiate sports. Today’s system is a result of changes originally made in 1973 when Divisions I, II and III were formed. Five years later, Division I was split into two subdivisions: I-A and I-AA, which were recently renamed Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) respectively. Criteria for division membership (I, II or III) include: number of men’s and women’s sports, number of team sports, contest and participant minimums for each sport, and scheduling. Division I schools with football programs are defined as either FBS or FCS based on attendance. FBS schools must average a minimum home-game attendance of 15,000 at least once over a two-year period whereas FCS schools need not meet an attendance minimum.

The NCAA is a voluntary organization through which member schools and universities regulate and govern their athletic programs. The association’s core purpose, so it says, is to provide and enforce fair and just rules for intercollegiate athletic competition and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education, by emphasizing the primary goals of academic integrity and excellence among student-athletes.

Contributions of this Study

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The following information was gathered from the NCAA’s website (www.ncaa.org).
This study explores identity work by college football players at a high profile Division I-FBS university in the Southeastern U.S. By examining individual “talk,” (see Chapter 3), I address the players’ efforts to self-identify as men and as athletes. This research is based in the proposition that the culture and structure of big-time college football affects the way players self-identify. Key questions focus on how individual talk acts to inform others who the speaker is and actively helps the individual create a unique sense of self. That is, how do players describe what it means to be a “real man?” What do they say is necessary to “make it” as a college football player? How do local and regional/cultural prescriptions of manhood manifest themselves in individual narratives about manhood? How does playing football at an elite level influence the way players talk about themselves as men? Do the players identify as athletes? Why or why not? I argue that through understanding the ways whereby young men construct a self, we can discover how college football fosters the creation of particular kinds of masculinity in U.S. society. As I discuss below, some qualities of manhood are regarded as positive and admirable, while others are viewed as negative and offensive. With Messner (1992, 2002), Messner and Sabo (1990) and Connell (1995, 2000), I argue that a construction of masculinity through the violence and physical dominance of college football fosters a narrow conception of self that may harm individual players as well as the kind of practices that “admired” men are expected to display.

Contributions to Sociology

This study adds to sociological understanding in the following ways. I add to the sociology of sport and the sociology of gender literatures by analyzing the kinds of masculinities that skilled college athletes aspire to and show how they reflect hegemonic ideals of what being a “real man” means. My results also contribute to an understanding of the embodiment of masculinity through football players’ use of violence and force on the playing field. They show how football players strive to create a positive identity through excelling at college football even when doing so injures their bodies and saps their energies that might be dedicated to academic pursuits. The contradictions of the players’ lives are addressed throughout.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters
This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews pertinent research and theoretical literature on the following: Sports as an Institution, Gender as an Institution, Masculinities, Identities: Masculine and Athletic, Embodiment (the use of the body in competitive sports), and Emotion Work. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to collect and analyze data for this project. Chapter 4 reports how football players describe and explain the qualities, beliefs and behaviors of “real men” in relation to their efforts to create an identity as men and Chapter 5 reviews how players view the qualities and attributes required to play football at a high level and how they incorporate them into their identities as athletes. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings and shows how they advance sociological understanding of sports as an institution, gender and masculinity, and identity construction. It also offers insights that may be useful for college football players. Finally, I note the limitations of my research design and procedures and offer suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND: THEORY AND RESEARCH

Chapter 2 reviews theoretical issues and prior research that pertain to my study. Topics are as follows: Sports as an Institution, Gender as an Institution, Masculinities, Identities: Masculine and Athletic, Embodiment (the use of the body in competitive sports), and Emotion Work. I describe each area and comment on how it applies to my analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

Sports as a Social Institution

Leading sociologists of sports claim that organized sports constitute a social institution (Coakley 2007; Connell 2005; Messner 1992). According to Coakley (2007), this means that it is structured, organized, and different from “play.” Play, for example, is when two people shoot a basketball just for fun. Organized sports is an institution whereas rules become standardized and enforced by regulatory bodies, technical and organizational aspects of the game become important, and learning the game becomes formalized (Coakley 2007:6). Yet there is significantly more to defining sport as an institution than the formal structure and organization of rules. Messner (1992) shows how organized sports have historically and consistently been a site where social class, gender and racial domination are imposed and contested, where “power is at play.” The benefit of viewing sports as an institution, according to Messner (1992), is that it helps us understand its highly masculinist character, including how and why it sustains particular kinds of masculine practices and ideals. Connell (1995:84) agrees that “images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport.” Kimmel (2006:246) adds:

One of the reasons sports has become contemporary men’s dominant institution is that it embraces all three strategies men have historically employed to prove their manhood . . . sports builds the body; it requires strength, skill, size, and stamina—and self control. It’s also . . . an all-male preserve, excluding those feminized
‘others’ from its hallowed fields. It’s both the exclusion of other and a manly escape from them.

Over time, sport has been sustained as a masculine domain by and for the benefit of categories of men (and boys). In the early 20th century sport was used by elite men to “build character” in boys and young men in the belief that these qualities would allow them to lead and take charge in business and politics (Kimmel 2006; Messner 1992). This view of sport continued throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. As the U.S. labor-market shifted from manual to mental labor, and society—especially the home—became increasingly feminized, men sought refuge in sport, a place they could call their own (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2006; Messner 1992, 2002). Sport became a bastion of male pride and privilege, “a place for the boys.” But, as Messner (2002) notes, this came under attack with increasing sport participation rates by women, in part due to Title IX, and by gay men (see Anderson 2002), and a rise in “alternative” sports and niche media marketing to sporting subgroups. Messner (2002) says that despite these shifts, a cultural and structural “center” to the gendered order of sport remains, where male domination and masculine privilege reside. Messner (2002:xviii) says that this “center of sport” can be characterized by “the most highly celebrated, rewarded, and institutionalized bodily practices . . . defined largely by physical power, aggression, and violence.” This narrow center of sport, largely controlled by and for men, is a place where the most culturally admired and honored forms of masculinity (see hegemonic masculinity below) are constructed and maintained.

Big-time college football, with its focus on aggressive, hard-hitting play and multi-million dollar revenues, is located at the center of the sport institution in the U. S. Former Stanford basketball player Mariah Burton Nelson’s book, The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football (1995) says it all. College football provides an ideal cultural and institutional context to examine how young football players construct masculine and athletic selves through the processes of identity work (see below). Messner (2002) calls for a critical examination of the “center of the sports world,” and my study attempts to respond to his call. Through the talk and identity work of college

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6 Title IX is part of the 1973 U.S. Congress’ Education Amendments that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs. A subcomponent of Title IX addresses the prohibition of discrimination based on sex in participation in intercollegiate athletic competition.
football players, this study aims to understand, analyze and critique how college football, at the center of the sports institution constructs and perpetuates particular forms of masculinity that are, to an extent, hegemonic in U. S. culture and society.

**Gender: Masculinity/ies, Masculine and Athletic Identity/ies**

Before I review material on masculinities, I briefly overview recent theoretical work on gender as a social institution. My aim is to situate my focus on masculinities as an active achievement, both in terms of identities but also in terms of physical practices and actions (Martin 2003).

**Gender as social institution**

In this section I provide an overview of the gender institution or gender order from Connell (1987), Lorber (1994), Risman (1998, 2004), and Martin (2004). Gender is fundamentally social, a system of social relations that influences individual and collective identities, practices, beliefs, and values. Connell (1987) refers to its multi-faceted character as the gender order and Risman (1998, 2004) as a social structure. They have in common the notion that gender is a societal-wide phenomenon with many facets and dynamics. They all argue against reducing gender to an individual, essential, natural phenomenon. Lorber (1994) was the first to call gender a social institution and Martin (2004) developed this conception in more detail. Martin (2004) lists the features that qualify gender as an institution, emphasizing its persistence over time, its effects on interactions, practices, and identity, and its intimate relationship with conflict, power and change. Martin (2004) also notes that conceptualizing gender in this way provides a way to counter claims that gender is a natural, essential, and/or individual level phenomenon.

I reviewed the notion of sports as an institution above, highlighting Messner’s (1992, 2002) proposition that sport is a gendered institution. I link the two by noting how the sports institution is gendered and how the sports institution helps to sustain, and/or challenge, aspects of the gender institution. I now review work on masculinities, which are the focus of this study.

**Masculinity/ies**
According to Bird (2008:5), masculinity is most commonly defined as “. . .
socially constructed expectations of behaviors, beliefs, expressions and styles of
interaction for men in a culture or subculture at a given point in time.” Moving beyond a
definition that treats masculinity as an individual trait, Connell (1995:71) argues that
defining masculinity requires us to:

. . . focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women
conduct gendered lives. ‘Masculinity’ . . . is simultaneously a place in gender
relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in
gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and
culture.

Connell’s emphasis on the “process of configured practice” [emphasis in original] (1995:
72) resulting in a plurality of masculinities (see also Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985;
Hearn 1998; Whitehead 2002) has laid the groundwork for contemporary critical studies
of men and masculinities. Others have followed in highlighting the hierarchical and
relational qualities of gender (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Martin 1996, 2001;
Whitehead 2002). Connell (1995) further argues that these qualities of the gender
order—as well as its intersections with race and class—produce four “kinds” of
masculinities that must be examined in relation to each other and within a cultural and
structural context: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. Recent critical
studies of men and masculinities have centered their critique on the development and
influences of hegemonic masculinity. This research has focused on control, violence,
aggression, sexualization and domination of women, sexual prowess, homophobia, and
athleticism, among others (see Connell 1995; Kimmel 2006; Messerschmidt 2000;
Messner 2002). My analysis contributes to this literature on hegemonic masculinity by
examining its construction at the “center” of sport (Messner 2002). Hegemonic
masculinity is discussed below.

Many other sociologists and other scholars have also attempted to define
masculinities and most have identified at least two components. Masculinities are
practices of both a physical and communicative form (Martin 2001). Martin’s recent
work on masculinities (2001) and the practicing of gender (2003) are particularly useful
for my analysis. My results show that football players “practice” particular kinds of
masculinities and talk about those they most admire and/or aspire to embody or display. As West and Zimmerman (1987) say, people do gender—or in this case, do masculinities—as a means of displaying or asserting their qualifications as a man or in order to be interpreted by others as a man (Martin 2003). The motive, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), springs from an impulse to be accountable to the gender order or as Lorber (1994) and Martin (2004) prefer, the gender institution. In short, members of society practice masculinities within a system of gender relations that defines certain practices as normatively, stereotypically, or associatively “masculine” (Martin 2001). As Kondo (1990) says, any behavior can be construed as masculine or feminine and the relations of gender are being constantly negotiated. One implication of this assertion is that a gendered person’s “work is never done.” One must rather continuously display actions that assert one as “competent” and “accomplished” in her or his claimed gender status (Messerschmidt 2000; West and Zimmerman 1987).

My study rests on the assumption that college football provides a context for players to practice particular kinds of masculinities. As results in Chapter 5 show, the players whom I interviewed assert that football both requires and rewards practices of a very narrow kind, a kind that is viewed in U. S. culture as “highly” or somewhat extremely masculine and, in some respects, masculinist. None of the behaviors that my informants praise in Chapters 4 or 5 can readily be viewed as feminine or as associated with femininity. They are stereotypically masculine in valorizing physical toughness, providing for others, and not behaving in ways that American culture defines as feminine or characteristic of gay men. Yet, some of their qualities are not inherently gendered, e.g., retaining focus, setting goals, and working hard. In Chapters 4 and 5, I review both the practices that skilled college football players display that they and/or others view as appropriate—and thus masculine—as well as their efforts to create and sustain particular kinds of masculine identities.

Hegemonic masculinity/ies. As noted above, hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) has been the dominant and most commonly examined theoretical perspective in critical studies on men and masculinity (Bird 2005). The original concept “... embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it
ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Recent critiques of hegemonic masculinity have noted the problematic tendency of Connell’s framework to reduce masculinity and femininity to the behaviors of boys/men and girls/women respectively (Martin 1998; Schippers 2007), and the pervasive ambiguity about what this hegemonic ideal substantively entails (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Demetriou 2001; Schrock and Padavic 2007).

Schippers (2007: 90) argues that “it is in the quality content of the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ that we find the hegemonic significance of masculinity and femininity.” In other words, contrary to Connell’s framework that locates gender practices in a specific “place” (i.e., in “man” and “woman”) Schippers (2007) suggests a framework that allows both men and women to behave in both masculine and feminine ways. Her goal is to keep Connell’s original framework while incorporating multiple femininities. This effort is important for my study in two ways. First, my results show that players in my study act and talk about themselves in ways that intend to send the message: “I am a man because I do these things; I am not a woman because I do not do those other things.” The players realize that they can act in “feminine” ways but that doing so would risk framing themselves as “not real men.” Second, the talk and actions of the football players in my study shed light on the cultural and structural contexts of “big-time” college football. As Schippers (2007: 92-93) notes:

Masculinity and femininity and their constructed relationship to each other are an available rationale for practice and referent with which to interpret and judge, not just the gender displays and practices of individuals, but all social relations, policy, rules, and institutional practice and structure.

Other scholars have critiqued the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Schrock and Padavic (2007:629), examining how “local forms of hegemonic masculinity are constructed via face-to-face interactions,” note that the dominant hegemonic ideal is not always present depending on the context and the locale. For example, Dellinger (2004) explained how masculinity is constructed differently by men accountants in two different organizations. Working for a feminist magazine, men accountants felt the need to “fight” for their masculinity in an “embattled” space that was largely controlled by feminist women. But while working for a pornographic magazine, men accountants defined their
masculinity more easily in a space that was relatively “safe.” One way this works is through a “hybridization” process where historical and cultural notions of manhood are manipulated and blended over time (Demetriou 2001). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 849) suggest the following framework in regards to the “geography of masculinities”:

Local: constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction . . . Regional: constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state . . . [and] Global: constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media . . .

Yet these locations of contested and constructed masculinities overlap. What is considered hegemonic masculinity in one context may or may not be in another (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schrock and Padavic 2007). This framework is useful for understanding the context within which my study examines the construction of masculinities among college football players. I contextualize the world of college football as “local.” That is, certain practices and enactments of masculinity are played out and constructed within the organization of “big-time” college football. However, some of these enacted and expressed qualities of local masculinities are very much in line with the broader regional (and possibly global) masculinities that emphasize aggression, dominance, homophobia and the sexualization and subordination of women. I return to this discussion of local, regional and global masculinities in Chapter 5.

Masculine and Athletic Identities

Much of the research reviewed so far takes masculinity (and/or masculinities) for granted; that is, it fails to ask male athletes about themselves as men (for an exception, see Messner 1992). It fails to ask what it means to be a man, to act like a man, how important it is to be a man. It fails also to explore how masculine identities intersect with and resemble (or not) athletic identities. My dissertation addresses this gap by asking college football players to talk about their lives as boys and young men both independently of and in concert with their lives in athletics, specifically football. Let me clarify. Of course, a college football player in the U. S., with few exceptions, is male—either a late adolescent or a young adult. Nearly all football players are men and the sport will continue to be all-male for the foreseeable future. But football players no doubt have
varied feelings about being men and differing views of themselves as men. Is their conception of what it means to be a man similar to their conception of what it means to be an athlete? Would they be the same man if not for football? Would these young men define masculinity differently if they were not playing college football?

Sports psychologists have researched the degree to which athletes identify as an athlete (Brewer, Vanraalte and Linder, 1993), the social and personal dimensions of athletic identity (Stephan and Brewer, 2005), and the benefits and problems of identifying as an athlete (Brewer et al. 1993; Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer, 1996; Sparkes, 1998). However, much of this research fails to address the connection between masculine and athletic identities and the processes that men go through to construct both.

My work builds on Messner (1989, 1992, 2002) who explores how sport is implicated in the social construction of masculine identities by male athletes. Contrary to psychoanalytic theories of gender identity, Messner (1992) argues that gender identity is an ongoing interactional process between the “internal” and the “external.” Messner (1992: 22) says, “… masculine identity is neither fully formed by the social context nor caused by some personal dynamic put into place during infancy. Instead, it comes to be in the interaction between the internal and the social.” Messner’s goal is to examine how the social institution of sport interacts with the psychological dimensions of individual men in the construction of masculine identity.

Messner (1989, 1992) finds that sport participation plays an important role in many men’s lives. Being introduced into the all-male domain of sport by significant others (peers, fathers, and other boys and men) is an important socializing tool in helping young boys see themselves on the road toward self-identifying as “men.” Connell (2005) argues that sport has become almost as important as sexuality for adolescents in forming masculine selves. Many men in Messner’s research said that early experiences with sport were fun and allowed them to “hang out with the guys.” But the competitive nature of sport quickly led them to focus on being the best. “Hanging out with the guys” suddenly became conditional on performance and ability. This shift led to the exclusion and marginalization of non-athletic men. Other negative lessons were learned too, such as homophobia and excluding girls and women.
Messner (1992) also found significant differences in how athletes from different social class backgrounds and racial groups “use” sport to construct masculine and athletic identities. Early in their playing days, many athletes use sport as a tool to gain status and respect. But, as noted in Chapter 1, athletes from lower status backgrounds, compared to their higher status peers, tend to place more emphasis on sport as a route to success and a way to earn respect from others. White male athletes and those from higher status backgrounds have access to race privilege and non-sport resources—both social and economic—that often leads to a belief that playing sport is “pissing into the wind.” In other words, they have other options. These options and resources let them walk away from sport with dignity if they are injured, their bodies wear out, or they want to avoid injury or failure (Messner 1990; 1992). Because of such differences, self-identifying as an “athlete” may be more important to a positive self-image for boys and men from under-privileged backgrounds. Boys and men from more privileged backgrounds rely less on sport for respect and self-worth, according to Messner (1992).

Messner’s work is useful for my study in several ways. I use his concept of gaining respect to explore how college football players construct a masculine identity. I also ask about playing hurt, taking a hit, and other uses of the body in relation to a masculine identity. I explore the possibility that violence is part of a football player’s masculine identity. Do players believe football requires them to be undaunted by the violence of the sport and, as men, to eschew fear of its potential consequences? Messner studied players with a variety of experiences with organized sport, some of whom played professional sport while others did not play beyond high school. I, on the other hand, study a specific subgroup of athletes: football players at a Division I-FBS program. Many, although not all, of the players in my study come from less privileged backgrounds and say they hope to “make it to the next level.” My aim is to examine how being recognized early as a skilled football player with high potential affects the players’ construction of a masculine and athletic identity.

Although Messner never uses the term, “athletic identity,” he explores this notion through the questions he asked. He found that the men in his study continued defining themselves as athletes long after they stopped participating in sports. The centrality of this identity prompted many of them to find creative ways to remain involved in sports,
for example, through coaching or other jobs, after they could no longer participate. My aims are to follow up on Messner’s findings with college football players and to sort out how their masculine and athletic identities are intertwined.

Messner (1989, 1992) and Connell (2000) explore male athletes’ constructions of an athletic identity yet they pay little attention to the processes of identity construction as a social psychological dynamic. My study adds to their work by making more explicit the processes of identity work (see below) in terms of the construction, manipulation, and uses of masculine and athletic identities. I explore how football players’ backgrounds and current relations and experiences influence their identity construction processes. My aim is to gain insights into players’ identity construction processes by stimulating them to talk about who they are and what football and athletics mean to them.

Messner’s (1992) work emphasizes how the structure of organized sport affects an athlete’s construction of masculinity and sense of self. I hope to compliment this work in a number of ways. I add to it by focusing on an exclusive population of young men who occupy a “central” location—football—in sport. By examining this group, I hope to address competing and overlapping ideas of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) at the local and regional levels (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schrock and Padavic 2007). Furthermore, while I recognize the broader context of the cultural and organizational structure of college football, I approach the construction of masculine and athletic identities from a symbolic-interactionist perspective by analyzing individual talk and action (see Chapter 3).

By focusing on football, among the more violent contact sports that young men play, I explore the connection between emotions and the use of the body in a physically violent way (more on this below). Connell (2005) focused on the importance of football and its embodiment of physical violence as a key component of constructing masculinities by adolescent boys (see also Green 1996; and Messner 1992).

Identity Construction: Concepts and Research

Identity as a concept has been thrust into a central position in the social sciences, especially in social psychology (Cerulo 1997; Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Howard 2000;
Stryker and Burke 2000). Agreeing on a definition, use and approach to studying identity has been difficult (MacInnes 2004), cutting across a wide range of disciplines (Stryker and Burke 2000). For the purposes of my research, identity is defined as “... parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker and Burke 2000:284). That is, identity is a part of the self, the fundamental sense of who and what one is.

Recent sociological theories have extended this definition by suggesting that identity is more than simply a part of oneself; it is something that is claimed, created, manipulated, changed and used over time. Sociological underpinnings of identity now focus on the processes behind how identities are constructed (Callero 2003; Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000; Mason-Schrock 1996; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Howard (2000) notes the increasing acceptance of the use of a constructionist approach to understand how identities are shaped and given meaning, based on situation and context, through interaction. As Luckmann (2008: 286) succinctly states, “... personal identities are actively ‘constructed’ in social interaction, in processes of direct intersubjective communication.”

Conceptualizing identities as a process, as something that is done and accomplished is only the first step. I am interested in how individuals construct their identities. In the midst of a “cultural turn” in sociology, MacInnes (2004) addressed this question by calling on sociology to provide a more thorough and complete examination of how identities are constructed, shaped and manipulated over time. In other words, from an interactionist perspective, identities are constructed through what people do and say, or, what Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) call identity work. According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996: 115) identity work is “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others.” Prior theories viewed identities as a part of oneself, as something people have or are. This perspective emphasizes and locates the constructed quality of identities at the center of the argument, not whether or not they are “possessed.” Stated differently, prior thinking argued that identities are meanings given to the self, whereas Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996: 115) conceptualize identities as indexes of the self, as “signs that refer to qualities of the
identity claimant." To them, then, “identity…is not a meaning, but *a sign that evokes meaning.*”

Sociologists have done a great deal of research on identity work. Snow and Anderson’s (1987) landmark study of homeless men shows how they use talk and storytelling to construct identities. Through talk, they actively create, use, and change their identities to gain a sense of self-worth and respect from others. Frewin et al. (2007) studied how adolescent fathers, through individual talk, shifted and changed their identities from irresponsible adolescents to responsible fathers. By examining interviews with musicians, Hadden and Lester (1978) suggest that, through talk, individuals locate themselves contextually, make sense of that location through “retrospecting,” and construct an aspired-to identity through “prospecting.” They are concerned with, “the set of verbal practices through which persons assemble and display who they are while in the presence of, and in interaction with, others” (331). In an auto-ethnography Tsang (2000) uses narrative, or individual story-telling, to construct multiple self-identities as a high-performance athlete and as an academic. These studies document how people use everyday talk and narrative to construct and manipulate their identities.

But identity work is done collectively as well, that is, by groups. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996), studying a group of men who use myth and poetry to remake “man” as a moral identity and a group of transsexuals, examine their processes of identity construction and maintenance. They say identity work is done collectively as well as individually and that a great deal of identity work is done in groups, in interactive settings. For example, Mason-Schrock (1996) showed how the self-narratives of transsexuals helped them develop new identities through interactive processes in a group. He says that construction of a new self, or an identity, occurs not in isolation but through involvement in a subculture where identity constructing processes are collectively constituted. Cerulo (1997) also encourages a conception of identity that focuses on how identities are constructed, changed and used in interaction with others. A focus on collective identity work is useful for understanding how interaction with others contributes to identity development by football players.

My research examines the construction of identity by college football players by asking, among others, the following questions: *How* do college football players come to
identify as men and as athletes? What do they do? What do they say? How do their behavior and speech acts construct masculine and athletic identity claims? Using interview data I examine how individual speech acts work to construct college football players’ masculine and athletic identities. I also pay attention to collective identity work that is done through interaction with other players and coaches. For example, qualities, characteristics and behaviors that indicate one is a “real man” or an “athlete” are often supported and reinforced by other players or coaches.

**Embodiment, Emotions, and College Football**

The body is increasingly central to sociological theories and research on gender (Connell 1995, 2002; Lorber 1994; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005), masculinity/ies (Connell 2000; Messerschmidt 2000; Messner 1992, 2002) and to the sociology of sport (see Cole 2000 for a review). As Schrock, Reid and Boyd (2005: 317) say, “Sociologists appear to be coming to terms with how people ‘embody gender,’ which refers not only to how people use or mold the body to signify gender but also to how such bodywork is intertwined with subjectivity (i.e., cognition and feelings).” Embodiment, as I use the term, refers to how the body is used to display or “signify” one’s gender identity claims. Yet it is important not to reduce gender to an expression of biological or reproductive differences between female and male. Gender is the way in which society and social institutions—including sports—deal with the human body (Connell 2002). Examining the role of the body and the embodiment of gender is paramount when researching athletes and sport. In sport, the body is central; it is trained, worked on, and manipulated in diverse ways in order to compete and perform. Sport, particularly college football, is as an arena that deals with and addresses the human body in consequential ways.

A gender identity is “worked on” or created through doing identity work in interaction with others. The body is often used—displayed, worked on, dressed, “buffed up,” modified—to aid in the construction of a gender identity. A conceptual link between embodiment and identity work is useful for this study. I show how college football players use their bodies to do the work they see as a requirement for identifying as a man
and as a college football player within the institution of sport and Connell’s (2002) broader “reproductive arena.”

The embodiment of gender is pervasive in sociological studies of masculinities and sport (Connell 2000; Messner 1992, 2002). Messner (1992) has been instrumental in theorizing how the body is used (and abused) by male athletes as a way to identify as men and as athletes. Constructing and maintaining an identity as an athlete requires success in athletic competition. The body must be trained, built and worked on to keep it in peak condition for competition. Messner (1992) was one of the first to say that in sport, especially football, hockey and lacrosse, the body is used as a tool or a weapon that often leads to pain and injury. Using the body in this way can prompt feelings of alienation from the body, where pain and injury are seen as roadblocks and annoyances that must be ignored or overcome. Although some players suffer career ending injuries, most suffer a number of minor injuries over their playing careers, leading to the wearing down of their joints, flexibility, and resilience in later years. Several athletes Messner (1992) interviewed talked about how, during competition, they felt “separated from their bodies” as if it were not a part of them. Place these emotions in a context where competition and winning are everything (different from simply “doing one’s best”) and athletes experience what Messner (1992: 64) calls a split between the mind and the body: “Athletes attempt to ‘use’ their minds in order to ‘get the most out of their bodies.’” A distinction between the body and the mind is useful in my study. I report in Chapter 5 on “mental toughness”—separate from “physical toughness”—which my informants say is needed to play college football. In a sense, this notion reflects a “mind over matter” perspective.

Using the body to display gender also involves—in a reflexive way—subjective emotions about working on the body for various uses and purposes. Recent research has focused on the link between identity formation and emotions in sport. As Duquin (2000:477) notes:

A significant number of studies on emotions in sport have focused on identity formation: on the emotional socialization experienced in sport, the emotional work required in constructing athletic identities, and the effects of sport on
reproducing social identities of culture, gender, class, race, sexuality and subculture.

This project draws on Messner’s (1992) research involving athletes’ identities and emotional experience with their bodies in sport. In violent contact sports such as football, hockey, and boxing, Messner notes the contradictory ways in which athletes talk and feel about their physical bodies. On one hand, the athletes talk about the “naturalness” of using their bodies in this way. For example, Messner interviewed a former professional offensive lineman (one of the most physically punishing positions on the football team) who talked about his body as being “built” for physical, violent contact. Other athletes talked about the work and effort needed to train and prepare the body for competition (Messner 1992). Messner says football and hockey use the body as a weapon in the struggle for position and space on the playing field. And using the body in this way requires “emotion management,” something Messner says is not easy for everyone. Thus some players learn to “fake it.” They pretend to enjoy the physical—and often violent—nature of the game in order to pass as “real men” and avoid stigmatization.

I use the concept of emotion management to study embodiment, emotions and identity among football players. I do this by addressing how college football players feel about using their body in a physically violent way. I ask my informants about their experiences with passion, fear, love and pain. As I report in Chapter 5, players in my study manage their emotions when they talk about what it takes to play college football. They talk about the need to “have heart” and to “put your body on the line” in order to succeed.

Conclusions

Chapter 2 reviewed pertinent theory and research for my study. I have contextualized my findings by providing a link between gender and sport as institutions, noting how the masculinist aspects of sport, especially football, helps to construct (and in some ways challenge) cultural and societal ideals about masculinity. My research aims to compliment and extend Messner’s (1992, 2002) work by critically examining the identity
work done by college football players at a Division I-FBS program. Before I present my findings, I review the methods used to collect and analyze data in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Overview

Chapter 3 describes the methods I used to collect and analyze data for my project. The data come from interviews with 17 athletes. I begin by describing how I gained access to interviewees and how interviews were conducted, including settings, length and discussion topics. In the Data Analysis section, I outline how I analyzed my interview data. As I explain later, I analyzed my data using a modified form of inductive grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Straus 1967; Martin and Turner 1986; Turner 1981). To a lesser extent, I also attempt to build on and “extend” the work of Michael Messner (1992, 2002) regarding how male athletes construct a personal identity. I describe both methods—grounded theory and the extended case method—later in the chapter.

Data Collection

Informants, Recruitment and Confidentiality

The students in my study were football players at a NCAA Division I-FBS (see Chapter 1 for an explanation of this term) university in the southeastern U. S. All were student-athletes which means they were enrolled as full-time students in various academic programs while they played football as an extra curricular activity. In all, I interviewed 16 scholarship football players and one walk-on football player between summer 2006 and spring 2008.7 Warren (2002) says between 20 and 40 informants are needed for research using interview data. However, I believe my sample of 17

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7 A scholarship football player is a student-athlete who is recruited by and supported by a college or university which provides the student with housing, meals directly or funds for meals, money or other means for doing laundry, equipment and uniforms, transportation to competitions, and so forth. A walk-on football player is a student-athlete who was not recruited out of high school or provided any of the benefits given scholarship players. Walk-on football players rarely make the official roster, with even fewer earning a scholarship, but often participate in team practices. Both scholarship and walk-on athletes must be enrolled “full-time” (a minimum of 12 hours) and show continued progress toward a degree to be allowed to practice and compete.
informants forms a reliable basis for my analysis. As I note below in the data analysis section, interview data were coded and analyzed throughout the data collection process. That is, themes about masculine and athletic identity began to and continued to emerge as I continued to contact new informants and conduct more interviews. In fact, emerging themes often help shape subsequent interview questions, a process called “theoretical saturation” (Charmaz 2006). As I approached later interviews, themes related to my primary analytic categories began to repeat. The last few interviews offered very few to no new emerging themes about masculine and athletic identity; in short, my concepts had been saturated.

Table 2.1 lists the informants interviewed in my study. They are given pseudonyms to protect their identities. I collected demographic information from each informant including year in school, age, race, nativity, family composition and background, social class, scholarship status, and academic major. However, to protect the players’ identities, I do not discuss or report in the analysis their playing positions, nativity, or other attributes that might be used to identify them. I do report my informants’ year in school, age, self-reported race/ethnicity, family structure, and social class. I interviewed five sophomores, eight juniors and four seniors. Two of the four seniors were returning students who had completed their years of athletic eligibility. At time of interview, my informants were between 20 and 24 years of age, with a median age of 21. Thirteen were Black, three were White, and one identified as Jamaican, Puerto Rican, and African-American (although he acknowledged that others would probably identify him as Black). Eleven players grew up in a two-parent home and six grew up in a single-mother household. Informants self labeled their social class background. Five players said they grew up poor, six said they came from a “working class” background, five claimed “middle-class” status, and one said he came from an “upper-class” home.

---

8 Each informant was asked about family structure and social class during his pre-college days. I did not provide any preconceived family structure or social class choices for the players. If the player asked for clarification, I explained family structure as who he lived with growing up and social class as economic standing.

9 Family structure and social class are not central components of the analysis. I report briefly on any significance in Chapter 6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Class Level</th>
<th>Interview Date/Time (minutes)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>7-06/75</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2-07/73</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2-07/69</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2-07/87</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elwood</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>3-07/110</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>4-07/64</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>5-07/97</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>MC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>6-07/120</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>MC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ike</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>7-07/148</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>8-07/97</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>11-07/32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1-08/87</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1-08/80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>MC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>1-08/49</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>MC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>1-08/58</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>UC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>2-08/64</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P***</td>
<td>MC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Fresh</td>
<td>4-08/56</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2P</td>
<td>WC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: SM=Single Mother Home; 2P=2 Parent Home
WC=Working Class; MC=Middle Class; UC=Upper Class
* Walk-on
** Post Eligibility; returned to finish degree
*** Mother is Jamaican: Father is ½ Puerto Rican, ½ African-American

I gained access to my informants in two ways: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. A few informants were current or former students in courses that I taught; some were students in other sociology courses; one was contacted through my work as an academic tutor. Informants who were students or tutees of mine or in a colleagues’ class were informed that their participation—and responses in the interview—would be completely confidential and in no way would affect their standing in the class or our student-teacher or tutee-tutor relationship. No cash payment, course credit, or other material incentive was offered to informants. Some informants suggested other players for me to interview, by providing a phone number, email address, or in-person introduction.
Although I did notify my informants up front that their participation in my research was strictly voluntary and would not affect their standing in my classes or our relationship as tutor and tutee, I recognize the possibility that these relationships could have influenced what they said and how they presented themselves. As my student, I acknowledge that the players in my study were possibly motivated to present favorable images of themselves as a certain type of “man.” It is also possible that players’ accounts were drawn from scripted “talking points” for the media given to them by coaches and other authority figures. That is, players may have been directed throughout their playing careers that as representatives of a team and school they should present positive and favorable images of themselves. I say more about this possibility in Chapter 6.

I gained the informants’ cooperation for an interview by appealing to their desires to tell their stories and talk about themselves. Football players at a Division I-FBS university receive substantial attention from the local, regional and even national media. Adler and Adler (1989) say that the collegiate athletic world of celebrity status and popularity expands the “glorified self” of individual athletes and often becomes the center of their lives. Therefore, when I approached an informant, I told him I was interested in his life, especially as a football player in a top football program. I positioned the player and his story in the limelight to appeal to his ego. However, as noted above, I made it clear that nothing they said would be attached to their name or identity in any way. I believe that describing reasons and the context for the interview in this way provided an athlete with the opportunity to talk about his life and football without fear of repercussion.

All but two interviews lasted between one and two hours. The shortest interview lasted 32 minutes (the informant had to leave unexpectedly and was unable to reschedule). The longest interview lasted 148 minutes. All interviews took place in a quiet area so we were not disturbed. Several were held in my campus office but some were done in other locations on campus (with no one else present) in a private room or quiet part of a room.

I asked players questions about their families and growing-up experiences, particularly in relation to sports, especially football. I explored their emotions related to their experiences in sports and related to their gender (as boys or men), to their race/ethnicity, and in relation to how they think others view them. I asked them questions such as, “What does it mean to be a man?” and “What does it take to play
football?” My aim throughout was to explore how they defined themselves in regards to athletics generally and football in particular and also masculinity and manhood.

All informants had an opportunity at the end of the interview to ask questions about the interview process and project. However, in order to maintain the integrity of the project and avoid contaminating my data, I did not describe the explicit aims of the project. If an informant asked, I said I was trying to understand more about what football means to players and that I simply wanted “his story.” I asked my informants to not speak to other prospective informants about the interview questions. After emphasizing the importance of confidentiality, I believe I was able to limit the contamination of my data. If players did discuss the interview with their teammates, it is unlikely that they had knowledge of my research goals or other students’ comments. In other words, I do not believe knowledge about the interview, me, or the questions I asked contaminated my sample.

All interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder (DAR) in accordance with all applicable regulations and signed consent standards (see Appendix B for the approved informed consent form). Recorded interviews were transcribed and secured on a password protected computer; at the end of one year, they will be destroyed to protect the informants. Four people transcribed interviews: me, a part-time employee of my academic department, and two commercial typists. All were informed about maintaining anonymity of informants and all signed a confidentiality agreement. Interviews were transcribed primarily for content; nonverbal gestures, pauses, and non-speech acts such as sighs or laughs were recorded when I believed they were an important component of the speech content. Interviews were transcribed in a way that captured colloquial speech without casting aspersions on the speaker. All data linking a player’s transcribed interview with his identity were encrypted and placed in a secure location known only to myself. For the project I gained human subjects approval through the Institutional Review Board. Appendix A shows the Review Board’s approval.

**Interview Schedule**

The kind of qualitative interviewing that I did focuses on individuals as “meaning-makers” in their everyday experiences and life worlds (Warren 2002). This approach entails a form of guided conversation that uses three kinds of questions.
“Main” questions are designed to begin and guide the conversation; “probing” questions aim to clarify and ask for further examples; “follow-up” questions are designed to better understand the implications of answers to the main questions (Warren 2002).

I asked each informant to talk about his experiences in, understanding of, and feelings about football as a player at a Division 1-FBS university. Before I began, I previewed what we would discuss to avoid surprising the player later. I emphasized that there were no wrong answers and that my interest was in his involvement in playing football and his thoughts about football related things: his entry into football, injuries, respect from other players, having the passion and desire to play football, fear of being hurt, and so forth. I did not mention masculine or athletic identity. I worried that this might be confusing or would threaten my ability to gain rapport with the informant.

As noted, I used a list of questions, topics and areas of inquiry as a guideline for the interviews. I did not ask questions in a structured format nor in a particular order. However, I asked questions about how they felt, what they had experienced, and their relationships with others in regards to football, being a boy/man, and a member of a particular race/ethnic group. As noted, my purpose was to obtain their stories and experiences about such issues.

Caveat on Interviewing Men in an Attempt to Study Masculinity/ies

My focus on masculinity as actions that "portray" or represent manhood made me cautious in several regards. I tried to heed warnings by Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) who say that interviewing men can be a “double-edged sword.” On one hand it is an opportunity for them to display manhood—the interview allows the informant an opportunity to “act like a man.” For this project, this is largely a good thing. I am interested in how informants defined, described, and portrayed manhood and masculinity and their identities as athletes. On the other hand, an interview may be viewed by some men as a threat to their masculinity. As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) note, men often become defensive and attempt to take control of the interview; they become reluctant to disclose their feelings, tend to exaggerate their capacity for rationality and control, and attempt to gloss over seemingly mundane topics with phrases such as, “you know what I mean?” In this way, the portrayal of manhood/masculinity can potentially act as a roadblock for a productive and useful interview.
I used several strategies to make the men feel in control and at ease during the interview. For example, I let them choose when and where the interview took place and often feigned ignorance (for example, about football related topics) to give them the power of authority. To avoid asking directly about emotions, I asked for stories that evoked emotions in the past. For example, I often asked, “how did you feel about that” to avoid forcing an informant to display a present “emotional self” during the interview. Another of my strategies was to introduce sensitive topics by stating what other men have said. Also, to make an informant feel empowered and make sure I covered all the topics included, I often circled back to an issue, took on the role of a newcomer who did not understand before, or tried to articulate what he might have meant as I asked for elaboration or corroboration. For example, during my interview with Gary, injuries came up very quickly. I circled back later and asked him to elaborate on the emotions that went along with those injuries and returning to the playing field after an injury.

Caveat about Race and Subjectivity in the Interview

To avoid problems associated with discussions about race and ethnicity and barriers that might obstruct a meaningful dialogue between a White interviewer and a Black informant, I turn to Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2002) who argue that the interview process and the subsequent interpretation must take into account the social, cultural and historical background of the informant. The interviewer must know that respondents are aware of the complex and subtle nature of identity (related to race and other statuses) that affect how the interview process will transpire. Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2002) suggest that researchers (especially those who are White) need to understand the situations and contexts often experienced by minority group members. For example, a White researcher needs to understand that a Black student athlete may feel out of place on a predominately white campus. These “out-of-place” feelings can easily transfer into an interview situation.

Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2002) suggested several strategies for dealing with such interracial interactions. Self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer is critical, especially when interviewing minority group respondents. For example, I disclosed to my informants that although I did not participate in organized sports as a youth, I am active in a number of sports and activities, contributing to my identity and sense of self.
Sharing similar experiences, similar to what Douglas (1985) called “creative interviewing” can be useful in bridging the gap that the informant might feel between his and the interviewer’s experiences. For example, interview situations are often situated around relations of power where the informant might feel like he is being interrogated. This can be especially troublesome when the interviewer is White and the informant is Black. To overcome this, I shared similar experiences with my informants in an attempt to enhance communication. I tried to be sensitive to subtle clues such as facial expressions, body posture, and other forms of nonverbal communication that may be positive or negative signs about the attitude of the informant and the subsequent flow of the interview. For example, a respondent raising his or her voice may not be a sign of anger but a sign that the respondent has been given a chance to speak on a topic that she or he finds interesting. Other non-verbal cues (e.g., looking down) may be signs that the respondent is reluctant or nervous. If I sensed such a reaction, I redirected my questions and went back to them later or disclosed personal information to comfort the respondent.

Data Analysis

My data were analyzed utilizing grounded theory practices of coding and memoing (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland et al. 2006; Martin and Turner 1986; Turner 1981). Coding and memoing are analytical practices in a grounded theory project. In the analysis, I analyzed the data inductively to build on and extend prior work on U.S. athletes by Messner (1992, 2000; see Chapter 2). My aim was to identity concepts that can enhance understanding of football players’ identities as men and as athletes.

I began data analysis with ideas about what I was looking for although I remained open to new concepts as well. Guided by Messner (1992, 2002), I looked for evidence that a player was attempting to construct a masculine or athletic self through speech acts. Toward this end, I also used a modified form of narrative analysis to examine players’ “talk” (see below). My goal was in part to extend Messner’s (1992, 2002) work on masculinity and an athletic identity in relation to sports participation by men. As Lofland, et al. (2006:195) point out:
Much, and perhaps most, qualitative fieldwork findings of some theoretical or conceptual significance are not so much novel discoveries as they are ‘extensions’ or ‘refinements’ of existing work. Prior familiarity with other potentially relevant bodies of work, theoretical or empirical, is obviously a necessary condition for developing extensions and refinements, but actually making those connections should be triggered by one’s empirical observations.

Throughout the data collection phase and the beginning phases of analysis, I also sought to discover other, new concepts and patterns. During the initial coding phase I asked questions like, “What is this about? What idea or thing do the data suggest? From whose point of view?” (Charmaz 2006:47). After analyzing the data in that way, I engaged in focused coding which involves taking initial codes found in the data and applying them to larger chunks of data. This step is conceptual in raising the process to a more analytic level (Charmaz 2006). Focused coding is important because it allowed me to base subsequent interview questions and observations on concepts and codes that emerged in the early stages of analysis. For example, early interviews yielded several codes on descriptions of masculinity and what it takes to play football. In subsequent interviews, I addressed this by asking informants how they define what being a “real man” means and what it takes to play football.

Analyzing “Talk” as Impression Management

On a general level, I characterize my interview data as “talk” to refer to language that is used as a key meaning maker (Lofland et al. 2006). Snow and Anderson (1987) and Hadden and Lester (1978) both refer to “identity talk.” I similarly describe my interview data as “talk,” “speech acts,” or “accounts.” Social psychologists have argued that individuals engage in various forms of impression management in order to present a positive image of themselves to others (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008; Goffman 1969). People offer accounts, which are “... a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry” (Scott and Lyman 1968: 46), to avoid confusion about the impression that is being presented and to explain potentially harmful events that may be detrimental to the managed impression. I characterize my interview data as a process of impression management that includes talk, speech acts and
accounts about what it means to be a man and what it takes to play college football. I say more about this in Chapter 6.

Lofland et al. (2006) outline three kinds of talk: talk in action, informal interviewing, and intensive interviewing. This project utilizes intensive interviewing by asking for descriptions of experiences by college football players. The players’ talk, comments, accounts, and use of language in the interview can be viewed as engaging in impression management. That is, through their accounts, they actively construct and portray themselves as athletic men. Since my interview data are not strictly narratives—often defined as “storytelling”—I analyzed transcriptions of the players’ talk by using Riessman’s (1993: 61) analytic method as a guideline:

…[S]tart from the inside, from the meanings encoded in the form of the talk, and expand outward, identifying, for example, underlying propositions that make the talk sensible, including what is taken for granted by speaker and listener. The strategy privileges the teller’s experience, but interpretation cannot be avoided. Following the advice of Riessman, I analyze and interpret the players’ talk and accounts to address processes of identity construction, that is, how college football players use speech acts to make claims as men and as athletes.

Atlas/Ti

I utilized the software program Atlas/Ti in the coding process. This software is useful for organizing, referencing, and retrieving codes, categories and memos and it does not force the analyst to indicate relationships among the codes, a framework onto the data, or perform automatic data analysis (see Coffey and Atkinson 1996:187). Table 2.2 lists the 34 focused codes that I organized and charted during the analysis.

Table 2.2. List of Focused Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Body: athleticism/skill/talent recognized by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Body: connected with athlete status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Body: reasons for working on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Body: recognized by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Body: size and shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Body: type it takes to distinguish oneself in ftbl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Body: using as a weapon/machine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.2 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Body: using athletic ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Emotions: about fame and popularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Emotions: about the &quot;general other's&quot; views toward him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Ftbll: connected with emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Ftbll: connected with fame/popularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Ftbll: connections with body type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Ftbll: connections with masculinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Ftbll: connections with respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Ftbll: influences for playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Ftbll: physical/violent nature of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Ftbll: uses of: school, way out, stay out of trouble, connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Ftbll: way to learn about self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Ftbll: what type of man it takes to play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Identity: connected with ftbll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Injury: dealing with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Injury: emotions about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Injury: how to avoid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Masculinity: as a work in progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Masculinity: connected with playing/achieving in sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Masculinity: connected with the body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Masculinity: connected with women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Masculinity: describing what distinguishes men on the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Masculinity: describing what it means to be a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Masculinity: signs of &quot;doing it&quot; during interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Respect: gaining and losing it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Women: dealing with/managing; relations with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Women: what they are &quot;used&quot; for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theoretical Memoing: Discovering Patterns, Defining Concepts

I also engaged in memo writing throughout the process. Memo writing, as described by Martin and Turner (1986) and by Charmaz (2006) is a mechanism for reflecting critically on one's data, analytical results, and/or methods. One begins memoing the minute one starts analyzing data. I wrote over 60 memos during my analysis. My early memos were often outlines or general thoughts about data collection and the beginning phases of data collection practices or analysis. Later memos were
written to define my codes and explore their theoretical qualities and connections (Charmaz 2006).

To develop definitions for my key concepts, I used the “constant comparative method” (Glaser 1965; Martin and Turner 1986; Turner 1981). By comparing observations and categories, I created definitions of concepts that best reflected my data. I also used theoretical sampling to saturate concepts (Charmaz 2006), a situation when additional data no longer produces new insights about a concept. That is, when an important theme emerged but my data were too thin, I focused on it in later collection phases. The process of saturating concepts began during the middle of the interview process and shaped subsequent interviews. As concepts and themes emerged in early interviews, subsequent interviews were done to flesh them out. This process was followed until my key concepts were saturated.

The final step in my analysis involves integrating my findings with prior research. This is the crux of Burawoy’s (1998, 2000) “extended case method” and what Snow et al. (2003) call “theoretical extension.” Embedded in the analysis section, I address how my findings resemble and differ from the findings of others—especially Messner (1992, 2002)—who have studied the connection between masculine and athletic identities and who have attempted to better understand the masculine identity dynamics of men and boys (e.g., Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2000).
Chapter 4 reports my informants’ talk about what it takes to be a “real man.” My informants say a real man is self-made and embraces the opposite of whatever is feminine or homosexual. The players offer accounts that define masculinity as taking responsibility, having agency, and being able to achieve one’s goals, facing challenges and taking risks, and providing for others. These ideals are highly valued in U. S. society and the college football players in my study say they aspire to them.

Being a “Real Man”

The football players in my study say a “real man” embraces many admirable qualities and behaviors. Becoming and being a real man is hard work and it is a work in progress, not a final state of being. In their experience and views, masculinity is not static or unchanging but something they work at and constantly try to “do” (Connell 1995; Martin 2003; West and Zimmerman 1987).

So what does it mean to be a “real man?” The football players in my study identified two requirements: (1) being “self-made” and (2) embracing and enacting the opposite of what society views as feminine or gay/homosexual. Accounts associated with the first dimension assert the necessity for personal responsibility, agency and goal achievement, a willingness to face challenges and take risks, and an ability to provide for or take care of others. Accounts associated with the second dimension focus on avoiding practices associated with women and girls or anything suggesting the “feminine.” It also avoids being perceived as, or acting as if one is, homosexual. I now present each dimension.

A “Real Man” is “Self-Made”

Perhaps because most players are from under-privileged backgrounds economically, the football players in my study emphasize the quality of being “self-
made” as part of being a “real man.” A “real man” is not someone to whom things are simply given or handed down. Rather, a real man proves he is his own person and is independent and responsible. He knows right from wrong and does what is right. He works hard; he has goals that he strives to achieve. He faces challenges and takes risks and provides for and takes care of others. In short, he lives up to society’s highest ideals of decency and responsibility. Kimmel (2006) notes that the ideals of “a man as self-made” and a “man as breadwinner” are central components of masculinity in U.S. society, historically and today. My football player informants appear to have “received the memo.” They too emphasize these qualities. A self-made man pulls himself up by his bootstraps and makes himself into something of value, into someone others will respect and admire. Connell (2005) notes that contemporary notions of masculinity, spawned in early-modern Europe, emphasize individuality and derive from beliefs in personal responsibility and agency. The players in my study overwhelmingly endorse these themes.

Comments from Elwood capture the notion that real men are self-made. They are responsible for creating themselves in particular ways. He reviews what one must do to “be called a man” and also what he has done to legitimate his status in that regard. He views manhood as more complex and encompassing than succeeding at college football. Much has been given to him but until he starts earning for himself and providing for others, he is not a man, in his view. These comments anticipate much of the material in the conception of a “real man” as self-made.

M: Is that how you see yourself [as a man]?
E: No, I’m working hard on it [becoming a real man] . . . cuz college football doesn’t last forever. Football in general doesn’t last forever. I’m a young man. I consider myself . . . . But you know, it’s easy to say you’re a man when [school] is paying for you to be at your apartment, paying for your food, paying for your bills, things of that nature. And when you have to provide for yourself and provide for others, I think that’s when you start getting into that role of a man.
M: Right now, would you characterize yourself that way [as a man]?
E: I characterize myself as a . . . as a young man. Like I wouldn’t say I’m a man, I’m a grown man, right now because . . . when you look at the whole scheme of
things, I haven’t done much. It’s nothing. I’ve done a lot but it’s not much, uh, a lot’s been given, a lot’s been . . . been, been laid on my plate because I had a gift of playin’ football. I’m workin’ towards not having anything given, to being able to work and provide [for myself and for others].

Football players in my study view self-made manhood as having several qualities: (a) taking personal responsibility, (b) having agency and being able to achieve one's goals, (c) facing challenges and taking risks, and (d) providing for others. I now define, present evidence, and explain each quality.

(a) Taking Personal Responsibility. A “real man” takes personal responsibility and behaves in a morally upright manner. This theme refers to a man’s obligation to take care of himself and to comply with the normative standards for a good, dependable and respectable person. A real man avoids depending on others and avoids failing to do what is right. For example, Bryan said being a man means “. . . being able to handle your business, taking care of stuff . . . being responsible, [and] taking care of yourself.” Chris echoed these sentiments in noting that “. . . a man is someone who . . . takes care of hisself . . . handles his business when he needs to.” Frank similarly said, “. . . To be a man you need to accept responsibilities, meet standards and all like that. [If] you fail, you [are] failing as a person and as a man.” Meeting societal standards of “uprightness” and decency are implied in Frank’s reference to societal standards. A “real man” complies with the standards that society admires. In short, a real man takes responsibility for himself and for others and he does what is right and avoids doing what is wrong.

These accounts suggest an imperative of being personally responsible and independent and they imply a moral duty to keep one's word and do what is right. They imply that a real man is righteous and good. Lipset (1996) suggests that a “moral individualism” is a key part of the American tradition. Lipset (1996) notes: “This is an important assertion—that community in democratic pluralistic America is grounded in the individual as a thinking, moral actor, not in group solidarity” (p.275).

Harry seems to agree with Lipset when listing the qualities of a real man. “For me it is values, character, honesty, integrity. A man isn’t how big or how small you are. A man is what you represent, your values and morals that you represent, point blank. That’s the biggest thing.” Chris similarly emphasized the requirement to do what is right:
“[A man is someone] . . . who does the right thing . . . lives right, you know, [is] positive.” Being a self-made man is more than simply being personally responsible; it also entails doing the morally correct thing.

(b) Having Agency and Achieving goals. Another theme articulated by the players reflects the meritocratic ideal of acting, doing things, and doing whatever is needed to accomplish one’s desired ends. Having agency refers to a person’s ability to make things happen or to get things done. It involves having goals and working hard to realize them. A real man has goals and the drive, ambition, and ability to go after them. According to Dale, a man is “. . . someone who will do what they need to do to get what they want. If you want something, go get it or do what you have to to go get it.” Alfred similarly notes that a man is “. . . somebody who has some goals, is goal oriented, you know, got some things that they’re trying to do in his life.”

Working to achieve goals is a key aspect of genuine manhood. Having goals indicates an intention to do things, to improve, to grow. Working toward a goal is what real men do. Alfred says he is not yet a “real man” but he is working hard to achieve that standard. “Let’s not say yeah I made it I’m truly a man now. Right now, it’s like what we call grinding. It’s a grinding process.” Alfred meant that hard—or grinding—work is required to achieve manhood. But a real man does this work rather than shirk it. He does not sit around and wait for manhood to happen. He invests, works hard and “makes it happen.” The men in my study appeared to view themselves as “working toward being a man.” They see working hard, being goal-oriented, and trying to make things happen as necessary steps along the road to manhood.

(c) Facing Challenges and Taking Risks. Facing challenges and taking risks refers to a willingness to venture beyond what is safe and secure and to overcome limitations. A real man goes out on a limb; he does not turn away from uncertainty. A real man faces challenges and takes risks. Bryan views being a man as being willing to make tough or risky decisions rather than avoid them. He gives an example of a decision he made in the face of opposition by others in his social world. Many viewed his decision as wrong but he felt it was right. And, as things have turned out, he believes he was right. It involved a decision to attend a junior college out of high school rather than
go to a larger institution and football program. The following excerpt shows how he viewed his decision as risky but also as paying off.

M: Do you currently see yourself as a man?
B: You know I would want to say it [yes], but I still have a lot of molding to do. But I still got a lot of stuff to work with on that
M: Has there been anytime recently or even further back in the past when you saw or you experienced moments when you could tell, this was something about your pathway toward becoming a man, when there was a significant moment in your life when you saw something like that happen?
B: Yeah. There was this one time I had like make a good decision on where I was gonna go coming out of high school. I was gonna go to a D1-AA [currently referred to as division I-FCS; see Chapter 1] school or go to a junior college and I stepped up to the plate and decided to go to a juco [junior college]. So it paid off for me cuz I got to transfer here.
M: OK . . . and you saw that as making a step?
B: Yea, cuz a lot of people criticized me for it, you know. They were saying it was a stupid choice cuz I was giving up a four year scholarship to go to a juco. So it was kind of a risk.

He took a risk that paid off for him and he feels good about it, viewing his actions as evidence that he can act like a man.

Chris talked about how he faced a university environment that he found challenging due to being more multi-cultural than his high school was. Being able to deal with an unfamiliar environment provided evidence to Chris that he could face uncertainty and survive. He believes the experience helped him “grow up” from a boy into a man.

Yeah man, like, see I’d always been in the black schools and black neighborhoods and dealing with black people, know what I’m sayin? So when I got here, it’s like my first mix[ed-race/ethnic] school with all cultures and all that, you know? But mainly though, what I’m sayin is like . . . it made me grow up here, football, non-football, whatever, cuz you have to talk to people. Something’s not going right you have to let ‘em know this and this and this. Confront people. You don’t have to be rude but [you must] confront ‘em and tell ‘em what’s goin on with ya and
stuff like that. See back in high school I didn’t do that. I didn’t. I mean
everything was always easy. You know it was just . . . when something’s not
right, when you think you’re not getting treated right . . . I had to learn how to go
talk to someone.

Chris’s comments suggest that a man is someone who “confronts people” and “tells them
what’s going on.” A real man is assertive and straightforward; he goes forward and faces
uncertain situations rather than run away from them.

Frank offers other examples of challenges that helped him identify as a man and,
by implication, suggests that real men face up to rather than run away from hard times.
Both events were “turning points” in Frank’s life. One was having a son while he was in
high school and the other was sustaining a severe physical injury that required months of
physical rehabilitation.

M: Do you feel that responsibility [to grow up] because of your child? Do you
see yourself now as a man?
F: Oh yeah, I seen it at 17. ’Cuz I was a single parent. That was tough. My
Momma helped me out a lot. Besides that it was really tough . . . .
M: Was there a turning point when you realized, now you see yourself as a man?
F: Yep having my little boy and by tearing my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament,
in the knee]. I figured football wasn’t for everybody.
M: When you hurt yourself you figured football wasn’t for everybody? Did you
have doubts about you?
F: No I didn’t have doubts about me. Football just might not be for everybody.
M: So when you hurt yourself why did you think it wasn’t for everybody, that
you didn’t have doubts about yourself?
F: When I tore my ACL I was told that it was a hard injury to come back from
but I was determined to run track my senior year because [otherwise] I could miss
everything [related to sports in] my senior year. That’s when I was self-motivated
to run track and get my knee right to run track. And then come up here and try to
play here.

Frank faced these challenges head on, he said. Although helped by his mother, he found
parenting an infant son difficult. Yet he did not abandon his son (nor had he when we
talked). He was told his knee injury would entail a difficult recovery process. Sustaining a severe injury led him to believe that some guys don’t have “what it takes to come back” but he says he did have what it took. It would have been easier to quit but Frank refused to quit. He saw both experiences as opportunities to prove that he “has what it takes” to recover and play football again. Facing and overcoming these obstacles helped Frank see himself as a man.

(d) Providing for Others. A standard suggested in the comments of Frank is that a real man does things for others, in particular, for family but also for other people, when possible. The implication is that “providing” includes earning money for housing, food, and necessities but also helping out in other ways. In part, this standard reflects the “bread-winner” ideal of manhood noted by Kimmel (2006). Comments by Elwood suggest that a real man helps his family and people beyond his family. He expresses admiration for his father and uncles who, in his view, “put other people before themselves,” suggesting that they sacrificed their wants to help others.

To be a man [long pause] umm, to be a man. I’d . . . when I think of a man I automatically go to the men that were in my life growing up and who I wanted to be like. That would be my father, my uncles, so their qualities would be, they provided for their families, they . . . [long pause] they put other people before them, uh, they made sure . . . that [long pause]. They made sure that the people that helped them were helped by them once they were able to help. They . . . the men that I look up to, they did . . . they did as much as they can for as many people as they can, as long as they could.

Bryan notes that a “real man” helps around the house by doing things to make home a welcoming place, e.g., “you know just, takin’ care of stuff around the house, you know, being there to take care of that for your wife or your family, something like that.” Alfred views playing college football as a possible step to the professional leagues where he can earn money to support his family and help other people as well.

That’s what playing sports in college is all about, making money one day. You know you’re making money to help support your family and you’re also making money to help support other people, later down the road. When you can help out other people that are less fortunate . . . that need money [or] need food to survive.
For these men, providing for others is necessary for one to become (and be) a real man.  

A “Real Man” is neither Feminine nor Gay

Many of the qualities that my informants say are important for achieving manhood are admirable. Yet they also expressed less admirable conceptions of what manhood means. Proper masculinity is, in their views, the opposite of whatever is feminine or gay. Gender theorists argue that multiple masculinities develop out of a relational and hierarchical gender structure (Bird 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Martin 2001; Schippers 2007) and my results provide an example of how that occurs.

Connell (1995, 2005) argues that hegemonic masculinity positions the construction of individual gender identity in the context of structured gender inequalities, whereas multiple masculinities are constructed with each having differential power or salience. In other words, some kinds of masculinity are admired while others are not (but see Schippers 2007). Some are more positive than others (Connell 1995). The concept of hegemonic masculinity indicates an “ideal” type (Schrock and Padavic 2007) that positions itself vis-à-vis women and subordinated masculinities, including masculinities associated with gay men.

Informants in my study expressed views about what it means to be a “real man” by saying that real men are not like women and not like homosexual men. These views invoke a negative conception of ideal manhood. By doing this, my informants frame the feminine and the homosexual as tainted, as something they wish to avoid or maintain distance from. Stated differently, they assert that a real man distances himself from women and the feminine and from gay or homosexual men. Schippers (2008) would suggest that the players are “doing difference.” Bird (2005) says men benefit from a conception of gender as relational and mutually exclusive because current patriarchal arrangements offer privileges to men and disadvantages to women.Positing men as the opposite of women maintains men’s power, individually and collectively. When my informants say that real men are neither feminine nor gay, they embrace a conception of masculinity that reinforces (and reconstitutes) a gender institution that privileges men and oppresses women and privileges heterosexual men (and masculinity) over stigmatized gay men and homosexuality (Schippers 2007; Pemberton 2008).
The players in my study commonly equated feminine and homosexual characteristics. In fact, they rejected homosexuality more harshly than they denigrated girls/women and the feminine. However, as Schippers (2007) argues, homosexuality in men is rejected by heterosexual men not because it is a subordinated kind of masculinity but because it is “femininity.” This thesis is reflected in my results. When the players criticized homosexuals, they did so primarily by pointing to the feminine. However, some players expressed disgust that a gay man might make a sexual pass at them or approach them for sexual favors. In making these comments, they constructed a masculine identity that positions themselves in opposition to girls/femininity and to gay men and as "othering" women and gays (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

(a) Denigrating Girls/Women and the Feminine. The stigmatized taint on femininity is reflected in comments by my informants that stereotype women and/or girls as quitters, unable to achieve their goals, unwilling to work hard, too talkative, and/or as complainers or whiners. They also depict girls as protected and therefore as having a “crutch” that is denied to boys. The following comments by Dale reflect aspects of this claim, thus suggesting that masculinity is other than whatever girls do or act like.

If you want to go get it [be a man] then don’t be a girl and [say] never mind I can’t do it. Just go get it and if you want something, work for it, get it. Be a man about it. . . . If you are going to sit there and complain about it, that’s not being a man. You know . . . you hear a girl and they want to go into every detail about everything and they just complain if everything isn’t right.

Dale suggests that “girls” do things that a “real man” scrupulously avoids. A real man has goals and works hard to achieve them, Dale tells us, but girls do not. Girls have neither motivation nor a desire to work hard and are quick to give up and complain. Real men, unlike “girls,” do not say “I can’t.” Dale describes a noir side of masculinity that is “not so rosy and nice,” as many earlier qualities suggest.

Less negative accounts assert a differential treatment of girls and boys during childhood that produces qualities that help boys become “real men.” Frank grew up with older sisters and said his mother treated his sisters differently from how she treated him. His comments imply that his experience was favorable, compared to that of girls. He implies that all girls are “given a crutch,” compared to boys. By implication, boys can
take care of themselves while girls cannot. “Oh yeah … all females get treated differently. Like a crutch or something. [Parents] don’t let a female do too much. I never had no curfew.” Through this difference, Frank learned that girls are sheltered and thus become less capable than boys. Boys and men are more independent and autonomous. Frank implies that girls are handicapped relative to boys in this way.

(b) Denigrating Homosexuality and Homosexual Men. The players’ rejection of homosexuality as a quality of “real men” depicts gay men as behaving in feminine ways. They “are kind of feminine” or they walk like women or they “talk feminine” (probably meaning “sissified”). Alfred claims that real men neither act feminine nor do they like for other men to act that way.

You know if a man . . . if he acts a certain way, he’s feminine . . . . I got some [male] cousins that are kind of feminine. They talk feminine, you know, they got their ‘little walk’ to ‘em, whatever. And you know that’s always not a good thing cuz like, other men see them as, ‘Don’t talk to me; don’t do that’ . . . .

Alfred’s comment exposes sexist attitudes that belittle feminine ways of behaving and talking by men or boys as well as a form of masculinity that “real men” should avoid (cf. Schippers 2007). Later, Alfred asserted a closer connection between the feminine and homosexuality:

A: There are a lot of masculine dudes that got feminine ways to ‘em but some guys that are masculine try not to let others know they are a certain way [they are actually gay]. But truly deep down inside they really is.

M: A certain way? Like what way?

A: Feminine and stuff like that but deep down they’re kinda gay or whatever.

When asked what a man should do or say to let others know that he “is not gay,” For Alfred, a (real) man should talk about women, assert that he is sexually successful with women, and display physical aggression by hitting people. Specifically, Alfred said that a man should “. . . be cool, have a couple of women around sometimes . . . brag about whether you can hit [as in punch or slug] somebody or not . . . . Yeah, that’s how men talk; that’s how athletes talk. You know? Who they did [had sex with], what they did. That’s just how it be sometimes.”

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To distance himself from homosexuality, a man should display himself to others as “cool.” Being cool means being seen with women even if not in a sexual way (they can simply hang around). Gay athletes report using such a strategy to keep their homosexual identity secret from straight men (Pronger 1990; Messner 1992). Bragging about heterosexual conquests and saying you have “hit someone” are other ways for a “real man” to distance himself from homosexuality. Using physical violence or threatening its use shows that one as dominant and powerful, thus a “real man” instead of a wimpy, weak gay/homosexual man.

Harry expresses both sexist and heterosexist attitudes when distancing himself from homosexuality. He interprets the word masculine to mean “straight” sexually and the word feminine to mean “gay.”

Masculine and feminine: Now you are talking gay and straight stuff to me. I respect them [gay men] but I don’t like that [homosexuality] imposed on me. I don’t have any problem with gay people but don’t impose that on me. Don’t come to me and try to hook up with me and talk to me about that stuff or be touchy feely. I respect you and you’re cool but naw, that’s [having a gay man hit on me] my only problem with that.

Harry equates femininity with male homosexuality. By attaching gay men’s sexuality to negative aspects of cultural femininity, Harry makes sense of and locates homosexuality as the opposite of what “real men,” including himself, are like (Schippers 2007). He distances himself from homosexuality by positioning himself in the center and stating that he respects gay men but does not want “that” imposed on him. His comment essentially says that “It is OK if you are gay but do not hit on me.” Heterosexual football players appear to boost their egos by rejecting gay men while assuming that gay men will make advances toward them. Such accounts were common among my informants who seemed motivated to avoid the appearance of prejudice toward gay men but at the same time wanted it known that they are not gay and that “real men” are likewise not gay.

Discussion and Conclusions
My informants offered accounts of a “real man” as someone who is morally upstanding and dependable. He is self-made. He takes responsibility for himself and others and actively works to achieve his goals. He acts in a morally correct manner. He takes risks and faces hardship and challenges. He is a bread-winner. These depictions of “real manhood” reflect many of our culture’s hegemonic masculine ideals (Kimmel 2006; Connell 1995). The social and cultural climate in which these athletes work and play football is narrow yet, remarkably, these young men suggest complex and diverse understandings of what “real manhood” is. Their comments suggest that they hold themselves, and other men, to high behavioral standards. Chapter 5 focuses on their views of what it takes to be a football player. My results show some overlap but also contradictions in the players' views of what it means to be a man versus a football player/athlete.

Actors in the world of college football (coaches, other players, and to some extent, fans) create, recreate, and enforce notions of masculine ideals that promote aggression, strength, violence, and using the body as a machine (Connell 2000; Eitzen 1999; Messner 1992, 2002). In other words, college football players live and work in a localized cultural and social context that emphasizes very narrow views of masculinity. The locale and context of big-time college football stresses violence, physical strength, and using the body as a weapon. While it also embraces some of the ideals reviewed thus far—taking responsibility, having goals, taking risks and facing challenges—it emphasizes other goals too—for instance, team-work and being responsible to and for one’s teammates. These expectations are reviewed in Chapter 5.

Material in Chapter 4 shows that football players stigmatize women and gay men in order to distance themselves from negative attributes, stereotypes, and cultural myths and beliefs associated with them. This material shows a less positive view of athletes’ conceptions of manhood than earlier results did. As Messner (1992) points out, athletic and masculine identities have strong sexist and homophobic elements. My results show those qualities persisting in 2007-2008. Comments from my informants suggest that masculine identities are perhaps fragile in that they fear being perceived as feminine or gay. To affirm their status as "real men," they distance themselves from women and from gay men. Do such concerns outweigh the more charitable views reported earlier? Does
the concern to avoid femininity and homosexuality prompt football players to be cruel to and/or violent toward women and gay men? Do these attitudes lead to violent behavior off the field toward women and gay men? I address such issues in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5 analyzes how my informant college football players account for themselves as athletes. They say college football players must have a strong mind, passion or “heart” for the game, and physical attributes as large size, strength, and talent or skill. A strong mind includes “focus,” intelligence, and the ability to learn. “Having heart” means being passionate about football and willing to give and take “a hit” on the playing field. Physical attributes reference the role of the body including players’ need to be “naturally gifted” in some way. Through these processes and conditions, players actively construct an athletic identity as a football player. Through playing football and describing themselves as having what it takes, these young men work on self-identifying as a particular kind of athletic man. Since football players are among the most admired athletes in the U. S., understanding college football players’ views on what success entails can inform us about one kind of hegemonic masculinity in today’s world (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 1992).

Succeeding as a Football Player

Most players in my study play at a Division I-FBS (NCAA standards; see Chapter 1) football program. They have all played organized football, the most popular sport among boys and young men in the U. S. (Coakley 2007; Messner 2002) since a very young age. As boys, they were recognized by parents, peers and/or coaches as being “distinct” from other boys. Compared to others, they were more talented or had a notable height, weight, or skill advantage. As they continued to play sports through their pre-teen and high school years, most “realized” that they were talented at playing football. Often with encouragement from others, they came to believe that their athletic potential could earn them a college scholarship and possibly more. And yet, according to statistics

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10 One informant was, at the time of the interview, a walk-on player, attempting to make the roster.
A Strong Mind or “Mental Strength”

Possibly due to the need to feel control over their position in life, or the willingness to escape the shadow of the “dumb jock” stereotype (Edwards 1984), players in my study emphasized “mental strength” as a defining quality for success as a college football athlete. Daily schedules are strict and filled with workouts, practices and team meetings. Players are exhausted at the end of the day. Yet, they must stay on top of their schoolwork and attend classes and take and pass exams. Playing football thus requires mental strength and an ability to resist feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. Players of course point to the importance of certain physical attributes—e.g., size, speed, and strength—but they also *down-play* the importance of physical or athletic attributes relative to mental strength. Mental strength is critical, they contend. The mental component of playing football acts as a weeding-out mechanism for players who “can’t handle it,” they say. Jeff’s comment reflects the claim by him and other players that the mental challenges of playing college football are difficult. “It ain’t all physical. It’s mostly mental. People can’t handle . . . I mean, it’s so much mental preparation, being
able to handle everything.” Mental strength appears to consist of remaining positive and committed despite the experiences and conditions that prompt one to feel overwhelmed and strained beyond endurance.

Frank stressed the importance of being mentally motivated, staying positive and avoiding negativity. He says one must be “. . . strong minded, self-motivated, basically self-motivated. [You] can’t look down on yourself . . . [you must] only be positive.” Other players agreed that mental strength is essential. When first asked about the type of man it takes to play college football, Bryan said you have to be physically fit. But he soon altered his comment to emphasize mental fitness or strength. He settled on the importance of both qualities but emphasized the necessity of having a “strong mind” consisting of deep commitment and a positive outlook.

Well first it takes . . . you gotta be physically fit. He’s gotta be mentally fit more than anything, cuz it will take a lot from you, so you gotta be mentally fit and physically fit . . . just a person who is willing to work, willing to be coachable and willing to work.

My analysis suggests that having a strong mind entails a minimum of three characteristics: (a) focus, (b) intelligence, and (c) coachability. Although closely connected, each entails a different facet of mental strength.

(a) Focus. According to the players’ accounts, focus is crucial to becoming a successful college football athlete. Focus means staying on target and not being distracted from the goal of succeeding at football. Focus is needed in two contexts: “on-the-field” and “off-the-field.” “On-the-field” issues refer to things associated with playing football. It means being persistent, determined, and confident when dealing with the practice schedules and other demanding aspects of college football. The daily trials of playing college football entail many pitfalls and opportunities to become discouraged. Players who are focused overcome potential barriers and take advantage of positive opportunities. “Off-the-field” refers to academic matters (attending class and maintaining a minimum GPA) and keeping other issues, such as relationships with women, from diverting attention away from football. Confronted with on-the-field challenges and off-the-field distractions, making it in college football takes focus so as to “keep your eyes on the prize.”
Maintaining focus on-the-field means handling the daily rigors of training and playing. Players must follow a strict workout/practice schedule, study films of other teams and former games, and fight to keep their position on the team. Harry talks about the daily training required to become the best football player he can be. From an early age, he knew he was athletically gifted. He chose football and focused all of his efforts on being good at it. Harry says,

I knew from an early age that I could be good at baseball or good at basketball, good at soccer, or I could be great at football. I could be good at everything and do all four . . . or I could pick one and say I am going to be great at it, focus all my weightlifting, all my running, all my stretching, all my thinking. Everything I did was focused on that particular skill.

Bryan studies film of prior games or opponents’ teams in order to improve his performance on the field. He says, “I’d say if you focus on your, you do your film studies, you go in there each and every day [and do your] film studies, you [will] come out on top.”

Maintaining focus is important to keeping one’s position. Dale talks about how the pressure to perform and stay focused is helped by knowing that there is always another player ready and willing to take your place on the team. When asked how he feels about someone always being behind him in the lineup, challenging his position, Dale says:

I think it helps because I’m not going to go out to practice and screw off. I know that I have to work to keep my job because I do have someone over my shoulder. But then again it sucks because if you [make a mistake] you wonder if you are going to get benched or if I’m going to play again. So it’s kind of hard on that sense but it’s good because it keeps you focused and it keeps you working.

Competition with teammates forces players to stay focused if they want to succeed. Several players said no position on the team is safe. On a team with many highly skilled recruits, there is constant competition for playing time. Not wanting to sit on the bench helps players remain focused.

Being focused means being persistent and having confidence in your ability to improve. Dale talks about qualities that distinguish starters from non-starters and who
will make it to the next level. The starters and the professional prospects are the players who stay focused and strive for perfection in practice. The players who focus and listen to the coaches (more on “coachability” below) are able to separate themselves from others. Dale says:

You can tell by how they act at practice because if they [unfocused players] mess up they don’t care. It’s the same people everyday and you can tell who does care because if they get sent back [to do the practice drill again], they don’t say, ‘Oh coach why are you sending me back?’ They say, ‘Alright, I’m going to go back and do it right this time and let me be perfect.’ The people who aren’t going to make it in the NFL or even the starting line up [are] the people [who] get sent back and they’ll just do it the same way. Football is a lot about mental. If you aren’t mentally strong you aren’t going to cut it.

Focus refers also to getting up when you get knocked down and, as several players say, “having a short memory.” Having a short memory means not letting a bad situation or bad day deter you from your goals. Many players are aware of pitfalls along the way and players with focus and confidence are able to “get over it” and succeed. For example, Chris talks about coming back from an injury or from making a mistake on the playing field. To play football, you must be strong minded and stay focused on success. Focused players are able to move past their mistakes. He says:

You gotta be able to bounce back and when I say bounce back, that can mean from injury . . . you have to have a short memory. Say you fumble the ball . . . [I] mean you [are] down, yeah you [are] gonna be down, any person would, I mean you [are] down, you let a hundred more guys down and thousand of fans down too, so you let people down. But . . . you have to be able to shake that off. Go back to the sideline and forget about it . . . just like that, you gotta be able to forget about it. The better players forget about it just like that. You keep it in your head; you’re gonna mess up again. Or you know, you’re not gonna be playing your best. So you gotta be able to . . . you have to have a short memory. Harry offered a similar account of the need to remain focused even in the face of making a mistake or missing an opportunity to capitalize. Having confidence, even extreme
confidence bordering on arrogance, is required for both individual and team success. He remembered what a former coach said to him:

I’ll tell you right now you are going to miss but I want one thing out of you. No matter what happens, no matter how many balls you miss, you walk around like a fucking bad ass, like you have a chip on your shoulder, like you own the field.

Cuz that confidence will carry over and it will carry over to the rest of the team. For many players, being persistent and having confidence are mental strength qualities that help one overcome the inevitable failures that accompany playing college football. Players talk about “working everyday to get better,” and “what can I do today to make me better than I was yesterday?” that refer to focus, persistence and confidence that are necessary elements for success in playing college football.

Having focus off-the-field refers to maintaining academic eligibility and keeping social and relationship matters from becoming distractions. To be eligible for athletic participation, the NCAA requires student athletes to maintain a 2.0 grade-point-average (GPA). [Individual institutions often have even higher requirements than the NCAA regulations mandate; for example, some impose a minimum number of days a student-athlete can miss class or require mandatory tutoring sessions for at-risk student-athletes.]

Elwood talks about the need to stay focused in the classroom after receiving a scholarship to play for a Division I-FBS football program. He emphasizes the need to be persistent. He says, “. . . then you have to go work in the classroom, you have to go get your qualifying scores, get your GPA up to match the sliding scale. Basically you have to be persistent . . . Um, you have to be persistent off the field and you have to be persistent in your books.” Paul echoes Elwood’s concern about performing well in the classroom relative to eligibility. Securing the scholarship and first-year eligibility requires serious dedication and focus on schoolwork. Paul says, “I really had to buckle down . . . in high school. You’ve . . . got to go through the NCAA clearing house for Division I football. So I really had to buckle down in school and focus on school.”

Performing well in the classroom has an effect on keeping a player focused. If he does not get the grade, he cannot play. But it also has the potential to indirectly and negatively affect a player’s on-field performance if school work becomes a distraction. For example, Bryan says he can tell when a player is not focused on-the-field because he
allows schoolwork or fatigue to compromise his performance. Bryan says, “I can tell when a guy comes out not as focused as they had been. They may just be tired, body aching, having problems in class. And you can just tell in their performance.”

While schoolwork and fatigue can prevent being focused on-the-field, the most common off-the-field issues talked about by players in my study were social and relationship aspects of life. Because of their popularity and high status, college football players are believed to be able to “get any woman they want.” In our culture, football players are stereotyped as men whom women want to date and the type of man that other men want to be. For example, Gary talks about how the status of being a football player translates into “getting” women, which means access to easy or casual sex and the dating scene. He says, “Oh yeah, football players will always be getting females. It doesn’t matter, I mean any football team in the world you gonna have girls . . . .” Jeff has had similar experiences. He says that some women give football players a lot of attention. He says, “They [women] will be quick to introduce themselves. Maybe some would be nicer than others and maybe they’d give you more attention because you play football.”

Jeff also described the fun he has with women and how easy “hooking up” (i.e. having sex) can be. He did not view such contacts as serious, as this remark shows: “I mean most of the time it was just to get together, hook up, have a good time, you know.”

With the allure of easily forming relationships with women comes the responsibility to prevent such relationships from interfering with football. When a player allows relationships “into their football world,” problems develop. Gary talks about how younger players are tempted with quick and easy sex/relationships and have to learn how to handle such situations. Although he does not say how players should correctly handle these situations, he implies that they should not distract a player from what he needs to do on the field. He says, “. . . and for a lot of the younger football players you got to be able to . . . there’s a right way to handle it and a wrong way to handle it.”

Many players talk about the need to keep relationships with women separate from football. For example, Bryan talks about the negative side effects for players who fail in this respect. He says:

I would say it’s different. You got your social life [and] you got your football life. You start bringing ties . . . like say your girlfriend broke up with you. You bring
that into football, you know, you start performing bad. But you gotta know when it’s time to have fun with your social life and you gotta know when it’s like, ‘OK, [I] gotta focus on football right now.’

When asked if he was in a relationship with a woman, Bryan said no, that women were not important to him at this time. He is focusing on football now. This attitude is common among the players I interviewed. Most do not feel like they have the time to commit to a serious relationship with a woman.

Relationships with women are serious when the possibility of pregnancy enters the picture. For example, in high school Elwood realized he needed to “slow down” and limit his sexual activity to avoid having a child that he felt he would have to support. He realized caring for a child would be a burden and distraction from his goal of playing college football. He says:

My maturing process started off in high school. So I was . . . I’m not gonna say I was out looking for every woman I wanted to have sex with but I kind of calmed down to where my . . . my latest days of high school, I didn’t want to get caught up. I didn’t want to leave [his hometown] with a baby that I’d had and have to worry about taking care of a child and all that stuff. So I slowed down.

As noted in Chapter 4, Frank had a child with his girlfriend. Yet he still focused and earned a scholarship to play college football, in part because his mother helped raise the child and in part by sacrificing his social life. Nevertheless, most players recognize a child as an obstacle and distraction to succeeding at college football.

Other aspects of a player’s life are viewed as possible distractions from playing football. For example, players realize that having too much of a social life is distracting. For example, Frank says he rarely goes out; rather, he focuses on playing football:

M: You don’t go out on the weekends, do anything?
F: No.
M: Nothing? Movies, clubs, bars, anything like that?
F: Probably go to the movies but besides that we got our eyes on the game. I play the game before I do anything.

Frank believes that relationships, childcare responsibilities, and social activities can distract players from football.
To summarize, focus is about dedication, persistence and confidence, on and off the playing field. To be a successful college football player, one must be focused. This involves working hard, sticking to a strict training regimen, practicing, going to class, and avoiding distractions. Harry sums it up well. After deciding that he wanted to play football, he sacrificed his social life, worked hard and did not stop until he was the best player at each level of organized football. He says:

I always had incredible determination and a [good] work-ethic. To the point where I wouldn’t go out on Friday or Saturday night to the movies with my friends because I wanted to train. Once I set my mind on wanting to play football, I wasn’t stopping until I was the best player in high school. I wasn’t stopping till I was the best player in college. I just had my mind on one thing. That’s how I always worked. I am going to go full throttle and then if I don’t make it that’s fine but I knew I did everything possible to get there.

Focus requires qualities discussed in Chapter 4 about what it means to be a man. Being a man is about having goals and the agency to achieve those goals. Many players in my study talked about succeeding at the college level and striving to play professionally. Although the goal of playing professionally is often unrealistic and misdirected, setting goals for oneself is a quality that many find admirable, even if the goals are not ultimately met. For these players, “real football players” or “true athletes” make decisions, set goals, and stay focused in pursuit of their goals. For players in my study this is what it takes to play college football, and in essence, to be a man.

(b) Intelligence. According to accounts offered by the players, “having a strong mind” means being intelligent. Intelligence means being smart (not dumb or stupid or dense) in the classroom, in life, and on the football field. A player must be smart enough to pass courses and navigate his way through the challenges of college. Elwood talks about what it takes to get through college life. When asked what it takes, he said: “Your mental capacity, you can’t be a dummy. You can be a dummy and if you’re trickin’ somebody, then let it slide, but if you’re just plumb dumb, it doesn’t fly too far in this college life.” Elwood is addressing how many players felt about being smart. Many feel there is more to success than being athletically gifted and playing a sport. They talk

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11 The NCAA estimates that less than 2% of NCAA football players will play any professional football.
about doing work in the classroom and taking on the responsibilities of being a college student.

Players have to be intelligent enough to truly understand the game of football itself. They must know the playbook and rules of the game. Depending on the position, players need to know when to check out of one formation and into another, the defense to line up in, and how to read a defense. Paul says playing football as a kid was simpler than in college. In his youth, Paul says players simply ran around, trying to tackle the opposing player or trying not to be tackled. But in high school and especially college, that changes. He says, “There’s more to it now, like while you’re in college, you’ve got to know formations, the shifts, the checks. But at a young age, really just ‘um, well as a running back, just not to get tackled.” Oscar also offered accounts about intelligence that capture what many of the players in my study said is important for success. Oscar talks about the necessity to understand the game and learn as you go.

   O: To me you have to be intelligent, not as much as physically gifted as anyone else, but intelligence in this sport gets you a long way.
   O: Uh, just by knowing . . . what kind of defense you’re facing and what kind of offense you’re facing . . . .

Many players said that mental strength means being smart enough to know and understand the complexities of football. Playing college football is not for the weak minded.

   (c) Coachable. All players in my study were star athletes in high school, among the most physically and athletically gifted players on their teams. But once they accepted a scholarship to an elite Division 1-A program, they became just another recruit, another freshman trying to become a starter. This change can be difficult for players who enter college football with an inflated ego about their abilities and role on the team. According to several accounts, one attribute that separates successful from unsuccessful players is the ability to listen and learn. Players refer to this quality as being coachable. Being coachable means being willing and able to take direction and criticism from the coaching staff. Coaches want players who listen, learn and do what they are told. For example, Gary, who was in the military prior to playing football, talked about the need to take
direction and be yelled at. He says, “A term [used] in the military is a person who isn’t afraid to be yelled at. Coach gonna yell at you . . . . It takes a guy who is able to listen to those directions and do what the coaches tell you.”

Many players offered similar accounts about being coachable. Typically, being physically gifted or athletically talented is rewarded with a scholarship and the opportunity to play for an elite Division 1-A program. Being coachable means an ability and willingness to take guidance and learn. Nathan suggests that being coachable is the single most important individual characteristic needed for college football success, even more than athletic talent. For Nathan, it’s about learning and potential. He says:

No you don’t have to be talented. You just gotta be coachable. If you’re coachable, that can take you a long way. If you have talent, that takes you just, that can take you but so far. I mean your talents alone can take you so far but if you’re coachable and the coaches see that you’re coachable, that can take you a long way.

Being coachable and taking direction is essential in many sports, especially team sports (Coakley 2007; Eitzen 1999; Messner 2002). Eitzen (1999) argues that an authoritarian power structure is a characteristic of football and other team sports that, in reality, contradicts American notions of democracy and egalitarianism. As a result, young men playing college football must learn to self-identify as men in a rigid, patriarchal structure that leaves little room for disobedience and individual choice.

Accounts that posit mental strength as the most important characteristic needed to play college football may be a way to dismiss as uninformed negative cultural stereotypes about football players. The most prominent of these stereotypes is the “dumb jock” stereotype (Edwards 1984) that is commonly held among students on Division 1 college campuses (Harrison and Lawrence 2004; Lapchick 1995). The players are aware that others see them this way. For example, Elwood says, “You walk in the classes sometimes and oh there’s the big football player, he’s dumb, he sits in the back of the room, he’s not smart, all that.” Accounts that emphasize the importance of mental strength are an attempt to debunk such stereotypes.

Players’ accounts about mental strength are a way for them to portray themselves as responsible and hard-working. As noted in Chapter 4, real men are personally
responsible. They take care of themselves and others. Football players have a lot of responsibility on the football field and in the classroom. Through emphasizing the importance of focus, intelligence and a willingness to be coached and learn, players reject stereotypes and offer accounts that portray them as responsible and intelligent, as honorable men. Being a football player means being athletic, yes, but it also means being a “real man.”

“You Gotta Have Heart”

Players in my study talked about another quality, having heart, that is required to make a successful college football player. They said, “You gotta have heart.” For example, when asked what it takes to play football, Alfred says, “Yeah, heart is the number one thing you can have.”

Having heart is an emotional component of a player’s identity. Most sports, especially those at more advanced levels of play such as college football, require mental, physical, and emotional strength. Having heart concerns emotional strength. For example, when asked if there is an emotional component to playing football, Dale distinguished having a strong mind from playing with emotion. Playing with emotion means caring how well you do and utilizing your feelings to push yourself to do your best. He says, “Yeah, you have to have your emotions with you because if you don’t care about it then, it’s like, oh well I screwed up. It’s mental too but you have to play with your emotions too.” Succeeding at football takes emotional energy and fortitude. “Playing with emotion” captures what the players in my study mean when they say, “you gotta have heart.”

Which emotion(s) are involved in “having heart”? Should players be sensitive, caring and compassionate? Not according to my informants. For example, when asked if having heart means being sensitive and caring, Brian dismissed those emotions that our culture commonly characterizes as feminine. He acknowledged that everyone feels these emotions, but as a football player, you must put those emotions aside. He says:

When you walk through those doors, you throw all that [being caring and sensitive] out. I mean you have it [but] you just put it away to the side. You don’t even bring it in. You don’t even let it come in and interfere, so you just . . .
don’t even bring it in . . . . This is like work. So you don’t even bring it in. Just leave it outside.

For players in my study, having heart means being passionate about playing football, having love for the game. There are a lot of opportunities to quit playing college football. Playing college football is hard work. The day-to-day demands are grueling, challenging and difficult. For my informants, playing football is not something that just happens. Players are not simply “along for the ride.” If you do not really want to play, there are hundreds more young men right behind you who are willing to take advantage of the opportunity. Playing with emotion means playing with only specific emotions: Passion and love for the game. Players must leave all other emotions at the door. Paul sums it up by saying that having heart is about being both tough and passionate. He says, “. . . toughness, have the heart to do it. It’s . . . like a feeling, a passion to do it.”

Conceptualizing “having heart” as being passionate about football can be made clear by using a popular sports drink commercial as an analogy. A series of commercials advertising a popular sports drink uses the catchphrase, “Is ‘it’ in you?” The commercials depict athletes pushing their physical limits and reaching the pinnacle of their ability. They are shown at a point where they are “giving it their all.” The athletes are shown moving in slow motion, with drops of sweat, strenuous facial expressions, bulging muscles and other references to athletic performance. The visual imagery coupled with a dramatic piano solo is powerful, and provides an answer to the question of “What is ‘it’?” “It” is, on the surface of course, the drink itself. The viewer is led to believe that consuming this sports drink will help them perform at their best. But something else is going on. “It” refers to that something else. I used this analogy during some of my interviews. After I was sure the player understood the commercial to which I was referring (they had all seen it), I asked: “What is ‘it’?” Answers varied but all players said “it” held similar meanings as “having heart”—that is, passion and guts. For example, Paul says that having “it” is a “special juice” that captures the essence of “you gotta have heart.” Having “it” means having the passion and the willpower to do what needs to be done. “It” is not connected to physical size or athletic ability but rather it reflects the meaning of heart or passion and motivation.
P: For me, I just feel like “it” is . . . it’s like the special juice, the extra . . . like your heart. “It” can be more than one thing really.
M: Yeah, try to explain.
P: “Is it in you?” Really I think it’s talking about do you, like, have it in you. Do you have the passion and desire. Everything that . . . [is used to] complete the task . . . like to do it.
MS: Okay. Passion and desire? Would your . . . athletic skills and talent have anything to do with that?
P: No . . . It’s more like your strive . . . I guess your work ethic . . . . Do you have that motivation to keep going even though everything’s not going good?

Paul’s descriptions of what “it” is from the sports drink analogy is similar to what the players say when talking about “you gotta have heart” in order to succeed as a college football player.

Having heart is important for success but how do we know if a player “has heart?” My analysis suggests that having heart involves showing others that one is passionate about playing football. For example, Chris says that playing with emotion is about showing love for the game. Putting passion into action is required to deal with the daily struggles of college football. When I asked Chris if he needs to be emotionally strong, he replied:

You gotta play with emotion out there. You know what I’m sayin’? Cuz I mean you gotta show your love for the game, love cuz, I mean, you gotta think. There are times when I don’t wanna practice, I [will] be tired and all this. I [will] be thinking there are thousands of people at home who wish they could be here . . . so if I say that to myself, I’d be ready to go. I mean, I gotta do it.

Similarly, Elwood says you cannot simply want to play college football. You have to put it into practice and earn it because there many opportunities to give up and quit. Elwood says, “What does it take? You have to, first you have to want it. You can’t just want it and not use any action behind wanting it. You know it’s easy to give up in this game cuz there are so many opportunities to give up.” Ike says heart goes beyond words. A player must show others that he has heart. Ike says, “So show ‘em how much heart you got
then. Man up, line ‘em up! You know, we’ll see who got the most heart. So, football is just a sport about heart. You got a heart, then show me! Don’t talk about it. Show me.”

How do players show heart and passion for the game? In two ways: (a) having the willingness or “guts” to give and take a hit, and (b) not being “soft.” The first means being willing to sacrifice one’s body to succeed. Being soft is a trait or action that does not embody “having heart.” A “soft” player does not take advantage of opportunities and is timid on the playing field, e.g., by avoiding hard-hitting physical contact.

(a) “Guts” to use your body. One way players show they “have heart” is to use the body, to “throw your body” around, to give and receive punishment. Messner (1992, 2002) describes the body as a weapon used by men who play violent, aggressive, contact sports such as football, hockey and boxing. Men who play these sports often naturalize and normalize the amount of aggression and physical contact these sports entail. They talk about how contact is “part of the game” and use this component to self-identify as “real” men. Real men know how to “give and take a hit.” Having heart is about guts and overcoming fears and hesitancy about putting the body on the line. Possessing a willingness to use and sacrifice the body is the ability to play aggressively, administer pain to your opponent, be able to take a hit, and play through pain and injury.

Alfred talks about the will and heart that are needed to deal with the every-down contact with other (often multiple) players that comes with playing football. He links the ability to take on contact with manhood and self-identifying as a man. He says:

I believe that a lot of people look at football players as men because you know, everybody can’t play football. That’s one thing I learned. Everybody can’t play this sport. Everybody ain’t got the heart to play this sport. You gotta have the will to come out and you know take on contact every down, every play. Taking on double teams, 600 pounds total, two men, 300 pounds plus.

Accounts about needing “the heart to hit someone” were often coupled with statements downplaying the importance of being physically strong or big. For Ike, playing football is about having heart, not how big you are, how quick you are or how tough you think you are. All you need is heart. He says, “You know, football, man, is a sport, man. I don’t care how big he is, how athletic he is. I don’t care how fast you is, how much of a man you think you is, or how rough and tough you think you is. It’s all
about heart.” Bryan offered a similar account, downplaying the role of the body. Even undersized players can play if they have heart or, what Brian calls “feistiness” in them to get up and fight again. He says,

In football to have heart, just like, say you’re undersized, you’re five-foot-eight, 175 [pounds] and you’re goin’ against a guy who’s six-foot-two 225, 230 [pounds]. You know more than likely you’re gonna pick the six-foot, two-inch guy, but the five-foot, eight-inch guy with heart, you know, he may lose a battle, but he’s gonna get back up and fight every time. They kind of got a feistiness about ‘em; that’s what heart is.

Similar accounts were made by other players who downplayed the importance of the body in relation to having heart. For many players, the true measure of what it takes to play football is the willingness, attitude, or, some might say “guts” to give and receive physical punishment on the playing field.

Having heart also means overcoming injuries and playing with pain. Using the body as a weapon is the act of committing violence on the body itself that often results in pain and/or injury (Messner 2002). Several players talked about playing with pain as a common part of the game. Most admitted doing this for the love of the game. For example, Bryan talks about how your love for the game and desire to be out there with your teammates outweighs the pain from contact and injury. He says,

Yeah, there are a lot of times when you play with pain . . . . Most of the time when you’re playing with pain, cuz you know, you really love the sport, you really want to be out there with your teammates. Your teammates are out there bustin’ and you really wanna go out there and bust it with ‘em . . . . That’s probably the most times you’re playing with pain and you really wanna be out there.

Sacrificing your body and playing through pain are accepted aspects of football when you “really love the sport.” In the context of having heart, men who love the sport and really want to play football are more than willing to put their body on the line for their career and for the team. A real football player is willing to make sacrifices.

Having heart also means playing without fear. When the body is constantly used as a weapon on the playing field, players adopt a style of play that allows them to
overcome fears that they may have about being injured or hurt. Several informants offered accounts about how they do this. Some suggested the need to “play at full speed” but under control while others referred to the need for a “reckless” style of play. Overall, using the body in this way refers to playing without fear of injury or making a mistake.

As Bryan notes, being afraid cannot enter your mind:

Well, it could be fear, but if you got fear you shouldn’t even be out there. Cuz when you’re out there, you gotta give it everything you got. So if, if you’re gonna get hurt, it’s gonna happen regardless, so I don’t even look at it as that, as getting injured, cuz getting injured . . . you know it’s a risk when you put the pads on. You know it’s a risk you can get hurt, so if you’re gonna fear and be timid, you shouldn’t even [play]. It’s not for you.

Chris shares this sentiment. He says pain and injuries are part of the game that you cannot dwell on. He says that playing timid and trying not to get hurt most often leads to physical injury. Playing at full speed is the only way to avoid injury. He says, “I mean, I deal with it, I’ll be like, injuries, they just happen. But I deal with it. I just be like, man, the only way to avoid injuries is to always go full speed, to go full speed. You get hurt when you [are] like loafing or something.”

Players view injury and pain as part of playing the game. Fear of being hurt does not avoid injuries or stop them from happening. A fearless attitude is needed to maintain a mindset that allows a player to consistently use his body in a physically violent sport.

Using your body means “going all out” and not being afraid to play at full speed.

(b) “You can’t be ‘soft’.” Another way of showing heart is to not take part in actions that show one as lacking heart or passion. A player is viewed as “soft” if he does not do what it takes to show others he has heart; a “soft” player is not willing to dish out and receive punishment. For example, Alfred says that a “soft” player does not measure up. He does not play with heart; he is not willing to hit other players. For Alfred, not engaging in contact on the playing field is what it means to be soft. He says,

Well, you know, there are some people I know that we call soft, s-o-f-capital T: Soft . . . . I see the dog in them; they can’t just go out and be good. They play soft and they act soft. They’re soft on the field. They don’t . . . I can’t explain, you just have to have it in ‘em. Some people just don’t have it in them. That’s
why not everyone can play football. You gotta have some heart to run out there and hit a 350 pound dude.

Being labeled “soft” happens when a player is viewed by other players as failing to live up to his potential or failing to take advantage of opportunities. For example, Elwood defines being soft as being capable but not capitalizing, as not living up to one’s potential. A soft player does not take advantage of moments and build a name and reputation for himself. He says:

Somebody who’s soft is a guy who probably can do the work. Most likely they’re capable. They’re capable just as anybody else, but they don’t . . . they don’t apply themselves in the moments. And in those moments is when your name is made, where your legend begins, where people start talking about you. And a lot of people have been . . . have been brought to that point and couldn’t capitalize. So those are the guys you call soft.

Players are labeled soft also if they are unwilling to play hurt. For example, Alfred talks about how players lose respect from teammates if they do not deal with pain and play hurt. Playing hurt signifies toughness and is the quickest way to be labeled a “real man” (Messner 1992). A “real man” earns respect by playing hurt. If he does not, he is “soft.” I asked Alfred how he deals with pain and injuries. He said:

You learn to deal with . . . that’s one thing you learn to deal with. Some people can’t deal with it and that’s where you get respect. Respect is playing with pain. Cuz some people that get little injuries and they don’t want to practice cuz they say they’re hurt, you know, and you lose a lot of respect if you do that all the time. You know, guys who get hurt or act hurt a lot, people look at them like they [are] soft, you know cuz people in the NFL, people stay in with broke[n] legs and broke[n] arms . . . now that’s a real person, a real man, if you can play through injuries like that.

Harry talks about another aspect of playing hurt which is the need to play hurt. After sustaining a leg injury Harry was told that it would not get any worse if he played on it. He would need surgery but it could wait until the end of the season. The question for Harry was whether to rest now and have the surgery or to play on it and deal with the pain. He chose the latter option for two reasons. First, trying to make it to the next level.
requires taking advantage of the limited number of opportunities a player has to show he can play and display his talents. Second, he did not want to be seen as injury prone or be labeled as “soft.” Not only does such a label threaten his self-identification as a man and/or as an athlete but it damages his reputation as a player who can handle pain and playing hurt. He says:

That’s the mentality I have. My team has confidence in me to go out there. They put their trust and faith into me. I’m not going to let them down over a torn quad [upper leg]. I will put this thing on the back burner once the season is over. I’ll deal with it but that’s pretty much the mentality. That’s just all you’re focused on. It becomes two-fold when you are injured . . . your number one goal is play. Athletics is like nothing else. You only have a window. You only have 16 tests. You have 12 tests for four years. That’s all you have guaranteed and then that’s it and then the next level can either take you or not take you. It’s not like the business world where you can get fired and keep getting fired and you’re 40 and your still getting fired . . . . They [the NFL] get to a point where they give up on you. Do you know what I’m saying? When you look at an injury like that, I can’t take seven games off and let everybody know that I am injury-prone, know that I am soft. It’s tough. That’s why you try and become so fit that unless it’s a freak accident . . . you hope that never happens to you. But obviously that happens.

Harry notes how the institutional structure of football pressures players to play hurt and in pain. If players do not “suck it up” and take advantage of opportunities to show they have what it takes, they will be passed over for someone else.

Accounts about passion and “love for the game” are common in our sports culture. Popular sport media is saturated with athletes talking about having passion on the playing field. For example, ESPN columnist J.A. Adande (2008) quotes Carlos Boozer, a power forward for the NBA’s Utah Jazz after their victory over the Los Angeles Lakers in the 2008 NBA playoffs, who talked about not thinking so much and playing with more emotion and passion. He said:

I just tried to stop thinking so much out there. I think we’ve all been waiting for such a big game out of me, and I’ve been waiting for it too and putting a little too
much pressure on myself. So I tried to go back to the basics and just have fun out there, enjoy the game, play with more passion.

My analysis shows a close connection between the qualities needed to play football and players’ identities as athletic men. Accounts that stress the importance of “having heart,” passion and effort to play college football reflect the admirable aspects of masculinity discussed in Chapter 4 that stress the need to have goals and the agency to pursue them. But it isn’t enough to only have goals. You must really want and strive for your goals, have the passion and “heart” to go after them, and do whatever it takes.

The descriptions used by football players represent a rigid construction of what is appropriate behavior for “real men,” for athletes who play football. “Having heart” means being passionate and tough and willing to sacrifice the body for individual and team success. The emotions allowed to be expressed are very narrow and confining. Players are not allowed to be compassionate, caring and sensitive. As Bryan says above, “you leave all that at the door.” There is no room “on-the-field” for those kinds of emotions. Players are expected to be tough and passionate about the game. This narrow and rigid concept of manhood is damaging to boys and young men who are expected to conform to these standards. There is little room to maneuver emotionally within the culture of college football.

Repercussions for not showing others you “have heart” can lead to being labeled as “soft.” Being “soft” means “not measuring up” or being unwilling to do what it takes. He was not tough enough to give and take a hit on the playing field; he is not a “real man.” This label is used to demean players who are not “tough enough” to handle the physical punishments of college football. This kind of talk is located in a culture that values men who are tough, hard, and competitive. In sports, it values men who make sacrifices. The beliefs and practices that these young men learn as important for success in college football prompt them to define “real men” in narrow, circumscribed ways. This in turn leads to players’ self-identity as particular kinds of athletic men.

The connection between playing football and being a man is clear for Alfred. He separates men from boys by labeling men as players who earn respect by playing hurt and dealing with physical pain. There is a strong sense of camaraderie among players who
He says:

Basically it comes back to what I was talking about, being soft. Coming up, being a defensive player, having the mentality to just come up and hit, you know contact and stuff like that. You make plays. People like that. People like to see stuff like that. And that’s how you earn a lot of respect. A lot of people can’t do that type of stuff and you know . . . them [are] ‘your boys’ right there; you know?

Accounts of physically self-destructive behavior are common among players in my study. A language of “softness” and “having heart” acts as a policing mechanism to keep boys and men inside a narrow definition of acceptable masculinity. They learn from an early age that playing hurt and fighting through pain signifies being tough, “having heart,” and being a “real man.”

The role of the body

Although many players in my study downplay the importance of the body, they still recognize that success at a high level requires exceptional size, strength, and/or athletic ability. Ryan learned from coaches that a player needs at least two of the following three things to succeed: size, strength and speed. You need at least two to make it, he says:

You need speed, strength, and size . . . . And if you ain’t got one, you better have the other two. So if you don’t have uh, strength, then you’ve better have speed or size. If you ain’t got, you know, it goes the other way around. So, I mean, if you have those three I think you are pretty good.

Elwood talks about physical athletic gifts that help one succeed as a college football player. He says, “You can’t teach height.” That is, being genetically predisposed to being tall greatly benefits some players over others. Athletic talent works in similar ways. Players are simply “born” with athletic talent; it is innate. Elwood says that, “Some people are just born with talent; they were bred that way.”

All players in my study talked about being recognized early in their playing careers as “gifted.” They were bigger, stronger or faster than other boys were. Several were recognized for their large size. Others were recognized for quickness and elusiveness. Others were recognized for the ability to hit hard. Oscar and Ike talked
about how they were the only freshmen to play on their high school varsity teams. They stood out from other players and were told by coaches that they would benefit from competing against players of similar size and skill. Frank told about how he was recognized at an early age by his uncle, a football coach, for having a football “instinct” and was encouraged to pursue football. By “instinct,” Frank means athleticism which, in his case, was speed. He says, “My Aunt married a coach and he said he saw a football instinct so he thought I should play. So I started playing in fifth grade then.”

Players also claimed that athletic ability can take a player only so far. It is up to the player to make the effort and do the hard work of training to compete and succeed. As several players said, one must be “mentally strong” and “have heart.” Oscar acknowledged that physical talent is important but it takes more than talent for players to “get where they want to be.” When asked how much physical ability matters for being a successful football player, he said:

It [athletic ability] is a great percentage because obviously you have to be able to maneuver things and get away from people [ athletically], but uh, but most people I know that have been successful in this sport, yeah they were physically gifted. But that’s not the thing that helped them get to where they wanted to be.

**Discussions and Conclusions**

For the players in my study, self-identifying as men is intimately connected with and strongly influenced by self-identifying as football players. As Messner (1992, 2002) and others have noted, playing football is an ideal institutional context for young men to do identity work on themselves as men. “Real men” take personal responsibility for their position in life; they work hard and have a strong mind to stay focused on their goals. Playing football provides all of these things. It is in ironic that these players downplayed the importance of physical attributes in comparison to mental strength and having heart. But despite their assertion, it became clear to me that their size, strength, and speed did matter in regards to being a successful college football player. Being able to block, push, tackle and wrestle other men takes physical size and strength. Being able to run faster, jump higher, and be more agile than your opponent is critical for success. Having heart
and a willingness to put one’s body on the line is important but all the heart in the world cannot overcome deficits of size, strength and athletic talent.

I am interested in why the players emphasized mental strength and heart over physical traits and athletic skill. I believe they did so because they view success as more than skillful use of the body on the playing field; they see themselves as more than just “talented bodies.” They view themselves—and want others to view them—as competent, strong-minded, intelligent, passionate, and committed. Alfred talked about how playing football and life outside of football have contributed to his self-identity. The requirements for succeeding in college football are more stringent and demanding than popular beliefs acknowledge, he feels. Only “real men,” not boys who have failed to grow up, can accept the challenge and succeed. He resents society’s failure to appreciate what he and his associates must do, and routinely do, in order to succeed.

M: You talked about football, tell me a little more about how football contributes to you seeing yourself as a man.
A: Well you know it do[es]. I think football makes you grow up a lot quicker. You know, it makes you look at life a little better because people out there on the street everyday of their life, they don’t like know the things that we go through. They just think, oh [he] plays football, goes to class, don’t do nothing in class. It’s not even like that. We push constantly all the time every day, all day.
M: Even stuff that’s not football related?
A: Yea, like goin’ to class. Coaches and stuff want you to go to class. . . . They stay on you about that. You miss class you got punishment—[you have to] run 15, 16 stadiums [run up and down stadiums steps] you know? And just meetings and study hall, more practice. And it just wears on your body. People just…they don’t even know.

Alfred’s statement sums up the collective consciousness of the football players in my sample. Playing college football is mentally and physically tough; it is demanding and grueling work, on and off the playing field. Unless you truly want to do it and are willing to work hard, many other men who are waiting in the wings will soon take your place. College football players are passionate, hard workers, not privileged, lazy jocks. It is sad that the general public fails to understand this point.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

College football is one of the most popular spectator sports in the U.S. Fans and spectators range from casual observers to “die-hard” fans who “live and die” through the successes and failures of their favorite team. Men who play college football are often admired for their athletic talents and hard hitting style of play and viewed as paragons of aggression, strength and dominance. This dissertation examines how a small group of student-athletes in the highly admired world of “big-time” college football actively construct their self-identities as athletic men. As reported, the players say being a man means being responsible, having agency to achieve goals, taking risks and meeting challenges, providing for others, and not displaying qualities that are regularly associated with women or gay men.

Playing football is an important aspect of the players’ lives that help them self-identify as men. My informants say playing football takes a strong mind, “heart” or passion, and a strong, big, or athletically gifted body. A player must be focused, intelligent, and coachable. He must have a passion for the game and the guts to put his body on the line. Being athletically or physically gifted, although emphasized by them less than mental strength and heart, are emphasized.

Chapter 6 seeks to situate the players’ accounts and to compare these results with previous research. This chapter also argues that my findings contribute to (1) the sociology of sport, (2) the sociology of gender and masculinity, (3) embodiment, emotion and masculinity, and (4) identity work. I conclude by discussing practical contributions and some limitations of my study and by offering suggestions for future research.

Situating the Players Talk

As noted in Chapter 3, I characterize my interview data as talk or accounts. Accounts are “linguistic device[s] employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry” (Scott and Lyman 1968: 46). In other words, in the context of an interview with
a stranger (like me), informants—in this case, football players—offer accounts that aim to present themselves in a positive and favorable light. I argue that positive accounts of masculinity (being responsible, having and attaining goals, etc.) are drawn from the broader cultural ideals about being a “self-made man” (Kimmel 2006). That is, they use American cultural notions of manhood to self-identify as athletic men. Others have argued that cultural perspectives influence and motivate individuals to behave and talk in certain ways. For example, Scully and Marolla (1984) suggest that rapists offer accounts that either justify or excuse their criminal behavior. The players in my study are not offering accounts to excuse untoward behavior but they do offer accounts to justify their identities as athletic men. In this context, it is possible that the players’ accounts are not a manifestation of deep identity issues but rather, they may be accounts that are offered to justify their actions and claims.

The players’ active construction of a masculine and athletic self takes place within the specific locale of “big-time” college football, a sport that is admired by boys and men and covered extensively in local and national sports media. In other words, the players in my study offer accounts and definitions of manhood as figures occupying positions of celebrity status and fame (at least locally). Adler and Adler (1989) say that as athletes move into a celebrity culture, their self-identities change. They begin to see themselves as others see them, as famed objects, influencing how they self-identify. Sport is an institution that receives a good amount of coverage in mainstream media outlets. College football in particular is a very popular sport, especially in the South (Borucki 2003).

During the interviews, I asked my informants questions about playing football at a Division I-FBS program that is highly popular in the local area and across the country. Most said they enjoy their celebrity status (for some the possibility of that status) and told similar stories about dealing with public admirers. Addressing the issue directly, or connecting it with the construction of masculine and athletic identities, is outside the scope of this project but I try to situate the players’ accounts within this context of fame and popularity. As stated in Chapter 3, I convinced some players to talk by appealing to their “glorified” egos. I wanted to obtain each player’s personal story and experiences about playing football. Despite my guarantee that their views would be reported anonymously, I suspect many of them were cautious and less than forthright about some
of their experiences and views. Players are given “talking points” by coaches and other athletic department personnel to use when talking with members of the media. And although I am not a media person (although one player refused to talk with me because he believed I was a member of the media), I suspect that some of the players’ accounts were framed in ways they had been coached. They were designed to present a favorable image of themselves, the football program, and the university. If I am correct in this assertion, we can view the players’ accounts as reflections of the athletic program at their university, not only of their personal views and claims.

As discussed, positive characteristics of masculinity expressed by the players in my study (e.g., being responsible, having agency and achieving goals, etc.) reflect cultural prescriptions of accepted manhood (Bird 2005; Connell 1995, 2005; Kimmel 2006). Yet there is a growing body of research about some negative aspects of manhood, also expressed by the players in my study—including homophobia, sexism and violence. Some point to antigay and homophobic attitudes as central to the development of hegemonic masculinity among athletic and non-athletic boys and men. Osborne and Wagner (2007), for example, find that adolescent boys who participate in core sports (football, basketball, baseball or soccer) are three times more likely to express homophobic attitudes than boys who do not play those sports. Plummer (2006) argues that homophobia is central to maintaining a boundary between “successful masculinity” and “not measuring up” among boys and young men. Other research shows that violent and sexist qualities are supported by many men, not just athletes. For example, Skelton (1997) argues that adolescent boys draw on violent and sexist behaviors in school to conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity and Gough and Edwards (1998) show that men’s talk during male-bonding sessions often reproduces hegemonic masculinity centered on distancing the self from others, mostly women and gay men. There is little research, however, that specifically asks boys and young men to define or describe what “being a man” means to them. My study does.

Recent evidence suggests that hegemonic masculinity is being challenged in sport. For example, Harris and Clayton (2007) studied media depictions of a popular rugby player to track the changing patterns of athletic manhood. They found that dominant media images depicted the player as a “metrosexual.” A metrosexual is a man who is
concerned about his appearance, mainly through clothing and personal grooming that is often considered feminine and/or homosexual. Harris and Clayton (2007) argue that these media depictions challenge traditional notions of masculinity. More research is needed to highlight other challenges to hegemonic masculinity in organized sports.

An extensive body of research has focused on gender and sport. Recent research examines gender conflicts in female athletes (Fallon and Jome 2007) and the use of the body as a weapon while ignoring pain by young girls who want to prove they are “serious athletes” (Malcolm 2006). Few studies have examined how women (athletes and non-athletes) define and describe masculinity, however. Future research might usefully address this and related questions.

**On the Sociology of Sport**

My research contributes to the sociology of sport literature in three ways. First, I extend Messner’s (1992, 2002) research on the reflexive relationship between the culture and structure of an elite sport—college football—and the process of constructing masculine identities by men involved in that sport. Second, in extending Messner’s work my research speaks to the link between identity and inequality in sport. That is, I explore how identity construction by college football players fosters reproduction of gender and sexual inequality in sport and the broader society. I do this by focusing on 17 men who live their daily lives in the heart of the sports institution. My results show how they construct particular kinds of masculinity at a local level (more below) and produce and perpetuate gender and sexual inequalities in doing so. Third, I discuss the negative physical and psychological effects that this kind of masculinity may have on the players.

**College Football and the Individual**

Messner (1992, 2002) has been a leader in examining how the institutionalized structure of sport influences its participants. Most notably, he has focused on the link between sport participation and masculinity (see also Connell 1995, 2000; and Kimmel 2006). His research attests that playing sport—especially college football—provides a

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12 An adequate review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper. For a concise summary of the literature, see Washington and Karen (2000).
place where boys and young men learn what “being a man is all about.” My research supports that thesis. As Messner (2002) notes, football is located at the “center of sport” because it draws significant attention from the sport news media as well as from fans and spectators. The center of sport is found, Messner (2002) says, by “following the money” to sports that highlight aggression, dominance and violence. The center of sport, he alleges, is masculinist and in line with the institutional gender order in valuing men over women and masculinity over femininity. As noted in Chapter 2, gender is an institution and sport is an institution and both reflect as well as recreate gender—and sexual—inequality (Messner 1992). Male-dominated sports such as football, basketball, and baseball exclusively occupy the center of sport in response to the perceived threat of increasing participation by women and gay men, and, to a lesser extent, fringe or “alternative” sports such as snowboarding and the “X Games.” Messner (2002) argues that despite the seemingly changing nature of sport, characterized by a broad range of sport choices, the cultural and structural center of sport has become increasingly narrow. The dominant and privileged masculinist structure of elite sports such as football has been maintained.

My research extends Messner’s work by showing how football players verbally construct masculine and athletic identities that bolster their elevated status. My results expose the products of the college football institution, at least that part of the sports institution that elite football programs occupy. They let me identify the kinds of men that today’s elite college football system is producing. My results show that this product is perhaps less well-balanced than one might wish. It overly emphasizes the physical, undervalues the integrity of the body (maintaining or assuring good health), and overvalues football and winning. It also denigrates gay men and women and femininity.

The ideals expressed by my informants are difficult to live up to. While their values are admirable (e.g., regarding personal responsibility), other values and practices are less so (e.g., regarding sexism and homophobia). Individual players have the agency to develop healthy attitudes toward women and gay men, but the structure and culture of college football do not actively promote these qualities, my results suggest. Although the U.S. has seen declines in homophobic (Loftus 2001) and sexist attitudes (Brewster and
Padavic 2000), they are central to dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity that stress power, aggression, violence, dominance and exclusion of “the other.”

A campus party culture combined with the athletic program's focus on winning may tell football players that athletic success is more important than academic success. This contradiction is not lost on student-athletes who juggle busy schedules and struggle with their identities. In addition, as Chapters 4 and 5 report, these young men’s idealistic notions of manhood exist within a peer culture that devalues education as not “cool” (Majors 1998; Messner 1992). In short, athletes in my study confront a peer culture and football culture that de-emphasize academic achievement (Messner 1992). Little wonder then that their commitment is more to maintaining a spot on the team and winning football games than earning academic credits and making good grades.

**Sport, Identity and the Reproduction of Inequality**

The sociology of sport literature has recently called for research on the link between identity and inequality, meaning that individuals, through the active construction of their identities (identity work), reproduce (or challenge) inequality in sport. The first issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ)* in 2007 was devoted to “(Post) Identity and Sporting Cultures.” In the introductory article, King and McDonald (2007: 1), speaking to issues raised in my study, say “. . . a rigorous interrogation of the relationship between identity and inequality is essential for understanding the genealogy of our field [sport], as well as the shape it might take in our future.” In other words, identity is not new to sociology or the sociology of sport but it has only recently taken a central role in exposing the processes of the reproduction of inequality in sports. By extending Messner’s work, I answer this call and ask: What “kinds” of masculine identities are being produced by “big-time” college football and are these identities reproducing or challenging gender and sexual inequalities in sport and the broader society?

Through their talk, football players construct a kind of embodied masculinity that both (re)creates the center of sport and constructs themselves as aggressive, violent, sexist, heterosexist, misogynistic, and homophobic. They express admiration for qualities such as personal responsibility and having agency to achieve goals but say that *real men* are the opposite of women or gay men. The latter are characterized as inferior, weak, dependent, and too emotional. Players use their athletic skills and elite status as
“big men on campus” to construct identities as “real men” and to embrace the kinds of masculinity that are hegemonic in U. S. society. They seem not to question what real men are in terms of themselves. Who would dare say college football players are not real men? At first glance, it is ironic that young men with vast resources of manhood available to them stoop to denigrate, belittle, and marginalize women and gay men. When we contextualize their sexist and homophobic accounts within a fragmented and diverse sport landscape where women and gay men are trying to challenge the dominant center of sport (e.g., by insisting on fair treatment and the opportunity to play), college football players' assertions that they are real men (and not women or gay men) is perhaps understandable. As noted, all but three of my informants were African American men from relatively poor backgrounds. Thus, perhaps their feelings of threat reflect those statuses, at least in part. I hope future research will compare White and Black elite college players in these regards.

To better address how the construction of this kind of masculinity contributes to the reproduction of inequality, I draw on Schwalbe et al. (2000) who argue that inequality is reproduced through four “generic processes” at the interactional—or what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call the “local”—level. I argue that players in my study, through their interview talk, engage in two of these processes: “othering” and “boundary maintenance.” Players engage in othering by defining and singling out women and gay men as deficient or inferior in some way. They engage in “boundary maintenance” by defining and reserving football as a place where only “real men” reside.

Players engaged in othering when talking about physical differences between men and women. For example, Harry says that if it weren’t for differences in strength, size and speed, women would be able to compete with men on the football field. He first suggests that regardless of gender, the violent nature of football will take its toll on you. But he then amends his statement to focus on the inability of any woman to take a hit by a prominent NFL linebacker, known for his violent hits. He says,

I think genetically men are superior physical specimens when compared to women. Man to man . . . we both have the same opportunity, but man to woman? I am born genetically supposed to be bigger, stronger, faster. When you talk about football you get into issues now, somebody could get severely hurt. I don’t care
who you are, if Ray Lewis is gonna hit you, I don’t care what woman you are Ray Lewis could kill you . . . . When you talk about physical differences and you talk about the possibility of getting hurt and stuff like that, I don’t think women can play with men.

Messner (1992), reports similar accounts in his interviews with athletic men and argues, as I do here, that most men (even Harry, a college football player) would most likely not be able to survive (at least without injury) a hit from a professional football player known for his aggressive and violent hits. Furthermore, referencing the physical body to talk about the inferiority of women to men is a way to both naturalize and excuse broader forms of gender inequality, for example, in the workplace, in the home, and in politics or government.

Although a few players say that only physical differences such as speed and strength distinguish men and women, many players talked about other, non-physical qualities as points of distinction too. Most players broadly characterize women as dependent, talkative, not willing to work hard to achieve goals, nurturing, and obliged to take care of household chores; in other words, the opposite of masculine. This is an interesting caveat given the physical differences stated by many players and epitomized by Harry. If men are genetically advantaged over women with greater speed, size and strength, why is it necessary to make frequent psychological and behavioral distinctions between men and women? Players may do this to avoid feeling threatened by women and to continue the othering process as a way to build themselves up as real men. Yet players do not limit their construction of real men to physical qualities. They portray themselves as independent, responsible, "not whiners," "not quitters," and hard-working, characteristics women lack.

As reported in Chapter 4, players in my study say that real men are not like gay men. Gay men, to them, represent all that is feminine and, therefore, not masculine. This dynamic is an example of the process of othering (Schwalbe et al 2000; Schippers 2007). While not speaking to the (in)ability of gay men to play football, my informants equate qualities and characteristics associated with gay men with those of women. That is, gay men are like women because they do not measure up to traditional, heterosexist views of masculinity (cf. Schippers 2007). Gay men portrayed as the other, and thus like women,
occupy a place of lower status and respect in the gender hierarchy. Ipso facto, gay men cannot play first class football. Of course, some skilled football players are gay but, as Messner (1992) notes, they remain “in the closet” inside the sport, to avoid being shamed, ostracized, or ridiculed.

Coupled with the process of othering is the generic process of boundary maintenance which, according to Schwalbe et al. (2000), is a way in which inequality is preserved between dominant and subordinate groups. Through their talk, players in my study imply that football is hallowed ground. It is a safe place where men can be real men. They do not want women or gay men entering their territory. Allowing entry to women and gay men would not only threaten their view of what football is about but what being a man is about too. The homosocial and violent qualities of college football provide these male participants with a relatively easy way to maintain gender- and sexual-related boundaries, resulting in practices of exclusion.

As a homosocial arena, college football provides its participants with a place that is made by and for real men, not gay men who can threaten the power and privilege that accompanies heterosexual men. Although some gay men play football, their sexual identities usually remain secret, out of fear of ostracism and the potential for suffering physical or psychological harm (Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). As a physically demanding and violent sport, football players can easily exclude anyone—namely women—who “fail to not measure up” and are unable to “take a hit.” Never mind that most men cannot handle such constant wear and tear on their bodies, this argument is used as rationale to justify football as a singularly masculine sport. In short, football provides a place for men to distance themselves from the other by suggesting that women and gay men fail to measure up physically or psychologically. In this way, football players police the boundaries of football and protect it as a sacred arena for constructing a particular kind of manhood and themselves as real men. High stakes college football is, my results suggest, an institution ripe with power and privilege reserved for strong, powerful, talented "straight" men.

Identity as Problematic for the Players

Yet, the construction of a particular kind of athletic masculinity by players in my study is potentially dangerous to their physical and psychological health. Extensive
media attention and the near-celebrity status of college football players on campuses place them in a tenuous position regarding their identities and passage into adulthood. The narrow definition of “athletic manhood” that college football valorizes poses risks of various kinds. It fosters creation of a kind of man who prizes athletics over education and who sacrifices his body and (possibly) good health in order to win or maintain status on the team. The young men in my sample may be short-changed on education and tossed into the after-college world ill-prepared. Their ability to draw on football as a resource for making claims about manhood will not last forever. Football players who have disadvantages associated with race/ethnicity, social class, and/or cultural and social capital may be unable to live up to the manhood ideals they subscribe to. I say more about the difficulties and contradictions student-athletes face below.

**On Gender and Masculinity**

My research also adds to literature on gender and hegemonic masculinity. As noted in Chapter 2, contemporary gender theory views gender as fundamentally social, as a social institution, not reducing it to an essential, individual phenomenon (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 2004). My research uses this framework to explore how the masculinist institution of sport influences talk, action and the practicing of a certain “kind” of masculinity by college football players. My results show that the players’ constructed masculine identity embodies the institutionalized gender order within sport and the broader society. My research contributes also to literature on the sociology of gender by exploring how young men talk about being a "real man." I examine the process of constructing an "athletic man" identity, an issue to which I now turn.

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995) has been at the forefront of sociological research and theories on masculinity for some time, but not without its critics (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Demetriou 2007; Martin 1998; Schippers 2007; Schrock and Padavic 2007). My findings contribute to theoretical developments of hegemonic masculinity by uncovering some processes that go into constructing hegemonic masculinity in an athletic context. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest
a reframing of hegemonic masculinity to incorporate the “geography of masculinities,” that takes into account the specificity of different local constructions of hegemonic masculinity (see Schrock and Padavic 2007). That is, different locations and contexts may call for different constructions and embodiments of hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) specify three levels where the existence of hegemonic masculinity can be empirically analyzed: local, regional and global. The aspect addressed in the research presented here is the relationship between the three levels. I argue that college football provides a context for the construction of a localized masculinity that shares a reflexive relationship with a regional form of masculinity. That is, players in my study, through talk and embodied practices, construct a localized, hegemonic form of masculinity that centers on strength, power, dominance, and the exclusion of tainted “others.” It is localized, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:849) suggest, by being “constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of . . . organizations, and immediate communities.” In other words, college football is an organization that shapes the lives of its players in a specific educational institution and nation-state. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2000:849) note, local and regional masculinities are intimately connected: “Hegemonic masculinity at the regional level is symbolically represented through the interplay of specific local masculinities that have regional significance. . . .” College football offers an example of how this interplay works. The players in my study, through talk and embodied practices, construct localized forms of hegemonic masculinity that have regional significance, in valorizing power, aggression, and violence.

In addition, psychological and behavioral qualities such as personal responsibility, working hard to attain goals, and not being feminine or gay, are in line with regional definitions of manhood. In other ways, the localized practice of masculinity by college football players is narrower than, and, in some ways, contradictory to regional prescriptions of masculinity. That is, the talk and action associated with regional forms of masculinity may not be available to college football players. Let me explain. The form of masculinity practiced by college football players embodies physical violence, intimidation and aggression but it also excludes other forms of hegemonic masculine behavior such as drinking alcohol to excess, “going wild,” and “defending one’s honor”
Because of their high-profile status and popularity, football players in big-time programs are often advised—by coaches and advisors—to not act out in ways that would characterize someone as a real man. For example, as Connell (2000) notes, a real man (especially a young, college-age man) drinks and “goes wild and he “defends his honor” in public by “not backing down” or “taking any lip” from others. Such enactments of masculinity are not admired or encouraged in high-profile college athletes. Players are advised by coaches and others to avoid such situations and to stay out of trouble. However, some research suggests that the likelihood of “going wild” may differ significantly by age and skill level. For example, Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Sabo, and Farrell (2007) find that adolescents who take on a “jock identity” are significantly more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Perhaps as athletes mature and advance to elite levels of play (such as “big-time” college football), they are watched more closely and prevented from “going wild.”

**On Embodiment, Emotion, and Masculinity**

This dissertation also extends Messner’s (1992, 2002) work on the use of the body in sport. Through talking with football players, I explored how college football players talk about emotion work involved in playing a physically demanding sport. Messner analyzed how athletes use the body as a weapon and the emotion work they must do as a result. He showed how athletes “naturalize” aggression and contact and how male bodies are either “naturally built” for, or go through years of intense training to prepare for violent contact on the playing field. Light and Kirk (2000) similarly show how rugby players at an elite Australian high school embody hegemonic masculinity in the form of aggression, strength, and using the body as a weapon and claim that these forms are culturally valued regionally. My study extends this kind of work in two ways.

First, using the body as a weapon in sport continues today, possibly at a more intense level. Players are encouraged by others and the “nature of the game” to play hurt and to play through pain. Respect from other players, coaches, and fans is earned by giving your all to the team, especially putting your body in harms way. The structure of the game leads players to risk their physical health. Harry noted that players have a
limited number of opportunities to “prove themselves” on the football field. They cannot afford to waste these opportunities by sitting out with a “nagging” injury, he said. As a result, they often play even when they are hurt and in pain.

I label football players’ emotion work as “having heart.” This is similar to (but different from) Messner’s (1992) concept of “psyching up” and, in some ways, similar to what Smith (2008) calls “passion work.” Messner’s (1992) concept of “psyching up” refers to emotion work that players do just before performing; they are “getting ready” or “getting in the right mind” to use their bodies to perform. Smith (2008) says that professional wrestlers do back and front stage emotion work in order to relate to the audience. His concept of “passion work” refers to “jointly performed emotional labor intended to elicit a passionate response from subjects through an impression of extreme states such as joy, agony or suffering” (159). Smith’s study examines a specific group of athletes (professional wrestlers) who collude with each other in order to put on a show for an audience. Their backstage emotion work prepares them for doing that kind of passion work.

Messner’s (“psyching up”) and Smith’s (“passion work”) concepts refer to emotion work done immediately prior to and during an athletic performance. Messner’s concept addresses the mind-body disconnect that many athletes say is required for using the body to play a sport and Smith’s addresses the front stage “passion work” done to elicit emotional responses from an audience. An actor performing in a Broadway show is a comparable context but an actor does not use physical violence and aggression to elicit an audience response.

“Having heart” in regards to the football players in my study is different. My informants say “you gotta have heart,” meaning, you must want to play, work hard, and be coached. Playing football is more than having the guts or the mindset to use one’s body in pursuit of a goal. It requires going through the daily struggles and pitfalls of being a student-athlete. “Having heart” is about passion for the game and having the guts to put your body on the line in order to succeed, regardless of the costs. Players in my study are aware that college football entails violent physical contact. Some even talk about the joys such contact provide. But they also allege that a football player must “have heart” in order to do all that is required to play the game. A football player must
have heart—as in passion and guts—in practice, during weight training, during coaching sessions, and during games.

“Having heart” is a key component of a masculine identity in college football. But a distinction must be made between “having heart,” and having “a heart.” As noted in Chapter 5, heart is not about being compassionate and caring; as Brian said, “you leave all that [soft feelings] at the door.” Having heart means displaying oneself as a man who is passionate about football and tough enough to take the hurt and pains that practicing and playing entail.

Player’s views of the relationship between their body, playing football, and how they identify have ironic elements. Most discussions of the connection between masculinity and sport deal with using and manipulating the body. The body is trained and worked on for weight, agility and strength, and used as a tool or weapon to accomplish feats on the playing field. The physical and aggressive nature of football helps young men (and indeed all boys and men) define manhood. And yet, the players in my study downplayed the need to be big, strong and fast in favor of needing “mental strength” and “heart.” They made identity claims about being strong minded and having heart. Their expressions of manhood downplayed the body’s looks, shape, size, and athletic ability. However, as Chapter 5 notes, a gifted body—in reference to size, strength or athletic ability—is necessary for competition at a high level. Yet, the players talked almost as if anyone can play football, so long as they “have heart.” In their view, the body is not the key issue. Yet, the body is clearly important to football success.

This discrepancy has several implications. First, it supports Messner’s (1992, 2002) claim that athletes do emotion work in order to disconnect their physical body from their identities. That is, in order to take part in the physical pounding and brutality of college football, players feel a need to disconnect mind and body. Many players talk about playing at full speed and not thinking about pain or likelihood of injury. They talk as if their body were a separate entity from the self. They use their body to attain certain goals. Such a mindset can be dangerous if it leads to mindless risk-taking, debilitating injuries and even death.

Using the body as a weapon and participating in a violent sport suggests questions about on- and off-the-field violence. The literature on the issue is mixed. Kreager (2007)
finds that adolescent boys who play contact sports such as football and wrestling are more likely to be involved in a serious fight than their peers who play non-contact sports. However, research examining the link between on- and off-the-field violence among older male athletes who play contact and violent sports is scarce. Lapchick (2008c) argues that focusing on violent criminal acts by football players and other contact sport participants ignores incidents of interpersonal and domestic violence in the non-athletic population, noting that differences between the two groups are insignificant. Furthermore, Lapchick argues that due to their fame and exposure, the media distort the rates of interpersonal violence by elite athletes.

On Identity Work

Sport is often examined as a site where masculinity is constructed. Sociological literature and research show that young boys and men use sport to develop masculine identities and to self-identify as men (Connell 2000; Kimmel 2006; Messner 1992, 2002). This is nothing new. However, few sport scholars have explored how boys and young men do this. That is, what processes are at play in the construction and practices of masculinity by boys and young men? What do they say and do to claim a masculine identity, to show that they are real men?

As Chapter 2 reports, I frame identity as actions and work that are always in progress. From an interactionist perspective, individual identities are constantly being worked on, manipulated, shaped and changed over time through interactions with others (Luckmann 2008; Mason-Schrock 1996; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Players in my study talked about themselves in ways that serve to construct a particular kind of identity. As research has shown (Martin 2003), talk and actions often contradict one another. The findings presented here support the theoretical position that identities are in flux and under negotiation.

Allow me to clarify. Players’ talk was directed toward me, an interviewer, during our one-on-one interview sessions. The presence of someone outside of college football (that is, myself) prompted players to offer an image of themselves as determined, responsible, and hard working student-athletes. In different settings such as under the
watchful eye of a coach or “hanging out” with friends, players, in all likelihood, talk and act in different ways. Talk and actions in these settings may contradict the identity and self presented in an interview with an outsider. I argue that the setting and context influence the identity that is being worked on by an individual, supporting the theoretical position that identity is malleable and a product of ongoing work. Many contradictions between speech and actions support this theory. If a person’s identity(ies) was/were something possessed by that person, something static and fixed, what is said would complement what is done (cf. Martin 2003). In general, speech and non-speech acts would display a common and singular identity. A person’s “possessed” or underlying identity would manifest itself in consistent talk and action. However, if talk and action contradict one another, an underlying, possessed identity very likely does not exist (Kondo 1990). Identity construction is thus a continual process, involving agency and effort (Callero 2003; Frewin et al. 2007; Howard 2000; MacInnes 2004; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Stryker and Burke 2000). While I have little evidence on the players’ behaviors that might contradict their idealistic talk about what a real man is and does, I know from newspaper and other media reports that the behavior of some college football players (e.g., stealing, cheating on exams, getting into fights, using drugs) is less than ideal. Further attention to gaps between talk and action would be useful to shed light on how identity work is done by highly skilled college football athletes.

**Practical Contributions**

My findings reveal some of the struggles that high-profile student-athletes face. College football players are pulled in many directions. They are required to attend class, pass exams, study, and maintain a minimum GPA. (Student athletes must sign in at each class to prove they attended at the institution that I studied.) Players must attend meetings, go to practices—often more than once a day and in the summer heat—and attend training and weight-lifting sessions year-round. They must perform well on-the-field and contribute to a winning team. They deal with intense pressure from fans and the media. Life as a student-athlete is not easy, especially for high-profile football players.
Despite the popularity and adulation these players often receive from fans, their life is far from rosy or unproblematic.

I argue that of all student-athletes, college football players get the short end of the stick. They are pushed and pulled in many directions. They are less likely than other student-athletes to complete a degree and they are less likely to play professional ball afterwards. Yet positive change can emanate from the players themselves. Structural and cultural changes often start from the ground up. One important change can follow from increased awareness. If players are aware of their low chances for success in the "pros" and how the athletic department and university exploit their athletic talent for profit, they may realize the value of a college degree. Many college athletes, as Messner (1992) noted, “put all their eggs in one basket” and leave themselves vulnerable to failure later in life. I argue that awareness is the first step for remedying this situation.

Several organizations are making efforts to provide assistance for student-athletes and emphasize academics. The NCAA, discussed in Chapter 1, is one, although they have been heavily criticized. The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics stresses the theme that education should be emphasized over athletic achievement. Yet it is likely that players are fighting an uphill battle in their quest for greater justice and fair play. It is possible that universities and athletic departments do not want student-athletes to be fully informed about the nature of their situation. Players’ awareness may threaten the status quo that generates considerable wealth and favorable publicity for powerful individuals and groups. College football players at Division I-FBS universities may be encouraged to develop unattainable dreams that are not, in the end, in their best interests.

Research Limitations

My convenience sample is limited in several ways. First, it is small and I have no way to know if my results are typical or unique to the 17 players I interviewed. In that respect, my results should be viewed as suggestive more than definitive. With such a sample, I could not test hypotheses or offer findings of a general nature. Second, my sample of informants is located at only one university, thus my results can apply to that institution only. I can make a case that this institution is similar to others in the area.
(particularly in the U. S. south) but I have no evidence to make that claim. Thus, my results are again only suggestive. Third, I was able to listen to players talk about their descriptions of manhood and playing college football but I was not able to observe them either in class or in their spare time. (I was, however, able to observe them on the football field.) As a result, this study cannot reveal contradictions between the players’ claims and actions, if indeed they exist.

My research also fails to address racial issues. Of the players in my study, all but three are African American. When I asked about race in their daily lives or as football players, they denied its relevance to how the team was organized or functioned (see Brown et al. 2003). Although I question this claim, I was unable to challenge it and thus I am left with only ideas about how race affects their experiences and identity work as athletic men.

I can, however, offer anecdotal evidence of racial differences in the construction of athletic and masculine identities that may be useful for future research. Several of the men’s accounts suggested that race influences how others characterize them. Some players said that a Black man of a certain height and build is more likely to be labeled as an athlete than is a White man of the same physical stature. The extent to which a college football players’ awareness of others' perceptions influences their self-identity as an athlete or man is unclear. Messner (1992) reports on the different “uses” of sport by members of different social classes and race/ethnic groups to create an identity and life. Research comparing White and Black players would be helpful to explore the role of race in the dynamics I identify.

An additional caution concerns whether the players expressed their “true” views or an approved “line of talk” encouraged by the athletic program. As was noted, college football players and other collegiate athletes are coached about how to talk to the media. The university in question has a media room, with a television prompter, where athletes are trained to use prompters and respond to questions. Some of the comments I received sounded scripted, as if they were intended for the press rather than only to me. Readers should keep this point in mind when reading my results. Even if the player’s comments were created for public consumption, we may gain insights into the culture of high stakes college football programs from taking them seriously. The players’ comments can
possibly be viewed as evidence of how a high stakes football program in a major university frames itself.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

I recommend that future researchers go beyond soliciting players’ accounts in an effort to explore football players’ identity work. For example, one might follow a team by observing team meetings and practices and traveling with the team. By doing so, one could ascertain whether the players’ accounts were consistent with their behavior. Also, working with an “insider” who could observe and report to the researcher the inner-workings of a team would be helpful. That way, the researcher could have once-removed information about the players’ actual practices. A different type of interview might also prove helpful. For example, group interviews with several players at a time might provide clues into the process of collective identity work. Interviewing coaches, friends not on the team, intimate partners, and family members could also provide clues to how football players actually conduct their lives. Data from these sources could then be compared to the claims the players make about who they are, what they value, and how they behave.

I particularly urge future scholars to compare White and Black football players and explore how race influences team dynamics and relations. It is possible that race plays less of a role now than formerly, e.g., in regards to position “stacking” (Buffington 2005; Sack et al. 2005). It is also possible that relationships among players as well as between coaches and players are shaped by racial attitudes and practices. We need to know more about this possibility including whether it creates inequality among players both on the field and in their non-football-related lives. While football provides a means of achieving high status and wealth for (some) particularly skilled players, what does it do to those who are less fortunate? Perhaps the sheer joy of playing college football at a FBS institution fosters an identity among players, Black and White, that they cherish and take with them throughout their adult lives (see Messner 1992). This possibility deserves to be explored.
APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8633· FAX (850) 644-4392

REAPPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 5/23/2008

To:
Mike Stewart
2093 Victory Garden Lane
Tallahassee, FL  32301

Dept.:  SOCIOLOGY

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re:  Reapproval of Use of Human subjects in Research:
     Character Development and Friendships in College Football

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 5/22/2009 please request renewed approval.

You are reminded that a change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. Also, the principal investigator must report to the Chair promptly, and in writing, any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chairman of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols of such investigations as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc: Jill Quadagno
HSC No. 2008.0220-R
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form

I freely and voluntarily give my consent to be a participant in the research project entitled, “Character Development and Friendships in College Football.” This research is being conducted by Michael Stewart, a graduate student in the Sociology Department at The Florida State University. I understand that the purpose of the research is to understand the development and formation of different identities in college football players.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences playing football and how playing football contributes to my development as a person. I understand that nothing I say will be associated with my name or used in any way that will identify my teammates or me, to the extent allowed by law. I understand that all recordings of my comments will be stored digitally on a personal laptop computer, will be password secured, and will only be accessible to Michael Stewart. I understand that all recordings of my comments will be transcribed for research purposes only and destroyed within one year of the date they are recorded.

I understand that the interview will last approximately one hour in length and that I may withdraw from participation in the research at any time by stating that I wish to stop, withdraw, or refuse.

If I have questions, I understand that I may contact Michael Stewart at The Florida State University, Department of Sociology, 507 Bellamy Building, (850) 644-6765, or by email at mcs7669@garnet.acns.fsu.edu. I may also contact Dr. Patricia Martin, supervising research coordinator at 526 Bellamy Building, (850) 644-6416 or by email at pmartin@garnet.acns.fsu.edu. I may also contact the FSU Office of Research at (850) 644-9694. Michael Stewart guarantees the foregoing conditions to me in exchange for my agreement to participate in the research. I acknowledge that I may refuse to sign this form if I prefer to give verbal but not written consent to participate in the research.

In checking the following categories, I indicate my willingness to participate in this research project.

___ I agree to be interviewed, one-on-one.

___ I agree for my interview(s) to be audiotaped.

Interviewee signature: ______________________________________

Date: __________________

[Stamp]

[Stamp]
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael was born in June of 1974 and spent most of his formative years in Oklahoma. After graduating from McAlester High School in 1992, he earned his Bachelors of Science in Sociology and Psychology in 1996 from East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. Michael began graduate school at Florida State University in 2000 earning a Masters degree in 2002 and completing his dissertation in 2008. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bainbridge College in Bainbridge, Georgia. He lives in Havana, Florida with his devoted partner Melanie, their dog, India and their cat, Fischer.