University of Cincinnati

Date: 4/2/2013

I, Joseph E Petric, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

It is entitled:
Martyrs of Masculinity: Narratives about Health Risks and Head Trauma in the NFL

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Martyrs of Masculinity: Narratives about Health Risks and Head Trauma in the NFL

A thesis submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication
of the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences

May 2013

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Abstract

On May 2, 2012, former NFL player Junior Seau took his own life through a self-inflicted gunshot wound to his torso. In the past two years (December 2010 - December 2012) seven current and former NFL players have committed suicide, some leaving instructions behind for their brains to be studied for debilitating head trauma injuries such as CTE (Sports Illustrated, 2012). These suicides rupture dominant depictions of masculinity in sports because they create social awareness and visibility into the topic of player safety. The graphic imagery of their suicides and subsequent publicity spurs collective inquiry for the issue of help-seeking in players’ health as a dilemma of masculine identity that is reinforced by the NFL’s conflict of interests.

Whether intentional or not, the act of suicide may be a potential launching point for critical dialogue and social change because it disrupts the dominant understanding of football, health risks, player safety, and even masculinity. This thesis will investigate the significance of Junior Seau’s suicide as the launching point for critical and alternative dialogues that disrupt meanings and narratives that challenge power relations between the NFL and players. The analysis of the memorial service, news articles, NFL statements and a radio interview suggests that these epideictic narratives reinforce or resist the “status quo” in terms of dominant constructions of masculinity and health, as well as the hegemonic power relations associated with NFL, highlighting the how the reinforcement of the warrior narrative or masculine norms can also serve as a launching point for critical dialogue about health issues. The conclusion closes by exploring the counter-warrior narrative that has emerged as an alternative view in which masculinity is not mutually exclusive from healthcare and players are conscious of the health risks associated with football.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Masculinity is not just simply a metaphor or symbol; rather, it is a process of gendering power relations. Instances of masculine norms in contemporary American society are expressed through performances of stoicism, the appearance of dominance, control, and decision making, toughness or an imperviousness to pain, illness, or suffering, and an aversion towards help-seeking, direction, and healthcare in general (Messner, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1990, Trujillo, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Addis, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In order to understand the relationship between the social construction of masculinity and health behaviors it is important to understand the institutions in the United States that preserve this discourse. Professional football is one of the most recognizable examples of an industry whose profile is cemented around masculinity. Constructions of masculinity are thus central to understanding the negotiation of health and risk in discussions surrounding traumatic brain injuries.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is the leading cause of death and disability in children and adults from ages 1 to 44 (Brain Trauma Foundation, 2012, TBI Statistics). Approximately 52,000 deaths occur annually from traumatic brain injury, with an estimated 1.5 million head injuries reported to United States emergency rooms each year (Brain Trauma Foundation, 2012). 300,000 individuals suffer traumatic brain injuries that require hospitalization each year (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2012). Approximately 2% of the U.S. population, at least 5.3 million Americans, is currently living with disabilities resulting from traumatic brain injury (Brain Trauma Foundation, 2012). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) traumatic brain injuries contribute to nearly one-third (30.5%) of all injury related deaths in the
United States (CDC, 2013). It is estimated that mild forms of TBI such as concussions and sub-concussions account for 75% of documented TBIs each year (CDC, 2013).

In every age group, TBI rates for males are higher than females, and, in terms of general gender difference, TBI affects males at twice the rate of females (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2012; CDC, 2013). Kraus and MacArthur (1996) concluded that the higher rate of TBIs and mortality rate among males indicates “that males are more likely than females” to suffer severe injuries, including neurological ones caused from TBIs. Men in the United States, on average, die nearly 7 years earlier than women and have higher death rates for all 15 leading causes of death which can be attributed to similar risk-seeking behaviors (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1996). There are many socio-economic factors that contribute to these statistics, but more evidence suggests that western masculine gender norms play a role in risky health behavior that goes beyond biological differences, especially in terms of risk taking, help-seeking, and cost (Courtenay, 2000).

In the year 2000 alone, direct and indirect medical costs related to traumatic brain injuries in the US were estimated at $76.5 billion (Coronado et al., 2012). The CDC estimates that at least 1 million annual TBI cases in the US can be attributed sports related impacts alone (CDC, 2013). In the collision sport of football, certain positions like linemen or defensive players may sustain nearly 1400 impacts per season, and high school players that play both offense and defense may receive as many as 2000 impacts per season (Stern et al., 2011).

The National Football League (NFL) is a major institution in terms of viewership and economic value that perpetuates masculine performances on a large scale. No other venue emphasizes the NFL’s cultural reach in America quite like the Super Bowl. Super Bowl XLVI aired February 5th, 2012 and set US viewership records for the third year in a row with 111.3
million viewers (Deitsch, 2012). The three Super Bowls prior to 2013 (2010-2012) are currently the three most-watched broadcasts in American history, behind the last episode of M*A*S*H that held the record since 1981 (Deitsch, 2012). Since the Super Bowl reaches an unprecedented amount of the general population in the U.S., the NFL is able to charge $4 million for every 30 seconds of commercial time, but the NFL’s reach extends beyond just the Super Bowl (Deitch, 2012). In 2011, NFL games accounted for the 16 most viewed cable programs during the fall and 23 of the top 25, averaging 17.5 million viewers (Bean, 2012). 91 percent of the time weekly NFL games rated as the most watched local programming where “NFL games on CBS, FOX, and NBC averaged 19.8 million viewers – 144 percent higher than the average primetime viewership among the four major over-the-air networks” (Bean, 2012, p. 1). The NFL brings football into the households of millions while making millions of dollars as a business, but there is a need to explore how masculinity, football and health issues intersect within the broader culture of American society.

American professional sports are organized in many ways to perpetuate health risks, and the NFL makes this evident with the consequences associated with such a masculine organizational culture and its conflict of interest which results in perpetuation. Masculine identity in football has larger consequences for both individuals and society because violence on the field is so widely celebrated and consumed as status quo. Off the field, players compete not only to express their manhood, but to demonstrate their dominance over others. Some may compete through physical competitions like a race or lifting the most weight, which may be relatively harmless, but other competitions like money pools for the biggest hits or challenges to have intercourse with the most women are riskier (Fogel, 2011). Football players are required to engage in risk-taking behaviors as part of their occupation, but the lack of job security and poor
health benefits within this hyper-competitive industry leads to the self-imposed marginalization of players (Fogel, 2011). These performances of masculinity also perpetuate the limitation of a feminine voice, gendered organizational structure, and the increase in crimes of male power like sexual assault and domestic abuse (Brownmiller, 1976).

Brownmiller (1976) discusses crimes of male power based on male criminals trying to reinforce the subordination of women, such as rape and domestic violence, which reinforce notions of masculinity’s dominance and superiority in a patriarchal society. Benedict and Yaeger (1999) studied 509 NFL players, and found 109 had been arrested one or more times for serious crimes, for a total of 264 arrests. Benedict and Yaeger (1999) considered: homicide, rape, kidnapping, robbery, assault, battery, domestic violence, reckless endangerment, fraud, larceny, burglary, theft, property destruction, drug-related offenses, illegal use or possession of a weapon, DUI, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest as the crimes of male power. This lead Benedict (2004) to explain that masculinity in football produces and reproduces an organizational culture that unreasonably victimizes women through rape, violence, and crime. Not only does NFL’s organizational culture reinforce violent acts through monetary compensation, it also fortifies risky health decisions.

5% of players suffer a documented concussion each season, but studies that relied on medical reports and symptoms of players put that figure between 20%-50% (Kain, 2009). The NFL explicitly states that “all return-to-play decisions should be made by team medical staff” meaning team trainers literally control the long-term mental health of players. There is obviously a chance for conflict of interests, but it is shown in trainers’ decisions and players’ contracts. Take the recent practice of NFL teams “auctioning off” the right to be an NFL team’s ‘official’ medical provider, hospital, or physician group as an example of a medical conflict of
interests (Kain, 2009). In exchange for the promise of advertisement, teams receive free or reduced treatment. Also, NFL players are not guaranteed payment beyond the season in which injury occurs, meaning if a player cannot pass the physical at the start of each season the contract is void and the athlete could even end up paying medical expenses for a lifetime of chronic work-related physical problems. This illustrates the need for collective inquiry into the policy making and procedures for handling player healthcare, inquiry that includes physicians outside the NFL and NFLPA’s payroll, and perhaps Congress to enforce rules that advocates for what is in the best interest of players regardless of whether they are aware of the risk.

Kain (2009) believes a large number of NFL players do not fully understand the long-term consequences of concussions and lack the adequate awareness of concussion symptoms. Because of this, most evaluation, diagnosis and treatment for concussions are based almost entirely on the nature of the incident and the player’s description of symptoms to the treating clinician. More attention has been focused not only on the big hits that cause a concussion but the subconcussive hits, the thousands of little hits that add up over time, that are better associated with tau and CTE development at young ages (Gladwell, 2009). The NFL has a conflict of interests that incentivizes players to make choices that put them at severe risk for cognitive impairment (as well as physical impairment) years after they retire. There is a lack of agreement as to how many NFL players suffer concussions because such incentives make it less likely that players will openly discuss their health out of fear of monetary loss.

An average football player is likely to experience at least one concussion every other year of play, and 69% experience more than one in the same year (Delaney et al., 2008). Research investigating concussions and football players ranging from ages 18-24 concluded that players having at least one concussion lead to worse performance in neurocognitive testing
compared to players without one concussion (Colvin et al., 2009). New research suggests that less significant head impacts when repeated over long periods of time lead to significant head trauma (Colvin et al., 2009). Arguably, football is experiencing a cultural awakening in terms of viewing concussions not as “getting your bell rung,” but as a serious, life debilitating injury. This does not mean the players are represented as part of the cultural awakening in media (Anderson, 2012). This new understanding of head trauma in football results from the increasing research on brains of deceased football players, which has only been documented since 2002 (Anderson, 2012).

In fact, some players have killed themselves and donated their brains for research (GamesOver.org), dramatically calling attention to the health effects of brain trauma. Suicide among NFL players is six times the national average, according to the non-profit website GamesOver.org that is dedicated to helping football players transition to life after football. Since 2006, five former NFL players varying in age from 21 to 62 years old have committed suicide by shooting themselves in the stomach or chest with the implication that they are preserving their brains for research, putting intent behind suicide (GamesOver.org).

The ritual performance of death, such as suicide or martyrdom, can be utilized as a political weapon or a starting point for social change, similar to the Japanese samurai ritual called kanshi, (Silke 2006). Kanshi allowed a samurai to draw attention to the depth of their belief that his or her superior was engaged on a mistaken course of action. Here, suicide is more like martyrdom; it is not just honor, it is a way of influencing political decisions and policy making. Whether intentional or not, the act of NFL players committing suicide may be a potential launching point for critical dialogue and social change because many players have done
so in a way that disrupts the dominant understanding of football, health risks, player safety, and even masculinity.

After a player suicide occurs, the possibility to question or reinforce broader institutionalized ideologies like masculinity is evident in narratives regarding the deceased player by other players either retired or still playing football, family of the deceased player, media stories, and statements made by NFL constituents. These broader societal narratives can be referred to as discourses of macro power relations that represent disciplinary practices amongst a variety of subjects by influencing how meaning is formed (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Praise, blame, and omission contribute to forming this meaning.

Epideictic Rhetoric is explained by Chase (1961) and Sullivan (1993) as a means of praising or blaming to attribute moral value, which functions to maintain the status quo within a given culture while avoiding the alternatives. Regarding suicides by NFL players, epideictic narratives are used to fix the disrupted meaning caused by the suicide because narratives interrupt the everyday flow of life to attribute value to certain occurrences or utterances, attributing causality to seemingly disconnected events, making them a key unit worthy of further analysis (Harter, 2009). There is a need for more research into how epideictic narratives reinforce or challenge dominant constructions of masculinity through the responses to player suicides and if the narratives about the suicide or masculinity draw attention to the health risks associated with professional football in a way that creates potential opportunities for change or reiterates the dominant risk narratives common throughout football culture. The next section will explain the context of recent football player suicides and concludes with the player suicide that this thesis will focus on, Junior Seau, before previewing the literature review.

Context of Football Players and Suicide
In the past two years (December 2010 - December 2012) seven current and former NFL players have committed suicide (Farrar, 2013). The most recent suicide was the murder-suicide of Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher, 25, who took his own life at the Chiefs football stadium after shooting his 22-year-old girlfriend nine times in front of his mother on Saturday, December 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2012. There is no evidence linking the murder-suicide to traumatic head injuries in football, but it raised questions among fans and media alike, such as ‘Why are so many football players committing suicide?’, ‘Are head injuries playing a role in these tragic events?’, and ‘What is the NFL’s role in preventing or handling these events?’ In the midst of a lawsuit concerning the NFL’s intentional negligence regarding head trauma involving approximately 4,000 NFL players, this murder-suicide begs the question, what impacts do major head traumas play in these events? The NFL as an organization must deal with the media fallout in grievances surrounding the tragedies of its former players.

As of February of 2013, four former NFL players- Junior Seau, Ray Easterling, Dave Duerson and JoVan Belcher- died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds in the past year and a half alone. Another player, Wade Belack, hanged himself in August of 2012. O.J. Murdock, 25, shot himself in July 2012 in his car outside of his old high school after texting one of his former coaches “I apologize.” In February, 2011, over a year before Seau’s suicide, two-time Super Bowl winner Dave Duerson shot himself in the chest after text messaging his family members telling them to have his brain examined for degenerative disease. A month before Seau’s suicide in April of 2012, Ray Easterling, a former safety for the Atlanta Falcons, shot himself in the chest at his home after documentation of struggles related to dementia. Easterling and Duerson shot themselves in their chests with the intent of having their brains investigated for symptoms related to head trauma. Duerson sent text messages to his family asking them to have his brain
investigated for signs of CTE (Chicago Sun-Times, 2012). It is unknown whether these two former players’ suicides impacted Seau’s decision to kill himself in the manner in which he did, but it is important to note that he must have been aware of these past events, the exploration of possible linkage to neurological disease called CTE and the repercussions involved in the repetition of these events.

Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) was not discovered until 2002 because it is indistinguishable from Alzheimer’s in that its initial symptoms are “behavioral and personality changes, followed by disinhibition and irritability, before moving to dementia” (Gladwell, 2009 p. 5). Currently CTE can only be diagnosed post-mortem by microscopically studying brain tissue in a very specific way to look for distinct patterns of the protein “tau” (Gladwell, 2009). Tau was originally thought to mark the second and final stage of Alzheimer’s because it is what ultimately kills the individual by building up in the brain through years of dementia to shut down the brain (Gladwell, 2009). Tau was originally only seen in Alzheimer’s patients coupled with another protein called “beta-amyloid,” which is scientifically believed to “lay the groundwork for dementia” as the first stage of Alzheimer’s (Gladwell, 2009 p. 5).

According to Boston University’s Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy (a partner of the NFL), CTE can be caused instantaneously or from repetitive brain trauma, and can begin to appear “months, years, or even decades after the last brain trauma” (Boston University, 2012, What is CTE). CTE is often misdiagnosed as dementia or Alzheimer’s because of their similar symptoms, especially memory loss, and volatile mood swings that range from hostile aggression to severe depression and confusion (Boston University, 2012). Prior to the ability to test brain tissue for protein patterns and before being called CTE, the disease was labeled “dementia pugilistica” (DP) as early as the 1920s, when it was only found in boxers who
received multiple concussions and more commonly referred to as “punch drunk syndrome disorder” or “boxer’s dementia” (McKee et al. 2009). CTE is not unique to just the sport of boxing, it is an athlete’s disease.

90% of CTE cases are athletes that accumulate multiple traumatic brain injuries (BTIs), which the CDC estimates occurs 1.6 to 3.8 million times a year in sports alone, a range controlled for the instances that go unreported (Zeigler, 2012; CDC, 2013). Other than sports, CTE is most commonly found in shell shocked soldiers killed in war (Saulle, & Greenwald, 2012). Outside of boxing and soldiers, CTE is associated with contact sports such as ice hockey, professional wrestling, even soccer, but the collision based sport of football has been a central focus as of late due to its popularity and graphic display of traumatic brain injuries in American (Zeigler, 2012). As of December, 2012, 34 former NFL football players have been diagnosed with CTE (Carreon, 2013).

Recent research on CTE has investigated its prevalence in other athletes, most notably professional and college football players like Easterling, Duerson and Seau (Dailymail.com, 2012; Baugh et al., 2012). It is impossible to establish that brain damage was the main cause of these players’ deaths, but the NFL is faced with scrutiny and criticism of how football and related head trauma influenced these suicides. Especially in terms of a players’ mental and physical health, the NFL as an organization must be cautious about how they handle concussions and head trauma to insure players’ safety on a regular basis.

Easterling is the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit against the NFL. He filed the lawsuit almost one year before he shot himself. Easterling’s lawsuit, filed by his attorney Larry Coben during August of 2011, argues that the NFL "continuously and vehemently denied that it knew, should have known or believed that there is any relationship between NFL players suffering concussions
while playing . . . and long-term problems such as headaches, dizziness, dementia and/or Alzheimer's disease that many retired players have experienced" (Farrar, 2013). Easterling’s wife claims he told her suicide was a possibility to prove the connection between football and head trauma because he “felt like his brain was falling off” which is why she was not surprised by his suicide (Woody, 2012). Both Easterling and Deurson were found to have long term effects of concussions and their families are now suing the NFL (Tierney, 2012).

The brain tissue from Seau became a debated topic in the media following his suicide. Ultimately, his family decided to release his brain tissue for medical research and on January 10th, 2013 it was discovered that Seau did suffer from CTE at the age of 43. On January 23rd of the same year, less than two weeks after the CTE diagnosis, the Seau family filed a lawsuit against the NFL and Riddell Helmets for wrongful death, negligence, fraud and concealment. It is not certain that any of the thousands of current lawsuits against the NFL will ever reach court.

The next section will expand on the material context of Junior Seau’s suicide, media coverage and memorial service with the aim of situating it within the framework of previous literature on masculinity, sports, dialogue and resistance.

Context of Junior Seau’s Suicide

On May 2, 2012, police found the body of Tiaina Baul “Junior” Seau at his home in Oceanside, California –a suburb of San Diego. Seau died of an apparent suicide from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest at the age of 43. TMZ.com (2012) was the first to report his death, claiming that Seau’s girlfriend reported finding him unconscious before calling the police. Shortly after word of his suicide spread, fans, family members and local media pundits showed up wearing his jersey and showing support with flowers. Luisa Seau, his mourning mother, spoke with reporters and fans outside his house before being overcome with emotion. She said “I
don’t understand…I’m shocked,” demonstrating how unexpected this event was, especially since she spoke with him on the phone earlier in the week (p.1). The last communication Seau had with his family was through four separate text messages sent to his ex-wife Gina Seau and each of his three children the day before his suicide simply saying “I love you” according to Louis Bien of sbnation.com (Bien, 2012). Following his death, the Chargers held a ‘celebration of life’ on May 11, 2012 at Qualcomm Stadium where an estimated 20,000 fans were present to honor Junior Seau’s life and career.

Before he was a 20-year NFL veteran and “Man of the Year,” Junior was a football and track standout at Oceanside High School. He became a renowned linebacker with the University of Southern California before being drafted by his hometown San Diego Chargers in the first round of the 1990 NFL draft. Throughout his 20 years as an NFL linebacker Seau played for the Chargers, the Miami Dolphins and the New England Patriots. It is important to note that in his 20 years of playing, Seau was never diagnosed with one concussion. He retired in 2010 and became involved in charity work, especially in the California area. A few months after Seau’s retirement from the NFL, he was arrested on suspicion of domestic abuse of his girlfriend. Only hours after his release from police custody, Seau drove his car off a nearby cliff in Carlsbad, California without any evidence of drug or alcohol abuse involved. Seau claimed he fell asleep at the wheel.

Following Seau’s suicide, the NFL was forced to discuss how they pay tribute to someone that took his own life when public perception may question their responsibility. Mayor of San Diego Jerry Sanders, former coach Bobby Ross, former rival and fellow Californian John Lynch, and former teammates such as Dan Fouts, Bully Ray Smith, and LaDanian Tomlinson all paid tribute to Seau at his memorial service. While eulogizing Seau, speakers praised him for his charisma, his child-like enthusiasm for playing football, his commitment to the teams he played
for, and the violent hits he could deliver, which made him the archetypal exemplar of a defensive football player. They simultaneously contrast this praise by labeling the suicide as a tragedy for not only family and friends but the NFL. The speakers joked about the fear Seau garnered because of his violent nature, and followed it up by saying we should learn something from this, like if you need help to ask for it, placing the responsibility for suicide squarely on Seau. Seau’s suicide was the first of former NFL players to receive mainstream coverage outside of sports media. This makes it a significant cultural artifact worthy of study. As nearly 4,000 former players file suits against the NFL, lawyers representing the defendants argue that the NFL as an organization perpetuated fraudulent representations of head trauma by labeling it as “being dinged”, “getting your bell rung”, and by selling big hits as badges of honor that are not seriously threatening to the health of players (Layden, 2010; Florrio, 2013). The players’ attorneys claim the NFL’s conflict of interest, especially with team physicians and sports commentators, lead them to intentionally downplay or deny causality involving health risks and head trauma in football. This suppression of the truth would make them liable in a court of law, which prompted the NFL to enact policy changes on the 2012-2013 season regarding head-to-head collisions, presence of medical personnel for head trauma specifically and penalties in the form of fines and suspensions, but the conflict of interest still remains.

This brief background on Junior Seau and the context of his suicide illustrates the significance of studying narratives of masculinity praising or blaming Seau’s behaviors in relation to health risks. This thesis will investigate the significance of this suicide as the launching point for critical and alternative dialogues that disrupt meanings and challenge power relations between the NFL and players. This thesis also examines the use of epideictic narratives regarding Seau which utilize praise, blame, and avoidance to understand the degree to which
they reinforce or challenge the “status quo” in terms of dominant constructions of masculinity and health, as well as the hegemonic power relations associated with NFL.

Chapter Two chronicles pertinent literature on issues of organizational narratives reinforcing dominant ideologies, masculinity and hegemonic masculinity as examples of discourses. It also gathers important literature which can investigate the “warrior narrative” as the dominant way to construct masculinity in sports, and how player suicides like Seau’s serve as a launching point for critical dialogue about health issues and the warrior narrative through epideictic rhetoric. The intent of this literature review is to position the analysis and theoretical perspectives used to ground this case study of Junior Seau while laying the foundation for the research questions.

The research questions will guide the critical textual analysis of eight speakers at the Seau’s memorial service, 35 news articles, eight NFL statements and a radio interview transcript, which comprises Chapter Three. The analysis examines the epideictic narratives various speakers use in describing Junior Seau and his suicide in terms of what is praised, blamed and avoided. The objective of the analysis is to see how these stories dispute or agree with the status quo constructions of masculinity, health risk, and the dominant power relations within the NFL’s football culture, which will all be explained in the literature review of Chapter Two. This thesis will conclude with Chapter Four, which is a critical discussion of the results from the analysis to assess if the findings are significant, both theoretically and practically, before concluding by identifying the limitations of the thesis and what future research could explore.
Chapter Two: Literature Review and Methodology

The current chapter is designed to outline the pertinent literature used to ground the research questions, theoretical perspectives and analysis utilized by this thesis. The chapter is divided into six sections based on the following topics 1) constructions of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity, 2) epideictic narratives in organizations, 3) the warrior narrative 4) dialogue, suicide and epideictic rhetoric, and 5) methodological considerations. The aim is to demonstrate the intersection of masculinity, epideictic narratives, and dialogue related to the context of Junior Seau’s suicide.

Masculinities and Hegemonic Constructions

By deconstructing dominant meanings of masculinity, masculinity in football, and hegemonic masculinity, I will explain how micro level practices of masculinity in football embody societal narratives of health risk that are part of larger ideologies, which reifies masculinity. Narrative is a vehicle for discourses like masculinity to construct and influence collective identity formation of football players, which produces and reproduces institutional forms of daily masculine performances within a particular institutional environment. Thus masculinities are deeply embedded forms of organizational culture that not only formalize marginalization of other masculinities and gender inequality in general; they also result in very tangible, physical and real consequences for players (Maier, 1999; Acker, 1990).

There are many definitions of masculinity in literature, but Connell (1995) focuses on its relationship to gender by defining it as “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” (p.71). Notions of ideal masculine performances are usually
juxtaposed to stereotypical conceptions of feminine traits of passivity, objectification, displays of emotion, physically inferior, and gentleness. These binary constructions of masculinity and femininity have proven to be myths that limit options for equal gender expression (Butler, 1990).

Within this masculine-feminine dichotomy, men are often characterized as unwilling to ask for help when they experience problems in living, like reluctantly asking for directions, sharing feelings, and avoiding seeking out help from professionals. Men and women alike learn these gendered attitudes and behaviors through cultural socialization and hegemony, which is why men of different ages, heritage, and geographical backgrounds are, on average, less likely to seek out professional help for both physical and mental health problems, depression, substance abuse, physical disabilities and stressful life events (Addis, 2003).

Masculinity is constructed through a collaboration of narratives, discourses, and identity performances, meaning it is constructed and performed in contexts with a multitude of intersecting and often competing discourses. From a social constructionist perspective this means boys and men are not passive victims of a socially prescribed role, but are active agents in constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity within their culturally conditioned discourse. The concept of agency is a pivotal part of the individual’s self-expressions which exert power and produce effects in their lives that are central to their identity constructionism (Courtenay, 1999a).

Masculinity can also be understood as the vilification of the abnormal or non-dominant displays of masculinity or femininity. An extreme performance of this vilification often focuses on homosexuality. Football is usually referred to as a means of “separating the boys from the men,” where threatening feminine labels are utilized by players and coaches to motivate better physical performance on the sporting field (Courtenay, 2000). In his 1977 coming-out
autobiography titled “The David Kopay Story”, David Kopay, who became the first openly gay athlete when he came-out in 1975, provides some insight saying “The curse words on the football field are about behaving like a girl. If you don’t run fast enough or block or tackle hard enough you’re a pussy, a cunt, a sissy” (Young & Kopay, 1977 p. 53). This experience is from the 1970s, yet still holds true through 2013 where homophobic language like “fag,” “queer,” “gay,” and “wuss” are used to maintain the predominantly heteronormative masculine environment of sports while policing gender behaviors as well (Kamphoff, 2013). Messner (1992) said, “The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys (in sports) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable” (p. 34). Such persecution points to the gendered relationship of football as an institution, and also how football players are just trying to perform their construction of ideal masculinity.

This touches on the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which, in a patriarchal society, positions all men positively in terms of dominance, superiority, aggression, decision-making, risk-taking, competitiveness, and the constant desire for more power (Connell, 1990). Connell (1990) argues that hegemonic masculinity in the family setting exemplifies men’s patriarchal dominance over women and children, where the father is the “breadwinner” “protector” and “strongest” member of the family (Lerner, 1986). Hegemonic masculinity is considered the ideal performance of masculinity, but it is also fluid and can be changed (Connell, 1995). Connell (1995) argues that a multitude of possibilities, both feminine and masculine, may be appropriated differently by individuals within any given context and may appear contradictory at times. NFL football players are typically spoken of as an archetype of hegemonic masculinity, yet the NFL, and football as an industry, position football players in marginalized and oppressed social
contexts. Segal (1990) adds the concept of a “sensitive father” figure in modern masculine representations simply reify the hegemonic male dominance, by praising the male as “having the best of both worlds” because now males can claim dominance over what were feminized domains, without the same pains (Segal, 1990, p.58). By giving masculinity a softer edge it makes hegemonic male dominance, and the characteristics that come with that ideal, more acceptable. Masculinity is the dominant gendered subject, and masculine hegemony is a process where the dominant performance of masculinity teaches people to accept these constructions as normal and natural. Hegemonic masculinity is the idealized form of masculinity at a given place and time (Connell, 1995). It is the socially dominant gender construction that subordinates femininities as well as other forms of masculinity, and reflects and shapes men’s social relationships with women and other men; it represents power and authority and rejects that which does not fit within the firm structure of that which is deemed masculine (Mumby, 1987; Mumby, 1990).

In this increasingly commercialized environment, the pressure to win and maintain a commercial image puts football players at the heart of Foucault’s (1979) process of subjectification through self and culturally-imposed disciplinary power, where players can be the empowered subjects or the objects power is imposed on. In this sense, power has the capacity to reinforce the status quo relations, or it can be realized as a means of creating opportunities for change on both a macro and micro level. Foucault (1979) defines disciplinary power when surveillance becomes self-surveillance as individuals internalize regulation as a part of their construction of truth, knowledge, and identity. The warrior narrative is the dominant means of disciplinary discourse that becomes naturalized as the correct way to function, think, and see people as. Warrior narratives encourage athletes to police themselves in those terms, but
individuals may draw from multiple discourses that make contradictions more visible. For Foucault, power relations are always in flux, and groups can intentionally subvert these power relations, like masculinity’s construction through the warrior narrative, by exercising power through what mechanisms they possess. In this sense, players are discursively subjectified as the objects of the warrior narrative’s disciplinary discourse that defines masculinity as risking health for victory, persecuting those who do not fulfill this narrative as feminized, while coercing players to enact these norms through institutionalized practices (Foucault, 1979). Players’ identities are formed by discursive subjectification through the warrior narrative to embody what it means to be a true football player, which is a warrior. This self-knowledge of a true football player as a warrior becomes the very means of self-discipline and self-regulation by players to reinforce their own subjectification (Foucault, 1979). However, players are also subjects in terms of using agency to choose among available discourses.

Foucault (1979) also describes the concept of “bio-power” as an institutionalized means of controlling populations through dominant discourses of power. Bio-power literally means to have power through the bodies of humans. The organizational structuring of NFL policies, contracts, competitive culture and the dominant warrior-narrative are all techniques of enforcing bio-power. Foucault theorizes the “Body-politic” where “a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into bodies of knowledge” (Foucault, 1979 p. 28). The use of suicide by NFL players resists the dominant discourse constructed by the warrior-narrative in sports, using the graphic display of the body as a political weapon to spur media dialogue on the issue of player safety and head trauma.
The warrior narrative in football rhetorically empowers the storyteller to formulate subjects, while simultaneously embedding connections between cause and effect. When NFL players commit suicide by shooting themselves in the chest, like Duerson, Easterling and Seau, the issue of head trauma in sports and the plight of football players’ health risks potentially becomes a counter narrative to the dominant warrior narrative that valorizes tradition and self-sacrifice without emotional expression as tenants of the ideal football player.

It is important to note that this classification of players as warriors can be grounds for establishing alternative identities, narratives, and definitions of what is “healthy,” “masculine” and a true football player. This is evident in Foucault’s (1979) examination of sexuality where the discursive displays of disciplinary power are institutionalized throughout history and culture to produces certain forms of discourse around sexuality, but this strict policing of sexuality (both institutionally and self-imposed) empowered marginalized sexualities and sexual identities to have a status quo definition of sexuality to differentiate itself from (Butler, 1993). Butler (1993) argues that the taxonomy placed on sexuality through institutionalized forms of disciplinary power became the basis to establish counter knowledge, identities, and interpretations of dominant understandings of sexuality, which allowed these subaltern voices to limit and subvert the dominant power relations of that time. This demonstrates why analyzing how disciplinary power can be subverted to open up larger collective inquiry and advocacy is significant for discourses challenging the domination, reliance, and concealment of social control. Football players can become those who exercise power, rather than those that power is exercised on, making them participants rather than observers (subjects rather than objects) in their subjectification. Little research takes a dialectical approach to how masculinity performance is central to the intricate material and discursive contradictions that are central to these disciplinary
power relations. What constitutes a “healthy” performance of masculinity by a football player is a form of organizational knowledge positioned in a web of tensions and in flux.

There is a need to examine these dialectical relationships where organizational control is met with resistance to understand the negotiation of masculinity and health risks. Mumby (2004) defined power “as a dialectical phenomenon characterized by interdependent processes of struggle, resistance, and control” (pp. 240–1). This communicative approach to organizational narratives represent struggles of negotiated meaning where “power is exercised through a set of interpretive frames that each worker incorporates as part of his or her organizational identity” (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 184).

Here, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is used to not only examine the dominant power structures limiting resistance, but the act of resistance to hegemony itself. Hegemonic masculinity in football is a socially constructed subject for players to respond to by reproducing, resisting, or transforming their individual performance of masculinity in response to this ongoing struggle between competing narratives of enablement and constraint (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). Hegemony can be viewed from a number of lenses – fragmentation (Manoogian, Harter, & Denham, 2010), critical interpretivism (Mumby, 1987), postmodernism (Foucault, 1978) and critical feminism (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004) – but a common thread across these perspectives is to reveal the coalition formed through shared dominant ideologies across deeply embedded structures of that makeup a given culture as well as the dialectical struggle of power and resistance.

By examining the juxtaposed performances of masculinity and organizational narratives from a dialectical approach, Clair (1993) demonstrated how a multitude of discourses are constantly competing for organizational voice through members’ use of epideictic narratives to
frame issues in terms of organization reality. These discourses are masculinized, feminized, marginalized, and still play a role in the dominant conception of organizational reality for individuals. In fact, players’ value as paid-labor in football is dependent on fulfilling the dominant ideologies in narratives regarding football, and it is a mentality they have worked their lives to achieve, thus internalizing these narratives’ values as their own.

These internalized narratives by football players, along with the discourses they contain, are rarely positioned in terms of health or risk; instead most narratives are positioned in terms of the play, the hit, the tackle, or the general domination of the opponent (Messner, 1994). Clair (1993) described six narrative devices used to frame organizational storytelling within hegemonic values related to sexual harassment: 1) accepting dominant interests as universal, 2) labeling contradictions as a simple misunderstanding, 3) reification by framing issues as natural or biological, 4) trivialization to invalidate the claims or situations, 5) denotative hesitancy where language is part of the dominant group, leaving the muted group a limited vocabulary to express itself with, and 6) by framing public/social issues as private/personal matters to dismiss the organization’s responsibility. Clair’s (1993) work focuses on personal narratives in organizations which frame sexual harassment in a way that either perpetuates or challenges dominant interests, but the same framing devices can be used to investigate the framing of masculinity and health risks in football. Clair’s (1993) work on narratives framing organizational issues through status quo interpretations is also evident in football where hegemony also exists.

In the case of hegemony in football, the coalition between the NFL as an organization, which includes the owners, teams, staff, and various arms of the NFL, the sports media, fans, and players form a collective yet fragmented culture of oppression. Femininity is considered an overarching frame of subordination and oppression (Ferguson, 1985) because it casts the subject
as passive, powerless, and confined to a reaction to the norm. For football players, accepting repeated head trauma unnecessarily as part of being a football player may result in the commodification and privatization of male health risk seeking in football, which reinforces a larger cultural norm in American patriarchal society (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004).

By taking a dialectic approach to power examines acts of resistance that penetrate hegemonic forms in organizations, such as masculinity, within the culture of football in the NFL (Mumby, 2005). There is a need to show the contradictory ways these macro-level power relations are enacted at the micro-level on a regular basis. The warrior narrative in sports media idealizes the ideal masculine performance of identity as one of self-sacrifice, risking everything for the team and football glory, which is historically and culturally situated.

Anderson (2012) boldly believes masculinization glorifies violence, but is hidden through the argument of protecting the NFL’s tradition, rather not the labor that generates the revenue. This means the warrior narrative used to describe masculine sacrifice, once so valorized in the NFL, can be criticized through a “triangulated causal model” that emphasizes the “concern for safety, a weakening hegemonic model, and increased liability issues” facing the NFL following recent research and litigation (Anderson, 2012). It is difficult to imagine the NFL without being a contact-based sport, but player safety and health risks are beginning to be addressed as more serious issues..

“Doing masculinity” is negotiated within the certain constraints of the football culture as an industry and larger societal narratives of gender, power and discourse. Storytelling normalizes the performance of masculinity in football while framing meanings of health-risks within the context of the dominant warrior narrative and the larger field of discourse it embodies. Individual health narratives of individual football players play a role in the larger formation of health
legacies of football in general. The stories need to be more empowering to players by framing
the issue of head trauma in sports as a health issue, rather than individual self-management.
Families and individuals need knowledge and skills to better address the unintended
consequences of attempting to conform to the ideal football player on the field, illustrating the
need to examine the cultural messages that stories either embody, praise, or shame. Gherardi and
Poggio (2007) specifically examine narratives in masculine organizations to reveal how gender
identity is an integral part of shaping the organizational-self. No other organization is this more
evident in than the American football industry which has long been linked to the construction of
masculinity in the United States as sacrificing physical body for sporting glory (Anderson,
2012). The next section of this literature review will address narrative and epideictic in
organizations which examine the framing of narratives to discursively constrain alternative views
and reinforce the dominant ideologies of masculinity and health as well as the dominant power
of the NFL. This process also has the potential to open alternative narratives based on the
recognition or avoidance of health risks in football.

Narrative and Epideictic in Organizations

Societal narratives have implications for individual identity construction while
embodying larger level power relations that makes complying with social norms more acceptable
and challenging these norms more difficult. One common way narratives are used to reinforce
larger power relations is through storytelling in organizations. By taking a critical approach to
narratives in organizations, I will demonstrate the self-disciplining power certain discourses have
over individuals working within that organization, which typically reinforce the dominant
ideologies of that organization’s culture. It is important to begin with what narratives are before
showing how they embody larger discourses.
Narratives are communication patterns that give rise to the material behaviors that justify the evaluation of certain behaviors through temporary rationalization, and that individuals use to make sense of certain situations while preparing them for future situations, which Burke (1984) terms “equipment for living” (Fisher, 1984; Burke, 1984; Manoogian, Harter, & Denham, 2010). In terms of masculinity, narratives describing “men” and “masculinity” are referencing a specific performance of masculinity which normalizes or rejects partial performances of masculinity. The institutionalization of masculine norms by culture and society cultivates illusions of the archetypal, privileged male—and unprivileged other (Gottzén, 2011). These broader societal narratives can be referred to as discourses of macro power relations that serve to reinforce dominant ideologies and create self-disciplinary mechanisms through certain discourses.

Narratives can disrupt the normative routine of daily living activities to bestow worth to specific actions or articulations where otherwise unimportant or dissociated events are given autonomy, value, and specific contextual power (Harter, 2009). Here, storytelling acts as a vehicle to praise or blame certain behaviors or values by linking two events that may not be associated otherwise. The goal is to explore the relational meanings, tensions, and contradictions of masculinity in football that is rendered invisible through the dominant narratives within a specific organization and its culture, in this case the NFL.

Representations of larger discourses that occur on the macro-level are institutionalized by organizational narratives, reinforcing micro-level coercion and identity formation. At the micro-level, these narratives are consumed by individuals and either co-opted or resisted in their performance of discourses. Structurally, organizational narratives function as abstract ‘maps’ of idealized relationships of gender, power, and work (Acker, 1990; 1992). The shared stories of gender, power, and masculinity are enacted and rewritten in the everyday interaction of
employees, organizational members, and cultural agents. Everyday narratives function to praise and blame, masculinize and feminize, and accept as insider or resist as other (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004).

This epideictic use of storytelling as a vehicle to reinforce and/or transform deeply embedded power structures is imperative to maintain hegemonic ideals of masculine performance (Giddens, 1979; Mumby, 1987; Mumby, 1990; Clair, 1993). Employees are subject to narratives in organizations that are internalized as norms, guidelines, and eventually their own individual identity. This ontologically problematizes how these employees come to understand themselves and make sense of the world, both at work our outside of work, by seeing themselves and the world based on organizational guidelines framed by epidictic narratives. This is no different for NFL players who internalize narratives of masculinity as rules to governing their lives in terms of health, risk, masculinity, and their marginalized role in the power relations of the NFL. It is impossible to tell all sides of a dominant narrative in an organization, but storytelling is still a process where individual selective choice and social adaptation come into play (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004).

Mumby (1987, 1990) studied discourse by critically analyzing how storytelling influences organizational sense making through individual choices at the micro-level. In these situations, everyday narratives function to praise and blame, masculinize and feminize, accept as insider and resist as other (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). This use of narrative as a vehicle to respond to deeply embedded organizational power structures is a key area of study for Clair (1993), who suggests organizations develop conflicts of interest when narratives are constructed in a way that privatizes issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace. Mumby (1987, 1990) and Clair’s (1993) critical approach to the narrative discourse of storytelling in organizations
reveals that hegemonic masculinity narratives in organizations go beyond epideictically informing members about the correct or incorrect behaviors; they act as larger narratives used to construct organizational identity through accepting, countering, or transforming how the narratives are enacted (Mumby, 1987). To this end it is obvious that narrative and discourse contribute to power relations, but that usually entails reinforcing the status quo of those power relationships.

Deetz (1990; 1992) offers similar insights to how organizational narratives frame values within the dominant interests. Organizations distort genuine conversation (Gadamer, 2004) and the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1981) in ways that prevent “openness to alternative perspectives and reasoning” that are required to make informed decisions (Deetz, 1992, p.460). Deetz (1992) refers to this as systematically distorted communication because they distort open communication, but this distortion is hidden from assessment. Individuals’ narratives frame beliefs and values in ways that prevent critical examination and “are maintained precisely because they are not able to be brought to discourse,” which he attributes to muted groups’ lack of “undistorted expressions of their experiences” (Deetz, 1990, p. 233-234). Like Clair’s (1993) devices to sequester, Deetz (1992) introduces eight micro-practices that prevent open participation in decision-making through discursive closure: 1) disqualification entails how individuals discursively exclude certain perspectives from conversation, 2) naturalization is the reification of social constructions by treating them as natural or inevitable, removing historical-cultural context, 3) neutralization is the hiding of values through the guise of objectivity, 4) topical avoidance is intentionally avoiding a topic, 5) subjectification of experience is a means of isolating issues so they are understood as a private matter, 6) meaning denial and plausible deniability involves denying certain interpretations of discourse (for example, yelling at
someone yet claiming you are not angry), 7) legitimation is the use of moral fictions to hide alternatives while concealing contradictions, and 8) pacification occurs when problems are treated as so complex or difficult that attempts at change appear futile. Some of Deetz’s (1992) micro-practices overlap with Clair’s (1993) devices of sequestering, but they share comparable outcomes when applied to examining narratives of masculinity and health risk in football following player suicide.

Applying the work of Deetz (1992) and Clair (1993) to suicide narratives in the NFL demonstrates that by positioning head trauma as a personal issue, the stories stray away from attributing any responsibility to the NFL, or football culture, or organizational issue management as worthy of attention, minimizing responsibility to the individual subject. To this end, epideictic narratives and framing can be means of maximizing individual responsibility, in this case the players’ responsibility to play football or risk their health as part of masculine constructions, while minimizing the responsibility of the organization, in this case the NFL. This stigmatization of injury is similar to the stigmatization of disease, where players are less likely to share stories of injury and worry out of fear that they will either lose playing time or be treated as “less than a man” by positioning head trauma as a personal issue as a means of repositioning a public issue as a private matter, especially if they believe such positioning is natural. This embodies how narratives in organizations try to re-position critical interpretations of meaning in terms of the dominant discourse.

Masculinity, within the culture of football, is reproduced and resisted at the micro-level by players on a regular basis, but at the macro-level masculinity is held to a larger cultural script of the football industry, which is constructed by larger ideological narratives involving gender, power, and identity. In this sense, narratives are tools used within organizations to reinforce
dominant ideologies in order to create self-disciplinary mechanisms while limiting the organization from critical evaluation based on alternative discourses. This brings us to the next section of the literature review where the NFL employs the warrior narrative as the dominant discourse to construct guidelines for masculine norms and performances both on and off the field. The warrior narrative entails the naturalization of health risks and to marginalization and celebration of players based on their performances within the hegemonic warrior narrative.

The Warrior Narrative and Sports Media

Masculinity in football is constructed through a collaboration of narratives, discourses, and identity performances, where players often subject themselves to gruesome acts of violence and health risks so the team can win, which is an effort to fulfill these hegemonic masculine ideals perpetuated throughout their organizational culture. The cultural structure of football in America not only encourages players to sacrifice their health through the economics of players as paid-labor, it produces a “warrior-narrative” as a subject that people players, fans, writers and the like can identify with (Jansen and Sabo, 1994; Sabo and Jenson, 1998). Larger institutions communicate messages of masculinity through the display of masculine norms (Mahalik, 2000). This recognizes that masculinities function as belief systems that are learned, through socialization at young ages, and are employed to measure values and norms for acceptability.

The work of Jansen and Sabo (1994) as well as Sabo and Jenson (1998) demonstrates the use of war language, metaphors, stories, and analogies throughout sports by players, coaches, and media alike to establish a warrior narrative. Anderson (2012) explains how the warrior narrative glorifies a hegemonic masculine player that is committed to tolerating incredible amounts of pain on the field (e.g. broken bones, sickness, headaches, torn ligaments or tendons, physical conditions), and does not stop playing. Adam and Anderson (2010) explain that this
narrative’s war-like language motivates on –field-success for players, which is defined by toughness, violence, aggression and self-sacrifice. This is evident in many quotes by the soccer coaches in Adam and Anderson’s (2010) work telling players to: “spill blood,” ”go into battle,” “be willing to die for this team,” “slit their fucking throats,” “We want to see more players with blood on their shirts” (p. 286). Jansen and Sabo (1994) note that this warrior narrative becomes a guideline for orthodox behaviors to be seen as desirable, or what Adam and Anderson (2010) calls “masculine establishing discourse” on and off the football field through self-discipline by players to construct “(toxic) behaviors, and attitudes that constitute (orthodox) masculinity” (Adam and Anderson, 2010, p 286).

The warrior narrative in football has many themes. In football, healthy behavior is labeled as either feminine or homosexual, creating a binary where “strapping back up and getting back in the game” is ideal and protecting your-self from health risks makes you a “sissy” (Courtenay, 2000). Many times this narrative carries “homophobic, misogynistic, femophobic attitudes and the use of “extreme sexual violence” to instill players with a hegemonic ideal of masculinity (Adam and Anderson, 2010, p. 285-286). Sabo and Jensen (1998) argue that the warrior narrative is a cultural means of praising difference between men and women by belittling women and marginalizing men through language that makes them seem soft, weak, or passive. Adam and Anderson (2010) explain how soccer coaches describe playing as “a man’s game” comparing the players to women for their lack of “balls,” persecuting homosexuality by “Don’t fuck it up. Don’t be a fucking poof!” and telling them to “Go out there and dominate them. Bend them over and fuckin’ rape them!” (p. 287). Here the warrior narrative functions as a dominant discourse that constructs a system of glorifying and vilifying certain masculine performances, though these discourses may be perpetuated, reinforced, accepted and/or resisted by players. In
order to maintain their source of income and to be successful they must put their lives on the line or risk feminization. If a player resists this dominant narrative they risk being objectified as another marginalized masculinity that is feminized compared to the hegemonic warrior narratives. This demonstrates how football is riddled with war language from directly describing the game in terms of combat, to persecuting sexuality, or just by need to make risky health decisions as ideal (Messner 2007; Anderson 2010).

Ideology is embodied in everyday performances by individuals where “knowledge” is constructed by different voices competing with hegemonic articulations to create multiple discourses of masculinity. Football players become martyrs of masculinity because of the health risks they incur while trying to achieve the hegemonic ideal, such as the effects of performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) like steroids, Adderall, testosterone, or physically damaging injuries such as concussions. Since football players’ performances of masculinity result in their own marginalization and oppression, they should not be looked at as representations of hegemonic masculine ideals; rather a subverted form of masculinity in the culture of football, which Fogel (2011) refers to as “sporting masculinity.” This refers to the institutionalized subversion of men that fail to fulfill the dominant stereotypes within football narratives are susceptible to feminine labels that threaten their masculinity.

Performances of masculinity by football players stems from a heroic depiction of common activity in football, which valorizes health risks such as head trauma, and characterizes the lack of fulfilling these idealized performances as “the other”, making hegemonic masculinity a particular display of masculinity that is rarely achieved, but often sought (Connell. 1987). When this equates masculinity with accepting health risks, storytelling contributes to the ongoing problem that is the status quo in football, risking health for glory. Stories of masculine
performance can reinforce dominant narrative by explaining how masculinity is performed, constructed, and accepted in the context of football.

By trying to uphold the warrior narrative, football players are expected not to express intense physical pain and to continue competing despite serious risk to injury, which they are typically applauded for because of their intensity, commitment, heart or toughness (Addis, 2003). Addis (2003) claims these labels discourage help-seeking and self-care in the context of injury. NFL football has long been linked to the construction of masculinity in the U.S., where sacrificing one’s body for the sake of sporting glory or the team’s victory is seen as a key tenet. Sports journalists and film-makers. Many of the iconic images from the NFL’s history share the notions of concealing fear, not showing emotion, and playing through pain (Anderson, 2012). Across the culture of football, expressions of violence, aggression, power and dominance are stressed by players, coaches, media, and fans as part of the larger warrior narrative that valorizes these behaviors on the field.

Narratives crafted by journalists praise the ideal masculine performance of putting health at risk for the sake of sporting victory and vilify the fear of achieving these ideals as the feminized “other. This approach risks players’ long-term health but benefits coaches, colleges, and in professional sports, team owners and the NFL. This becomes another way to compete against other players, determine playing time by coaches, be heralded like a victorious warrior by the press, and to be the hero of worship to fans (Fogel, 2011). The sports journalism industry reinforces male dominance through its production of the warrior-narrative, but also because the industry is part of a broader patriarchal trend. Lapchick, Moss II, Russell, and Scearce (2011) surveyed 320 daily newspapers and popular sport Web sites in the U.S., finding that men
comprised 94% of sports editors, 90% of assistant sports editors, 89% of reporters, 90% of columnists, and 84% of copy editors/designers.

Male sports journalists have been shown to uphold these hegemonic masculine ideals by primarily covering men’s sports (which are construed as more masculine) and providing negative stereotypes of female athletes. Anderson (2009) theorized that the masculinization of sport media exists because sport journalists are comprised largely of former athletes who did not reach the level of sport they aspired to; or they are ex-professional athletes. This endorses a sequence where the next generation of young athletes, like the young athletes a generation before (typically from marginalized upbringings), emerge from their own institutions of masculine conditioning with the notion that winning a sporting event is worth traumatic brain injury; reifying the warrior narrative (Anderson, 2012). This cycle is repeated by sports journalists and major media on a regular basis. The warrior narrative is perpetuated by journalists, commentators, broadcasters, fans, coaches, amongst many other broad groups of people, which may be impacted the large portion of males and former athletes that compose the majority of sports media staffs. In terms of hegemonic masculinity representations by media across sports, several themes have emerged.

Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) identified 10 recurrent themes of masculinities represented in sports media called ‘The Televised Manhood Formula’, which functions as a master narrative. After 23 hours of sports coverage and 722 commercials, Messner, Dunbar and Hunt (2000) developed ten themes of masculinity features constructed in sports. Some overlap with the five features discussed by Trujillo (1991) but add to the distinguishing features of masculine hegemony in sports. Of Trujillo’s (1991) ten masculine themes, this paper will focus on his themes that sports is a man’s world, aggressive players earn praise, but nice guys finish
last, boys will be (violent) boys, give up your body for the team, sports is war, and show some guts! Aggression in sports representations of masculinities shows the negative consequences of playing “soft,” where aggressors are rewarded for being a “killer on the court” or having an “assassin’s mentality.” Messner (1992) and Trujillo (1995) provide examples of framing the male body as a weapon of aggression in ways detrimental to the health of NFL players. Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) discuss the portrayal of violence by sports media representations that frames cussing, near-fights, threats of bodily harm, and risk taking behavior as “reprehensible but also expected,” referring to violence almost as an expectation for masculinity in sports. Trujillo (1991) developed five distinguishing features of hegemonic masculinity which he examined in print and television representations of Nolan Ryan; 1) physical force and control, 2) occupational achievement, 3) family patriarchy, 4) frontiersman, and 5) heterosexuality.

Across mediated masculine themes it is evident that the male dominance of sports media, the perpetuation of the hegemonic masculinity through mediated sports representations, and the praising of the warrior narrative by sports commentators serves to reinforce an economic model that benefits various media outlets, coaches, owners, but not the players. Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) relate gender relations to what they call the “sports/media/commercial complex” adding commercials as a third dimension onto the work of Jhally (1989) who argued the “sports-media-complex” is a conglomerate of the mutual interdependence between sports organizations, media outlets, and sponsors in a way that exploits labor in the interest of a for-profit motive. The sports media, whether intentionally or not, controls how its industry is represented, but does so to solidify its capitalistic value while ensuring the industry does not change.
The sports media controls how players’ performances of masculinity are framed, which, in turn, influences what voices are heard and muted, what is the norm and the other, and how the audience will consume or experience the story. In the case of NFL players, this specific form of suicide has the potential to disrupt dominant narratives about masculinity and health in the NFL and thereby create space for muted voices to be heard. Without media coverage, the act of suicide is a nonevent because media publicity offers former NFL athletes the opportunity to empower themselves as players on the issue of player health and safety by generating sympathy, providing them with a voice, and thus expanding the “otherness” of masculinity in sports. This means players are somewhat dependent on the media for power which forces them to pay a price in order to join the media loop, either through sacrificing their identity or, occasionally, their legitimacy (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Anderson (2012) analyzed narrative themes of U.S. print media’s contestation of Aaron Rodgers’ self-withdrawal from a football game following a concussion and discussion with veteran teammate Donald Driver. It is difficult to account for the rapidly emerging research on NFL related head trauma, but it may serve as an academic and cultural awakening of viewing concussions not as “getting your bell rung” but as serious, life debilitating injuries (Anderson, 2012). As these emerging studies are consistently showing, less significant head trauma is now showing to be more significant than initially thought.

The male body is used by media to construct masculinity, whether emphasizing being shot or stabbed is a badge of honor, that facing death is nothing, or even that sports do not idolize people who are afraid. For example, if men are expected to not display emotion or pain, depression becomes an unacceptable norm (Addis, 2003). Media representations of these masculine tenants play a role in how the cultural construction of hegemonic masculinity is
disseminated, especially the warrior-narrative in football. The warrior narrative’s dominance throughout sports institutions functions as a code of disciplinary power by players to uphold these dominant constructions of masculinity and health in sports. The final section of the literature review deals with public dialogue about these issues, and the potential for suicide to open up public discussion regarding head trauma in football. The goal is to relate the aggressive, violent nature of masculinity in football to the need for increased public dialogue on help-seeking awareness of players, making it evident to players that they are making serious health choices when they decide to play.

**Epideictic Rhetoric, Agonistic Dialogue, and Suicide**

In this case, the act of suicide by Junior Seau highlights the changing construction of hegemonic masculine identity in football, where the suicide is an explicit criticism that seeks to take control of the changing power relations. The purpose of this section is to review the role of epideictic rhetoric in ascribing moral attributions to suicide, and the potential for recovering hidden conflicts in dialogue about health risks in the NFL.

The narratives regarding suicide and subsequent memorial services function as epideictic rhetoric. Aristotle identified epideictic as his third type of oratory in Rhetoric. Epideictic performances designate a class by praising and blaming in a way that casts actions as noble or disgraceful (Chase, 1961). The interest is in the performance, making the audience both judges and spectators. The goal of epideictic rhetoric is to delight the audience, but epideictic rhetoric contains both power of content and the style of the speaker. Sullivan (1993) claims epideictic rhetoric functions within homogeneous cultures to reinforce adherence to commonly held values through agencies of praise and blame, citing Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1979). Praise celebrates the existing order by magnifying the virtue of the subject being eulogized and thus the
cultural ideal rather than evaluating the argument of a certain side (Sullivan, 1993). Epideictic rhetoric produces consensus or orthodoxy, meaning it is something individuals recognize and share amongst others in the culture (Sullivan, 1993).

Looking at it from the standpoint of those who are not members of the orthodoxy, epideictic rhetoric can be seen as hegemonic because it is a form of communication lauding the dominant ideology of the culture (Sullivan, 1993 citing Poulakos, 1987). In the case of this paper’s research on the NFL, epideictic rhetoric is used to create, maintain, and celebrate masculinities by sports media. The suicides by former players also function as an epideictic criticism of the hegemonic masculinity praised by the warrior narrative employed by sports media. Suicides can be tools for blaming institutions, making them potential forms of resistance. In fact, the act of suicide by former players can be interpreted as ascribing moral responsibility to the NFL because of its blatant conflict of interests that generates millions in revenue by valorizing and simultaneously reinforcing risky help-seeking behavior. Research must look at praise and blame as means of persuading unification, but also how location and who/what is left out impact the disunity caused by the rhetorical situation.

In terms of dialogic inquiry, the suicides challenge people to see the other-ness of football players as men not just weapons, with the hope of making these taken-for-granted assumptions of masculinity realized where every person recognizes their role as both an observer and participant in enacting these socio-cultural norms of masculine identity. The suicides make the topic more approachable and less defensive, generates awareness needed to enter into a “shared field of inquiry” (Isaacs, 2001, p. 729). According to Isaacs (2001) “Human experience is dominated by idols – by representations that are taken as literally valid, even though they can be seen to have evolved over time” (Isaacs, 2001, 733). NFL players and athletes in general, are
cultural idols of masculinities, and in death they martyrs of hegemonic masculinity. The Seau suicide tries to operationalize the notion of idols and the field of inquiry by trying to cause patterns of thought and conversation that challenge the hegemonic masculinity narrative.

The issue of head trauma in sports is systematically distorted by the “warrior-narrative” in sports, because it is “a claim that cannot be brought to an open dispute… and where corporate control perpetuates a false consensus” that the members view as normal and part of their self-construction (Deetz, 1992a, p. 171-176). Deetz (1992a) investigates systematically distorted communication to critique hegemony and open up power formations to question their legitimacy. By examining how language, discourse and identities are constituted in localized contexts, a critical dialogic perspective stresses the significance of difference and revealing taken-for-granted-assumptions to subvert dominant power relations (Deetz, 1992a).

Dialogue can be defined in a variety of ways. This paper will focus on both a Bakhtinian view of dialogue as an everyday aspect of interaction entailing the voice of otherness in language (Barge & Little, 2002) and also the view that dialogue is a means for marginalized voices to create an open forum for change with the goal of social change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, Friere 1970; Hammond et al., 2003). Although resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity and the relationships of power in sports may involve activism, argumentation and contention, we can view such efforts as dialogic at a social level to the degree that such efforts create space to question dominant power relations and articulate the perspectives of marginalized groups (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012).

Ganesh and Zoller (2012) elaborate on three perspectives of dialogue, and this paper will focus on the agonistic perspective that “facilitates a pragmatic approach to dialogue by highlighting shifting relationships of power, identity, and vulnerability, while simultaneously
paying attention to questions of justice and social and material needs” (p. 77). According to Ganesh and Zoller, agonistic perspective values conflict as inherent in social change, focusing on opportunities to subvert dominant power relationships (p. 77). As Gergen, Gergen, and Barrett (2004) state, dialogue “may enable authority to be challenged, multiple opinions to be expressed, or taken-for-granted realities to be deliberated” (Cited by Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p 77). This notion demonstrates the fluidity of masculinities as constantly vying for dominance in given contexts, rather than a fixed entity.

The suicide by Junior Seau represents the potential to facilitate postmodern dialogue, where the suicide functions epideictically as activism, criticizing the practices of the NFL on the issue of voice in player safety much like the Japanese samurai’s act of kanshi. This act exemplifies the diachronic and synchronic perspectives of agonistic dialogue outlined by Ganesh and Zoller (2012). The former recognizes how “one-way” forms of communication, like narrative, argument, and persuasion, make way for or alternate with attempts at openness (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 78). The use of suicide by former NFL players like Seau critiques the NFL’s openness and obvious conflict of interests that influence players to put their health on the line for the sake of athletic competition. Although it may be difficult to equate a death with dialogue, as the player’s voice is literally silenced, like the Japanese kanshi, the communication surrounding suicide can function as epideictic activism that becomes an important component of public dialogue. Stern-Gillet (1987) describes the “responsibility-ascribing” function of suicide. The difference between suicide and martyrdom is the attribution of moral responsibility from the individual that took their own life to the moral responsibility of another like a situation, government or institution. The suicides by NFL players can be interpreted as martyrdom in response to the obvious conflict of interest the NFL in monitoring head trauma. These players’
suicides call for collaborative advocacy by former players to call for collaborative inquiry into the research of head trauma in the NFL.

The second perspective of agonistic dialogue is the synchronic perspective, which understands the confrontational tactics employed by activists as dialogic when they open up space to question taken-for-granted assumptions and begin dialogue about social change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). The specific form of suicide enacted by former NFL players like Seau demonstrates the unpredictability stressed by the synchronic perspective, because it is (among other things) a tactic of confrontational activism that does not follow the traditional standards of argumentation. The suicides create social awareness and visibility for the issue help-seeking in players’ health as a dilemma of masculine identity that is reinforced by the NFL’s conflict of interest. Like the subaltern groups who spurred more participatory research to genetic research mentioned by Ganesh and Zoller (2012), former players’ suicides spur inquiry into the issue of player safety, using the graphic imagery of their suicides and subsequent publicity as a means of making player health in relation to head trauma a more salient issue (p. 80).

The suicides represent an opportunity to change the meaning of head trauma from old school “bell rung” and “seeing stars” to more medically driven meanings like “mild brain injury” or “severe head trauma” with attendant solutions. The player’s requests to donate their bodies to science create an opportunity to take control of how the narrative is constructed, using the suicide to spur everyday construction with a message from the players trying to emphasize their experience. The Seau suicide calls for collaborative inquiry into the research process of head trauma and player health, calling for research that allows players and researchers who are not paid by the NFL to have input in the process.
Silke (2006) reiterates that in certain historical times suicide could have been viewed as a tool of civic engagement and means of empowering people in the afterlife as a political weapon, such as Cato’s suicide on the shores of Africa 44 B.C. The idea that death could have a larger political impact (which is judged by the victim) than his continued life could is similar to the ritual suicide by Japanese samurai as either setsujoku, avoiding the disgrace of enemy capture, and kanshi, suicide protesting the action of a superior (Silke, 2006).

Silke (2006) explains how kanshi was used by a samurai to draw attention to the “depth of their belief that his or her superior was engaged on a mistaken course.” Hunger strikes function similarly as prolonged suicide attempts, which benefited their respective social movements by demonstrating the commitment of protesters and by garnering media attention to help propel their argument to mainstream discussions. The act of suicide epideictically blames the NFL by challenging the normalcy of hegemonic masculinity while reducing the vulnerability of others to context issues of masculinity and help-seeking in football (Cruz-Ramos & Cruz-Valdivieso, 2011). The suicide draws media attention, which is then disseminated by opinion leaders and in everyday conversation. This creates a field of inquiry where alternative voices, alternative to the dominant voice of the NFL and warrior narrative that reinforces masculine hegemony, can criticize the role of the NFL openly, bringing about criticism, questions of litigation, and calls for a need in policy reform based on research.

Seven former and current NFL players, and one 21 year old former collegiate player who never suffered a documented concussion, have committed suicide in the past two years. Four suicides in the past year and a half alone were self-inflicted gunshots to the stated request that the players’ brain tissue be examined by sports-concussion specialists. This specific form of killing one’s self by preserving brain tissue for research engages media and opinion leaders to have
everyday conversations about the topic of head trauma in the NFL with the hope of maintaining open dialogue and including a wider range of voices beyond that of the NFL’s given the well documented conflict of interests. When the players commit suicide they do so with the apparent intention of having political consequences, which is why they make explicit instructions to have their brain donated for research on the topic. The deliberation process of the NFL on concussions has a conflict of interest where the medical personnel have a financial stake in benefitting the NFL as their job-provider. The NFL picks the authorities of their concussion committees, and has few opportunities for neutral or outside scrutiny. Media dialogue may move this discussion from homogeneous to heterogeneous by giving voice to the muted group, the players. The act of suicide by Seau and former players mobilizes local and national communities to discuss the issue while facilitating opinion leaders to lead in the discussion as well (Cruz-Ramos & Cruz-Valdivieso, 2011).

The goal of this act is to bring together a large group of people in a short amount of time, encouraging discussion of the issue, which is the telos of Rojas, Shah, JaeHo, Schmierbach, Keum, and Gil-de-Zuñiga’s (2005) concept of “media dialogue”. Media dialogue refers to engaging many people in dialogue through the use of media content as a springboard for discussion, civic engagement, and political participation, which assumes the media provides accurate information, a variety of opposing viewpoints, and a call to action (Rojas et al., 2005). Media dialogue seeks to achieve increased knowledge and efficacy in order to help citizens differentiate between individual and group interests, while empowering them to relate these interests to broader notions of public good, which ultimately helps them express their views, especially differences (Rojas et al., 2005). NFL players who committed suicide were trying to use media content as a way of initially encouraging dialogue through the two-step flow of
communication that followed the act of taking their own life. This demonstrates how suicide is not limited to the self of the deceased. In the case of NFL players specifically taking their lives by preserving their brains, suicide functions as a dialogic act that tries to explore how meaning is constructed, and how “otherness” is used to “reclaim conflicts, resist closure, and open new opportunities” (Deetz and Simpson, 2004).

Mutuality can develop in temporary moments, which is what Seau and other NFL players do with their suicides. The context of the suicides reclaims the conversation, giving players the power, creating temporary moments where change is possible (Cisnna and Anderson, 1998). The media may individualize the otherness to Seau or former players who have committed suicide similarly, but the suicides may function dialogically as a way of taking control and emphasizing the need to address the issue of head trauma and masculinity in the NFL on a larger scope.

Media provides a way to communicate knowledge through information dissemination while providing opportunities for participation (McLeod & Scheufele, 1999). McLeod and Scheufele (1999) claim higher status individuals, like opinion leaders or athletes, are more persuasive and tend to have greater political awareness, skill, resources, and thus influence. The Seau suicide is a mainstream news story, not just a sports story, which helps his message of martyrdom reach more people while simultaneously validating the position and making it worthy for people to support him, especially influential individuals (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Without media coverage, the suicide would likely fail to mobilize or influence anybody, because the media helps make the conflict more public. Media publicity offers former NFL players opportunities to improve their power on the issue of player health by generating sympathy for players, providing them with a voice in the media, and thus expanding the otherness (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).
Players are partly dependent on the media for power, especially because movement actors do not receive natural high standing like elected officials, which forces them to pay a price to join the media loop, their identity and sometimes their legitimacy (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). The power dependency on the media also means that media members have the power of framing the meaning when the events are reported as a story. Essentially, the media controls how activism is perceived, how the missing voice or other-ness is constructed, and determine how the audience will consume or experience it (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Journalists are gatekeepers of meaning because they decide how events are framed, and thus experienced (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 119).

Fursich (2002) cites Campbell and Carey (1991) saying media is “beyond simply transmitting information, journalists establish the boundaries of civic discourse, normalcy and common sense” (p. 59). Fursich (2002) explains Foucault’s (1995) focus on “the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern [western] society” where the “‘will to knowledge’ is always intrinsically connected to power that shows its discursive face in the institutionalized definition of what is normal by constantly reinforcing ‘exclusions’ (taboo, true-false, etc.)” (p.59-63). This paper seeks to show how Junior Seau’s suicide challenges this normalcy by breaking down the construction of masculinity based on the media’s epideictic praise or blame of hegemonic characteristics.

The suicides cross roles and functions of players in professional contexts, bringing a more personal invitation using graphic, humanizing imagery to change the relationships people have with players. In some senses, the suicide reclaims agency of players in that these acts of taking life are a way of trying to make things happen, a way of trying to control variables in the field of inquiry and how to call for accurate representation of voice and experience (Cissna &
Anderson, 1998). This specific form of suicide as encouraging dialogue, according to Cissna and Anderson (1998) citing King (1992), emphasizes the small, silent, muted voiced “who are struggling to speak” that emerge in moments of dialogue. The suicides try to change the meaning of head trauma from old school “bell rung” and “Seeing stars” to more medically driven meanings like “mild brain injury” or “severe head trauma.” Suicides by former players are a way of trying to take control of how the masculine narrative is constructed and understood, using the suicide to spur everyday construction with a message from the players trying to emphasize their experience on the issue and not just that of the NFL.

Only through encounters with radical difference does transformation become possible, and only through interaction can meaning and understanding be changed (Deetz and Simpson, 2004). These dialogic encounters do not occur regularly in daily life because systems of domination usually preclude genuine conversation by limiting difference (Deetz and Simpson, 2004). The NFL’s interests systematically preclude the voice of players and intentionally question the validity of studies that give them voice. The act of suicide is attempting to “transform quality of conversation and thinking behind it” (Isaacs, 1993).

Isaacs (1993) sees dialogue as a discipline of collective thinking, but dialogue does not try to rationally eliminate options, rather include all of them. Dialogue helps people learn how to think together, instead of problem solving, in order to reveal the taken-for-granted process of assumption making, known as “tacit knowledge” (Isaacs, 1993). The act of suicide by former NFL players seeks to tap into these tacit thoughts to increase insight and challenge normalcy of the hegemonic masculine identity of the culture. Therefore, dialogue centers on the notion that it is better not to hide differences, but let them be explored.
Methodological Considerations

Narratives surrounding the death of Junior Seau construct the meaning of his suicide. Narratives regarding his suicide may represent disciplinary discourse that reinforces hegemonic forms of masculinity and relations of power, or may resist hegemonic discourses to open space for critical question and alternative articulations of masculinity. This chapter expands upon critical discourse, applies Foucault’s interpretations to discuss narratives and power, justifies the selection process for included resources, and introduces the analysis process in terms of Seau’s suicide and the criticism included in the selected media.

The critical discourse perspective focuses on how certain meanings, identities, relationships, and structures legitimize, normalize and privilege dominant discourse (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). Narratives are a means of attributing causality to seemingly disconnected events, and within organizations are sites of struggle where various voices are vying to “fix” meaning in a way that best serves their interests (Harter, 2009). A critical-interpretative method examines micro-level performances of narratives and discourses to show how they reproduce, adapt, or resist larger scopes of discourse, where “grand” discourses and archetypal narratives construct and objectify subjects to subvert individual power relations. Mumby (1987) performed a critical-interpretive analysis of organizational narratives to demonstrate how the taken-for-granted assumptions referenced in organizational narratives perpetuate and benefit the interests of the dominant group.

Narratives of Seau close off or limit alternative interpretations of dominant meanings of masculinity and health risks associated with football, discursively restrict alternatives, and strategically frames the discussion of Seau and health risks in football in a way that prevents organizational change and reinforces the dominant meanings to avoid critical reflexivity. Deetz’
(1992) concept of systematically distorted communication combines Foucault’s (1979) concept of disciplinary power and subjectification as well as Habermas’ (1981) theory of open communication as a means of social change. Ultimately, the dominant, taken-for-granted power relations are discursively and systematically distorted through everyday communication.

A critical perspective shows how narratives construct, normalize and legitimize dominant interests. When dealing with power and resistance, a critical-interpretive approach to gender relations is an appropriate theoretical framework to deconstruct the dominant meanings that function as techniques of control and resistance. In this approach, communication, particularly storytelling, is the vehicle used by individuals to constitute their material reality. In other words, the way that dominant interests are legitimized, normalized, and perpetuated through storytelling is then applied to actual life events in a way that materializes critical concepts and influences perspective.

This paper conducts a critical textual analysis of print media articles and transcribed speeches involving the suicide or memorial of Junior Seau. This study examines 35 news articles from a variety of sources (both online and print), one transcribed radio interview between Ohio-sports radio host Ken Broo and Atlanta attorney Mike McGlamry who represents the players in the negligence suit against the NFL on the topic of head trauma, player safety and Junior Seau, and eight transcribed texts of speakers from Junior Seau’s “celebration of life.”

The news articles studied for this thesis were selected because of their circulation and viewership based on a sample of articles containing the key words “Junior Seau” following his suicide. The articles represent a comprehensive balance between sports-centered media coverage and mainstream media coverage of the head trauma debate. The articles selected focus on specific events regarding Junior Seau: beginning with his suicide on May 2, 2012, through
January 23, 2013 when his family sued the NFL and Riddell Helmets on the grounds of wrongful death. USA Today, The New York Times, and Los Angeles Times were all included because of their readership. The Internet articles were chosen based on their in-depth coverage of American football, which included ESPN, Sports Illustrated, Yahoo Sports, Fox Sports, AOL Sports, and CBS Sports. These are compared and aligned with articles from TMZ, Deadspin, and Pro Football Talk that are non-traditional sports media websites among the most popular sources for online blogs or their specific emphasis on professional football. The radio interview, on May 5th 2012 just three days after Seau committed suicide, where an Ohio sports radio host interviewed the attorney representing the players in the pending class action lawsuit against the NFL, was chosen because it was broadcast three days following Junior Seau’s suicide, it detailed the player’s legal perspective, and it is a source that demonstrates how the radio media framed the head trauma debate. The eight speakers at Seau’s “Celebration of Life” on May 11th, 2012 were selected to accurately represent Seau’s memorial service in its entirety where storytelling was used to epideictically praise and blame certain behaviors of masculinity within the hegemonic warrior-narrative discourse.

These texts represent important articulations of the meaning of Seau’s suicide. A critical lens is used to understand the degree to which this discourse reinforces or challenges dominant social formations. I used the framework outlined in the literature review and the research questions to conduct a thematic analysis. In particular, this thesis examines: narratives of praise, blame, and avoidance, masculine ascribing discourse, and framing of health risks in football. The focus is on elements of praise and blame within the warrior-narrative discourse that are consistent with epideictic rhetoric. I used a critical perspective to examine how masculinity is discursively framed, normalized, and reified into the dominant ideology of understanding. By
looking at articles, broadcasts, and speeches, the analysis empowers critical scholars to deconstruct masculine normalizations and investigate the impacts hegemonic masculinity has on culture, and individual’s organizational experience. This thesis looks at how football players make sense of the health risks they take on a regular basis, how organizational and cultural narratives function epideictically, and how the meaning of an archetypal football player is constructed.

Drawing on grounded theory, I developed a thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to question the taken-for-granted assumptions expressed by media and players. I differentiated the discourse based on different interest groups: 1) players perspective, which includes current and former players across generations; 2) the Seau family’s responses; 3) the NFL, comprised of NFL representatives, current and former owners, general managers, coaches and staff that represent the NFL; and 4) media commentators. In the analysis, I examine the degree to which this discourse attributes a cause for Seau’s suicide. In particular, I draw from the epideictic literature to examine what gets praised and blamed in discourse about Seau. I analyzed the text to understand how epideictic narratives reinforce or question dominant constructions of masculinity, including the warrior narrative and its implications for health risks, as well as power relations in the NFL. I identified emergent patterns in the discourse, using Deetz’s (1992) and Clair’s (1993) framework for understanding systematically distorted communication, including avoidance, naturalization, legitimation, and subjectification. I assessed the degree to which the narratives reinforce the dominant constructions of masculinity, football, and injury or challenge these themes by questioning or critiquing them. I seek to understand whether the narratives create space for opening dialogue that question the association of masculinity with violence and health risks, and the inclusion of multiple voices including parents, former players, and those
who advocate for alternate views of masculinity. I also explore whether these alternative masculinities open dialogue while giving voice to others, acknowledge an echoing of suicides (epideictic activism) by other former NFL players, empowering players by acting as a vehicle for their voices by mentioning litigation or the NFL’s conflict of interests. The aim in the analysis section is to identify a) consequences of contradictory masculine narratives in football that create control and cooptation, b) a conflict of interest based on the historical, political, and economic NFL policy and c) how discourses are (re)produced by subjects with certain interests (either football players, coaches or sports media members) to show who formulate and circulate narratives that praise or blame and whether this reinforces or challenges the status quo.

**Research Questions.**

In consideration of the previously reviewed literature and context, the following research questions have been proposed to guide the analysis section:

1. *In Describing Seau’s life and suicide, what do epideictic narratives praise, blame, and/or avoid? How do these narratives construct/define masculinity?*

2. *To what degree did Junior Seau’s suicide create dialogue about the potential costs of masculine identity in NFL players? How do these narratives frame the discussion of health risks in football?*

3. *To what degree does the discussion question dominant power relationships in sports?*

The analysis considers whose voices are heard in the discussion that surrounds this event, and seeks to understand to what degree these voices disrupt dominant assumptions about masculinity and injury. These questions are broad in scope to encompass the wide variety of voices, identities and experiences that are both limited and unbounded by the gendered discourses discussed in the previous literature.
Suicides of NFL players, regardless of intent, potentially disrupt the how health risks and masculinity are understood. The analysis examines the text of eight speakers at the memorial, 35 news articles, eight NFL statements and a radio interview transcript. I analyzed these texts using the critical framework developed in the literature review. Specifically, I examined how epideictic narratives sought to ascribe meaning to Junior Seau’s suicide, and the degree to which these narratives assigned responsibility for the suicide. I also analyzed the texts to understand how responses to the suicide reinforced dominant constructions of masculinity, including the warrior narrative, or challenged dominant depictions of masculinity. Finally, I sought to understand the degree to which these narratives about suicide and masculinity called attention to health risks in football to create an opening for change or reinforced dominant risk narratives. The aim of the analysis is to describe the epideictic narratives employed by various speakers throughout various mediums regarding Junior Seau’s suicide in terms of what is praised, blamed and avoided, in order to assess how these stories help or harm the status quo.

The status quo has a tripartite nature in that the “status quo” in this paper refers to the intersection of masculinity, the warrior narrative, and the current position of the NFL/football on health risks such as head injuries. The portrayal of this status quo changes overtime, depending on who is speaking, what their relationship with the status quo is, and how they articulate the previously mentioned elements of the status quo. It is important to note that certain parts of this status quo are emphasized differently based on how they represent or undermine the dominant understandings people have. For instance, the NFL does make changes in the interest of player safety, which undermines the NFL’s image of not caring about player safety and selling violent,
health risks through various conflicts of interest, but these changes do little to the historically dominant power structures of the NFL and ownership or contemporary discourses about masculinities like the warrior narrative. This example demonstrates how the relationships among masculinity, the warrior narrative, health risks and the NFL’s power can be complicated, sometimes stressing the change in one aspect to reinforce or challenge this tripartite.

The interconnectedness of the status quo led to the grouping of themes based on four categories of comparison. This chapter proceeds by examining the discourse of former and current players, Seau’s family, NFL representatives, and media commentators. The analysis covers four levels divided into sections that either reinforce the status quo or challenge the status quo: 1) The players’ perspective, 2) The family perspective, 3) The NFL/owners perspective regarding Junior Seau, and the final level of the analysis explores 4) The media commenting on sports.

**Player Level Perspective**

**Reinforcing the status quo.**

The first level is the players’ perspective; the analysis begins by exploring the reinforcement of the status quo through avoidance and individualizing blame. The major categories of analysis of reinforcing status quo use the work of Deetz (1992) paired with Clair (1993) to frame the discussion of the status quo in terms of discursively opening or closing discussions to maximize individual responsibility and minimize organizational responsibility, which is evident in what epideictic narratives of Seau’s suicide praise, blame, and avoid.

**Avoidance of suicide and head injury issues.** The first major theme is avoidance. Deetz (1992) defines topical avoidance as the intentional avoidance of specific ideas and topics, which distorts discourse in a way that systematically limits critical discussion. This was evident
especially at the memorial service, but also evident in media coverage of player testimonies. On-field behaviors were praised and framed in a way that distanced it from risk and health consequences. The topical avoidance of health and risks associated with the NFL, masculinity, and football is a common theme throughout various levels, and is most salient when players, coaches, media, and even family praise Seau’s life as a football player. Both through the warrior narrative and what this thesis calls the sensitive/modern warrior narrative, the people that utilize epideictic narratives of praise tend to avoid making any references to his cause of death, brain injuries, or the NFL’s responsibility. Some speakers praise Seau’s accomplishments or celebrate his life in a way that avoids mention of his suicide or his concerns about head trauma. This is not surprising in some sense given the situational demands of eulogizing a person that committed suicide, but this silence in some ways reinforces the status quo.

The first example comes from the memorial service where Hall Of Fame Quarterback, Dan Fouts, speaks of meeting Seau for the first time, described him as a man-child and remembered the pronunciation of his name. The quote reinforces the status quo in terms of masculinity, describing Seau’s physical nature, the violence of football, and its large-scale impact on others, yet does not address how these factors have anything to do with Seau’s suicide, the dominant understanding of health risks caused by football, or the role the NFL plays as an organization perpetuating these power relations:

I was asked to present the Parade All-American award to this 18-year old man-child… But before we took the stage, Junior came to me and said ‘there are a lot of Raider fans here’ but he said ‘don’t worry I got your back.’ And how many guys has he said that to over the years. So I wanted to make sure I pronounced his name correctly I asked him how do you say your name? He said “It is Se-au, because when I tackle someone they say “ow”. And then he smiled, ah what a smile huh? Ever present and what a lasting image that smile is. Junior left many lasting images in the mind of football fans over his remarkable 20 year career. We are all familiar with the stats, we are all familiar with the pro-bowls, and all the great things he did on the field, but he was more than just the
numbers. He was the ultimate leader, the ultimate teammate. (Dan Fouts from Memorial Service, Para #2)

The previous example initially reinforces the warrior narrative by highlighting and glorifying violence, while simultaneously praising his dedication to the game. The players typically praise Seau in a way that either ignores issues of risk and masculinity altogether by humanizing his more sensitive, personal side rather than focusing on the more violent, player side, or by simply reinforcing the warrior narrative directly.

In the next example Vice President of the Denver Broncos and former player John Elway focused solely on occupational achievements and used war-like language to describe Seau as playing football “the way it was meant to be played,” reinforcing the warrior narrative through naturalization to discursively limit alternatives, but also avoid the topic of health risks in relation to Seau or the NFL. Deetz (1992) defines naturalizing similarly to Clair’s (1993) concept of reification in that it is a means of framing a discussion to limit alternative by positing the hegemonic position as inevitable, biological or natural, thus unquestionable:

I had the pleasure of playing against Junior for many years. He played the game the way it was meant to be played. We shared a lot of laughs from our AFC West battles when I saw Junior before he was inducted into the Chargers HOF in November. Junior was a true competitor and a special player. My heartfelt condolences go out to the Seau family (San Diego Chargers (2012). "Statements Regarding the Passing of Junior Seau." Chargers.com)

The second aspect of avoidance involves praising the softer, more sensitive aspect of the player to humanize the warrior. By stressing relatively gender neutral or even feminine characteristics such as leadership and friendliness, some players simply avoided questions about why Seau killed himself and how it may be related to injuries sustained during the game. The first example of this, stated by New Orleans Saints’ Guard Eric Olsen, makes Seau’s violent
nature more acceptable by creating a relatable character, a friend whose violent nature is naturally acceptable:

… at the end of one of the days he [Seau] challenged anyone to a 1 on 1. Being one of the ‘big’ kids, I was volunteered by my buddies and went up in front of the whole camp to face this monster of a man. Shaking in my cleats, he gave me a wink before a coach gave the cadence. He let me pancake him. And he sold it too. I can’t even tell you how good I felt at that moment; it changed me forever. The whole camp cheered for me, a chubby kid that didn’t know if he even liked football. From then on I was addicted. (San Diego Chargers (2012).”Statements Regarding the Passing of Junior Seau.” Chargers.com)

The previous quote stresses more sensitive characteristics, like friendliness and concern for others, which makes it is easier to accept the violent, physical warrior that he receives so much occupational praise for because of the distance created. This not only legitimizes the warrior narrative indirectly, it also naturalizes a softer masculinity that compliments the violent nature of the player-warrior’s self-sacrifice. This discourse distances the violent nature of football and the health risks that entails.

The final example of this is a story told by Billy Ray Smith, praising Seau for looking out for his teammate and showing compassion. This quote frames the masculine-culture of the NFL in terms of monetary success, humorous pranks, and the need to embarrass others, while not addressing health or risks at all. Praising these arguably positive aspects of masculinity ultimately distances itself from the violence and risks associated with football:

I cannot tell you how humbled I am to be before you today so we can talk about my old friend, teammate, Junior Seau, starts with actually with my old quarterback, teammate, Dan Fouts. In 1983 I was the number one choice and I was out at training camp and Dan pulled up next to me in his Mercedes Benz, beautiful car, rolls down the window, “Hop in rookie.”...So we drive to a restaurant, get out of the car, walk in. All my teammates are there. You gotta be kidding me. The entire team is in this restaurant. It was unbelievable. We eat, we drink we have a great time. I excuse myself. I have to go to the restroom for a moment, and when I come back, every one of my teammates, gone. (Crowd laughs and cheers)

One thing was there the check. Okay. So I pay the check, and it was pretty huge. By the way, Dan gave me the ride to the dinner, so I was late getting back to training camp, and
that is another thousand dollar fine for being late to bed check. But uh, it’s team building, that’s what that is. (mild laughs)
Flash forward seven years, it is my turn…We have a great dinner, an unbelievable dinner, and then we tell Junior that he will have to pay for all these steaks that all of these linebackers have eaten during the evening. Not a problem, Junior pulled out the card, paid the tab with a smile on his face, that unbelievable smile, and we kind of feel like we’ve been robbed because he is not mad or anything like that you know…The next morning when we all come back into training camp, I have the entire female staff of the San Diego Chargers running up to me and thanking me so much. I can’t figure out why. Turns out June Bug and I lockered next to each-other, and knowing that he was about to pay the steaks he grabbed my credit card and charged flowers to every single female.
(Billy Ray Smith para 1-3 at memorial)

Praising the player for their occupational success and physical strength reinforces and naturalizes the violent nature of the NFL by defining masculinity through the warrior narrative of toughness, violence, and self-sacrifice that is worth emulating. This is also a way of using praise to avoid negative aspects associated with football such as health risks and violence.

Defending football. The second theme within the player level analysis is defending football which is done through the subjectification of experience, disqualification, and making suicide, depression, substance abuse, and head trauma in sports all matters of personal choice and individual decision-making. Deetz defines subjectification as a means of isolating an issue through interpretive mechanisms, ensuring social issues are understood as private issues. In the case of Seau, subjectification is evident by treating the structural problem of health issues related to football as an individual problem. This removes culpability from the NFL, technology or culture by making it about private blame. Individualizing blame towards the victims, in this case the players, uses subjectification and defends the tradition of the NFL. The first example of this comes from Fouts, who blames Seau for not seeking out help, stating:

Now, I know this is an evening of celebration, but there is no hiding the fact that Junior’s passing is a tragedy. It’s a tragedy for his family, his countless friends, for his many teammates and coaches, a tragedy for the community of San Diego, for charger fans and football fans everywhere, and with all tragedies there are lessons to be learned. Lessons
that must be learned by all of us. The lesson here is if you need help, get help. It is out there. It is out there. All you have to do is swallow your pride and ask for it. We all need help at times. We can all do a better job of helping each other. We must do a better job of communicating, of sharing our feelings, our doubts, our fears. If you need help, or recognize the signs of a friend that needs help, do something about it. Help is out there for all of us. Thank you. (Dan Fouts from Memorial Service, Para #2)

Fouts implies that Seau is at least partially, if not fully, at fault for his own death, essentially claiming Seau should have “swallowed his pride.” Here, blame is used to critique masculinity as an individual performance, but Fouts avoids discussing how dominant masculine discourses like the warrior narrative (“Say Ow”) and the NFL play a role in perpetuating this failure to seek help.

The second example of defending football utilizes disqualification, which Deetz (1992) defines as denying the right to express alternative interpretations to power relations by framing these alternatives as lacking expertise or the proper qualifications to have voice. Former running back and current ESPN Analyst, Merrill Hoge, defends the tradition of NFL and disqualifies former player, Kurt Warner, for attempting to blame health risks associated with football by framing as an ungrateful attack on a “game that has been so good to him.” The two are debating about the the potential dangers of playing football following Seau’s suicide. Warner is framing the discussion in terms of unnecessary health risks facing parents who are forced to decide whether to let their children play football or not. Warner tells Hoge that as a former player and parent he would not want or allow his children to play football. This logical use of framing health risks from football in terms of medical risks for children is disqualified by Hoge:

Having been through it and understanding what the ramifications can be and the physical toll the sport takes, there's no way I can't be concerned as a parent," Warner said. "There's a lot of risk."
Several former players, including Pittsburgh Steelers fullback and current ESPN analyst Merrill Hoge, have criticized Warner for similar comments. "I think it's irresponsible and unacceptable," Hoge said on ESPN. "He has thrown the game that has been so good to him under the bus. (Bordow, 2012)
The final example of this comes from former NFL Safety, John Lynch, who softens the violent nature of Seau to a “buddy,” a term of endearment, then employs this description of Seau to defend the NFL, using Seau’s image to restore the NFL. The following quote contains an indirect reference to the health issues facing the NFL/football, which is the only example of epideictically praising Seau’s modern warrior masculinity with a reference to health. Yet this narrative of Seau frames him and the description praising him as a means of bringing people together while avoiding his cause of death:

So I want to hear everybody right now, we just, we’ve all heard, anyone that knew Junior, knew he liked to say “buddy”. That was his deal. So on three I want everyone to call up to Junior “buddy” on three alright? Here we go. Now one, two, three, “Buddy” (crowd says with Lynch). I love it, and I know he is smiling. (Cheers) You know football has taken a beating here as of late, but I gotta [sic] tell you it is a wonderful sport, and it is a wonderful game, and I think the thing I love most about football, that I do love the most about football is this: that it brings people together. It brings people together from Oceanside, from Chula Vista, from Escondido, from all over because they love something, the San Diego Chargers, or they hate the Raiders, and that’s always been a beautiful thing to me. People from different races, teammates from different races, people from different places, you all come together for one common goal. I think no one represented this better than Junior Seau. (John Lynch at memorial para #7-8)

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that players reinforce the status quo of the violent nature of football and warrior narrative through avoidance, subjectification of experience to individualize blame, disqualification, and a modernized warrior narrative that naturalizes the violence with an interpersonal side. The majority of players who reinforce the status quo were older or retired, a significant insight gained from this analysis.

**Challenging the status quo.**

As this section continues, it will also become evident that the majority of challenges were made by younger or current players. In the analysis of the memorial service, there is no significant challenge of this status quo. The generational and situational differences are
indicative in the epideictic narratives themselves. Some themes throughout the analysis emerged through repeated patterns that forced their creation, specifically critical self-reflection in this section and apologia in the third level regarding the NFL’s response to Seau’s suicide. The younger generation of players praise critical self-reflection, blame of the NFL, and masculine nature of football culture through their epideictic narratives regarding Seau.

**Critical self-reflection.** The first example of challenging the status quo involves critical self-reflection by players that subverts all the elements of the status quo (masculinity, the warrior narrative, NFL’s power relations, and understanding of health risks) simultaneously. Players associate Seau’s suicide with health risks and individual behavior change that they did not have prior to his death. They do not focus on blaming Seau’s individual choices, but praise Seau for making them more aware and critical of football’s masculine culture and its possible health risks, both individually and collectively:

Even less-experienced NFL players in their mid-20s were forced to face some complicated questions in recent weeks.
"You can't avoid thinking about how the game might be affecting your future. Even something as small as forgetting where I put my keys. I know everyone does that from time to time, but am I forgetful because of football? Have I already done damage to my brain playing the game?" Packers tight end Tom Crabtree, who's played two seasons in the league, wrote in an email.
"When you see a guy we all assume to be so happy and successful take his own life, it's disturbing. I worry about how happy I am with life right now and wonder if the damage is too much to overcome. ... It's like these brain injuries really turn you into another person," Crabtree wrote. "It slowly chops away at your happiness. Nothing you can do about it."

He was one of a dozen players who, unprompted, mentioned brain disease or concussions in connection with Seau, even though there has been no evidence of either with the linebacker, who played from 1990 to 2009. (Associated Press.(2012) "Seau’s Suicide Prompts Worries about Post-NFL Life." *Fox News*)

The second example is similar to the first because it attributes increased awareness about health risks to Seau’s suicide, but personalizes the possible consequences. It suggests this result is possible for any football player, which should make players think about themselves as more
than a commodity or warrior, but as an individual participating in an activity that increases health risks.

"But it definitely makes you think, as someone who has played this sport, about the damage that can be caused." Explained rookie receiver Mohamed Sanu, chosen by the Bengals in the third round of April's [2012] draft: "You kind of wonder about your safety and your health and wonder if you'll be like that one day."(Associated Press.(2012) "Seau's Suicide Prompts Worries about Post-NFL Life."Fox News)

The final quote shows how the softer, sensitive player can be used to challenge, rather than reinforce, the status quo because it resonates, creating unity and dialogue among players, which presents an opening for critical questioning of health risks.

The difference with Junior for many folks my age or younger is that I played against Junior a bunch. He was a peer. It's more impactful. Not to suggest I had a great friendship with Junior or knew him off the field. I didn't. It's simply closer to home for me than a guy who played in the '70s or '80s," said Pete Kendall, a starting offensive lineman from 1996-2008 for the Seahawks, Cardinals, Jets and Redskins. "All of those kinds of situations are horrible, but Junior's situation probably would have people re-examining things. (Associated Press, 2012)

**Blaming the NFL.** The next theme examines the players' blaming the NFL for not doing enough to support its players, exemplified by Seau, sending mixed messages, and not listening to players calling for change. The best example of this is by current Pittsburgh Steeler Linebacker LaMarr Woodley who blames the current NFL policy which regularly polices drug use, but does not require financial education and personal health policies. This is another instance where a player recognizes the deficit in acknowledgement of post-NFL life struggles that exist for the majority of current players, which makes them think about their futures:

As for money matters, Steelers linebacker LaMarr Woodley, who's heading into his sixth season, said: "I wouldn't say the NFL takes care of players financially for the future. The NFL makes sure this is a drug-free league. You can't use steroids or street drugs; they're testing every week for that. But in terms of taking care of your finances, it's not something they push every week like they do with drugs. There's not a push that makes it mandatory for players to learn how to manage their money, or to set up life insurance or 401Ks. (Associated Press. (2012) "Seau's Suicide Prompts Worries about Post-NFL Life."Fox News)
The next example challenges the NFL on conflict of interest; it is here that ex-New England Patriot Ted Johnson calls attention to the unseen risks associated with the violent nature of football:

Seau’s death will be harder to set aside. Just five years ago, he was the personification of football toughness, a hard-hitting linebacker whose last name—which he capitalized on to create a Say-Ow clothing line—reflected what he did to quarterbacks. "When football players get dinged, they go back and play,” ex-New England Patriot Ted Johnson told the Lowell Sun in 2007. “You can see [Junior] Seau's arm with the bone broke, ripped out of the skin. But you can't see the damage of a concussion.” Seau, whose gruesome broken arm has been immortalized on YouTube, had no known history of concussions. But given the shaky reliability of NFL injury reports and the supposed dangers of sub-concussive trauma, everyone will surely ask if unseen brain damage caused Seau to shoot himself (Levin, 2012)

**Blame masculine culture of football.** The final theme for the players’ perspective challenges the status quo of masculinity and power relations of football by explaining the NFL’s role and specifically blaming masculine culture for perpetuating a warrior narrative that celebrates risky health decisions as part of its culture. This theme goes beyond critiquing the NFL, calling for a culture change that acknowledges an alternative form of masculinity that expresses emotion and seeks help without the stigmatization associated with it by the dominant warrior narrative of playing through pain:

"It's a matter of a culture change, more so than just creating a program. It needs to be something that's not looked down upon. If a player goes for counseling: 'What's wrong with that guy? Why can't he deal with it?' The NFL and NFLPA can definitely help more, but it also needs to be a culture change," said Camarillo, who holds out hope of continuing his playing career.

"It's just the 'tough guy' mentality," Camarillo said. "We're taught to deal with any type of weakness and fight through it. In the physical world, that works fine with a sprained ankle or something like that. But in the emotional world, it just doesn't work the same."(Associated Press.(2012) "Seau's Suicide Prompts Worries about Post-NFL Life."Fox News)

This final example of challenging the status quo demonstrates several players’ testimonies that blame masculinity for rejecting help-seeking and promoting stoicism while
noting that football culture (and the organizations within that culture) exacerbates these features of masculinity in general, making it an atmosphere where there is no need to learn problem-solving skills because answers are readily available for players. This quote argues that players’ lack of help-seeking skills is due to a dependency on football culture not challenging or encouraging them to develop independence from football, making it difficult to transition to life-after-football, where answers must be sought out:

"It just opens your eyes and makes you more aware of what each other is going through — and ask that extra question, give that extra hug, to make sure there aren't any problems we don't know about."

Matt Bowen, a former defensive back for the Redskins, Bills, Rams and Packers whose last season was 2006, got a telephone call from a college teammate the day Seau died. "I just want to tell you if you're ever down, you're ever depressed, just call me.' He was worried... My buddy from Iowa calling hit home a little bit," Bowen said. "A little doubt creeps into the back of my mind: Well, maybe this could happen to me."

…But players who've spent time in the NFL were split on whether they're properly equipped for what might await down the road. Asked whether the league is doing all it can to take care of players' financial, mental, physical and neurological health, particularly when it comes to having a good life in retirement, 13 veterans or retirees said yes, while 11 said no.

"There's a program for everything, but it can't prepare you for everything. Most people find out about the real world when they're 18 or 19. Ex-NFL players find out about it at 30 or 35," said 39-year-old Jon Kitna, a quarterback for the Seahawks, Bengals, Lions and Cowboys from 1997-2011. "You might think you've got it bad in football, because it can be a grind and you might think meetings are a drag, but the real world gives you a totally different mindset," said Kitna, now teaching algebra and coaching football at the high school he attended in Tacoma, Wash. "There are a lot of programs available, but you have to search for the answers. That's harder for athletes, because they've been given answers their whole life" (Associated Press, 2012)

Although the players’ perspective incorporates both support and opposition for the status quo of masculinity, violence, the warrior narrative and health risks, there is an emphasis on Seau’s suicide as prompting critical self-reflection that in some ways resists the status quo by critiquing the NFL and the masculine culture of football. The players’ perspective highlights the generational difference between younger and older players, where younger players challenge the
status quo more often than older or retired players, and appear to use more discursive mechanisms to challenge the status quo compared to older or retired players. The family perspective is the next level through which the status quo is both supported and challenged.

**Family Responses**

**Reinforcing the status quo.**

The Seau family response is comprised of statements made by Junior’s ex-wife Gina Seau in interviews with the media, statements made by Junior’s mother Louisa Seau to reporters following his suicide, statements made by Junior’s son Tyler Seau to the media and at Seau’s memorial service, as well as public statements made by the Seau family to the media following the discovery of CTE in Junior’s brain post mortem, including the family’s subsequent legal response to sue the NFL. This section will focus on how the narratives about Junior Seau by his family originally reinforce the status quo by explicitly invoking themes related to masculinity through naturalizing the warrior narrative and denying a link between head trauma and suicide.

**Naturalizing the warrior narrative.** The first example of Seau’s family reinforces the status quo through naturalizing the warrior narrative. Seau’s ex-wife recognizes Seau’s concussions but reifies those risks as the nature of the game by praising and valorizing him through the warrior narrative. This quote is also the most cited and salient throughout the media’s depiction of the family’s response to Seau’s suicide. This quote defines masculinity as being a warrior and playing through pain, praises and naturalizes the warrior narrative as “part of the game,” and does not blame anything, including football, the NFL, and health risks associated with football:

However, his ex-wife [Gina Seau] said Seau sustained concussions during his career. "Of course he had. He always bounced back and kept on playing," she said in a phone interview. "He's a warrior. That didn't stop him. I don't know what football player hasn't. 
It's not ballet. It's part of the game."(Associated Press (2012). "Ex-NFLer Junior Seau Found Dead, Police Probe Suicide." CBCnews. CBC/Radio Canada, 02 May 2012)

The initial family response to Seau’s suicide uses masculine discourse to naturalize the warrior narrative while avoiding and denying linkage between head trauma and suicide. This reifies players taking health risks in football and defends the status quo of masculine constructing discourse in NFL by praising the warrior narrative.

**Challenging the status quo.**

Once Seau’s family learned he suffered from CTE following the donation of his brain to research, their narratives shifted from reinforcing to challenging the status quo through themes of questioning the value of football and blaming the NFL. When comparing this shift, what was originally received praise is directly contradicted by questioning the value and justification of the warrior narrative and football. Other groups did not show a change in position based on the findings of CTE.

*Questioning the value of football.* Based on the late diagnosis of CTE following Seau’s suicide, the family’s narratives begin to question the value of football in society due to health risks, emotional issues, and death. In the first example, Seau’s ex-wife blames the NFL for not acting fast enough while their son questions football’s value, asking “[i]s it worth it,” challenging the status quo by framing Seau’s death in terms of health risks and culpability:

Seau’s family told ESPN that they “found solace in the CTE diagnosis because it helped explain some of Seau’s uncharacteristic behavior.”

When asked whether the NFL was slow to embrace the link between football and later-life cognitive decline, Seau’s ex-wife said: “Too slow for us, yeah.”

Seau’s son said the diagnosis “makes me realize he is not invincible.” He then asked rhetorically, “Is it worth it? I’m not sure. It is not worth it to me to not have a dad.” (Anderson, Paul D (2013). "REPORT: Junior Seau Had CTE." NFL Concussion Litigation RSS.N.p., 10 Jan.)
The second example of this includes Seau’s ex-wife questioning the value of football based on the ultimate results of post-NFL suffering and whether the warrior narrative is worth it, framing it based on head injury and the unavoidable health risks. This is a criticism of the masculine and football culture that aligns the warrior narrative solely with football, depicting the separation of player and person as an ultimate shift in identity that, in this case, resulted in tragedy:

Gina Seau said she and her ex-husband expected physical injuries from playing professional football but never thought "you're putting your brain and your mental health at a greater risk."

Junior Seau, she said, was never formally diagnosed with a concussion but routinely complained of symptoms associated with concussions after receiving hits to the head during games and in practices in 20 seasons in the NFL.

"The head-to-head contact, the collisions are just, they're out of control," Gina Seau said.

"He was a warrior and he loved the game," she added. "But ... I know that he didn't love the end of his life."

For the Seaus, football gave them everything and, they believe, has now taken it all away.

Gina Seau said "I think it's a gamble," Gina Seau said. "Just be extremely aware of what could potentially happen to your life."

None of the Seau children play football anymore and their mother is glad of that. (Avila, Jim, Lauren Pearle, and Russel Goldman (2013). "Seau Diagnosed With Brain Disease."ABC News. ABC)

In this example, the family’s statement in the lawsuit against the NFL directly blames them for selling violence while knowing health risks. This is important because the NFL as an organization is blamed legally for individual problems resulting from the culture of football. This challenges NFL policies that reinforce and naturalize the violent warrior narrative while avoiding policy change due to for-profit conflict of interest:

“The NFL knew or suspected that any rule changes that sought to recognize that link (to brain disease) and the health risk to NFL players would impose an economic cost that would significantly and adversely change the profit margins enjoyed by the NFL and its teams,” the Seaus said in the suit.

“It was important to us to get to the bottom of this, the truth,” Gina Seau told the AP then. “And now that it has been conclusively determined from every expert that he had obviously had CTE, we just hope it is taken more seriously. You can’t deny it exists, and
it is hard to deny there is a link between head trauma and CTE. There’s such strong evidence correlating head trauma and collisions and CTE.”
In the final years of his life, Seau went through wild behavior swings, according to Gina and to 23-year-old son, Tyler. There also were signs of irrationality, forgetfulness, insomnia and depression.
“He emotionally detached himself and would kind of ‘go away’ for a little bit,” Tyler Seau said. “And then the depression and things like that. It started to progressively get worse.” (Associated Press (2013)."News." CBS Sacramento.N.p., 23 Jan)

The second narrative in this section captures the direct message Seau’s family sent blaming the NFL for not caring about its players. The family criticizes the NFL for a lack of change to protect against “debilitating brain disease,” and its conflict of interest in its “decades of deception” regarding mental health:

“We were saddened to learn that Junior, a loving father and teammate, suffered from CTE,” the family said in a statement released to the AP. “While Junior always expected to have aches and pains from his playing days, none of us ever fathomed that he would suffer a debilitating brain disease that would cause him to leave us too soon.
“We know this lawsuit will not bring back Junior. But it will send a message that the NFL needs to care for its former players, acknowledge its decades of deception on the issue of head injuries and player safety, and make the game safer for future generations.” Plaintiffs are listed as Gina Seau, Junior’s ex-wife; Junior’s children Tyler, Sydney, Jake and Hunter, and Bette Hoffman, trustee of Seau’s estate. (Associated Press (2013)."News." CBS Sacramento.N.p., 23 Jan)

The family perspective regarding Junior Seau’s suicide changes over time; this is most easily depicted through Seau’s ex-wife’s shifting position. Overall, the entire family shifted from reinforcing the status quo through the naturalization of the warrior narrative and topical avoidance to challenging the value of football and blaming the NFL. It is also significant that, originally, the family denied linkage between health risks and Seau’s suicide, which directly contrasts with the current litigation which blames the NFL for that linkage.

**NFL Level: NFL/Owners Perspective Regarding Seau**

Reinforcing the status quo.
The next level is the NFL’s perspective, which entails NFL representatives’ reactions about Seau divided into sections that reinforce or subvert the status quo. The first section, regarding Junior Seau and the status quo, reinforces the NFL’s conflict of interest in terms of player safety through avoidance and bolstering. Even the NFLPA (P. A. stand for Players’ Association, which is the players’ union) praises Seau’s occupational and masculine successes without linking them to health risks or culpability.

Reifying the warrior narrative and avoidance. The avoidance theme begins by the NFL/Owners praising Seau in terms of a hegemonic ideal, his physical force, occupational success, and performance of masculinity. The first example, a quote from Norv Turner, praises Seau as a pro’s pro, displaying him as a hegemonic ideal worth emulating, which defends the NFL/Owners, avoiding the conversation of head trauma, health risks in football, and Seau’s suicide altogether, stating, “That cliché of being a coach on the field, he was more than that. As I said, he was a mentor for so many people. He taught people how to go about doing their job. How to be a pro. Not everyone has that quality” (San Diego Chargers (2012). "Statements Regarding the Passing of Junior Seau." Chargers.com).

The second example in this section comes from Seau’s memorial service where former San Diego Charger’s Head Coach Bobby Ross, who drafted Seau, praises Seau at the memorial service using the warrior narrative, describing Seau’s adherence to the warrior narrative as “commitment” to self-sacrifice and acknowledging he “gave himself totally and completely”. This naturalizes and legitimizes the warrior narrative as ideal for football. In eulogizing Seau, Ross defends the warrior narrative’s violent role in football and justifies risking severe injury for winning, objectifying Seau as a literal piece of meat. Ross claims this “commitment” was part of
the “program,” that Junior “understood it” and he understood what “commitment meant… giving of your complete self” like a “pig” contributes itself to “bacon and eggs” for breakfast:

He understood the word commitment. We used to talk about commitment a lot in our program. And what commitment meant to us was giving of your complete self. From the bottom of your heels to the top of your head. Junior did that. Yep. He was very special in that way. He gave of himself totally and completely. I’m sure maybe, if you have ever eaten, are saying to yourself where is he going with this? If you ever eaten baiting and eggs, bacon and eggs? Sure you have, great dish. You know, Junior was like the pig. He gave of his complete self. He just didn’t contribute the eggs. Okay. (Bobby Ross from Memorial Service, Para #5)

The third example, delivered by Ross later in his memorial address, addresses Seau by classifying his warrior nature as having a “good time” and something that should be enjoyed—simulating game violence. This is naturalizing the violence in football while avoiding issues of health risks:

He would love to serve us. When offense is running he would jump-in and get on the defensive side of the ball, and boy did he frustrate our offensive coaches. I had a guy named Ralph Freegan who would be up there picking at that mustache, and Junior would come in there and POW! A hit. He’d come up to me and say, “why you letting’ him serve us?” “let him have a good time, he is having fun lets enjoy this.” He didn’t like it because we would never move the ball real well against our own defense. (Bobby Ross from Memorial Service, Para #7)

The fourth example, delivered towards the end of Ross’s memorial address, praises Seau’s occupational achievements, which according to Ross, surpass his athleticism. This naturalizes the occupational masculine frame to defend football as a means of work-related success as part of someone’s identity, avoiding possible consequences associated with football:

Consistent, he practiced the same way he played. People have often asked me, “which is the best game he ever played?” I can’t say because Junior never had a bad game. He never had a bad game, everyone he played was good. (cheers) We all know he was a great player, tremendous athlete, tremendous athleticism, but you know what I think separates Junior from the rest? There are great linebackers in this league now, there are great defensive linemen, there are great players all over. Junior could have been an all-pro at any position, except possibly for quarterback. I know this, after I left they tried him at tightend. He could have been an all-pro. And then one particular game when we played Denver here John and we were short defensive lineman
and I went up to him and said “Junior, you are gonna have to play defensive end this week.” And he came up to me and say “Do you want me to start today?” And sure enough he did, that was the kind of player he was. (Cheers)(Bobby Ross from Memorial Service, Para #9)

Ross’ press release regarding Seau’s suicide emphasizes the hegemonic ideal, the “epitome of what a football player” is, in a way that naturalizes and praises his work ethic while avoiding the head trauma discussion completely:

Junior, to me, was the epitome of what a football player was. The words that come to me are passion for the game. Passion for life. Intensity for the game. Intensity for life. Team player. One of the best I’ve ever been around in that respect. Tremendous team player. Tremendous leader. Tremendous leader on our football team. Love for the game. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave each and every day of practice. Great practice player. One of the absolute best I’ve ever coached at any level. He used to frustrate our offensive coaches from time to time because of intensity at practice and his instincts. A guy that prepared greatly. He was always early in to study film. At the same he was tremendously instinctive. He relied on his instincts. But I believe a lot of those instincts were a result of preparation that he did in film preparation. I don’t know of a player in the National Football League that had a greater effect on the community in which he played, than Junior Seau. (San Diego Chargers (2012). "Statements Regarding the Passing of Junior Seau." Chargers.com)

Topical avoidance by the NFL/Owners reinforces the warrior narrative and hegemonic ideals associated with football in a way that supports the status quo and justifies health risks. The salience of praising Seau avoids the discussion of health risks in football and humanizes the violence while justifying it in a relatable way. The next section will demonstrate how the NFL/Owners utilize apologia to justify, reason, and bolster their position on health risks and football and improve their public appearance.

**Apologia regarding Seau.** The NFL/Owners, using apologia, attempt to shift blame away from themselves and deny any culpability. Apologia is defined by Benoit (1995) as the process of defending the accused, and can incorporate the usage of denial and bolstering in attempt to maintain the status quo, which is specified as reformatory apologia. This narrower fashion of apology utilizes self-defense rhetoric by bolstering its character to subvert, deny or deflect the
charges against its character, such as Richard Nixon’s rhetoric regarding Vietnam and the Watergate scandal (Abelson, 1959; Harrell et al., 1975) This reinforces the violent nature of football and their partnerships. In the first example, the NFL publicly acknowledges their partnerships with the NIH, CDC, and other organizations. The NFL spoke of their partnerships to the Associated Press within hours following news that Seau was diagnosed with CTE, bolstering their continued partnerships in hopes of improving their public appearance and displacing blame based on their commitment to mental and physical health research:

The NFL consistently has denied allegations similar to those in the lawsuit. “The NFL, both directly and in partnership with the NIH, Centers for Disease Control and other leading organizations, is committed to supporting a wide range of independent medical and scientific research that will both address CTE and promote the long-term health and safety of athletes at all levels,” the league told the AP after it was revealed Seau had CTE. (Associated Press (2013)."News." CBS Sacramento p., 23 Jan)

An NFL spokesperson responding to Seau’s CTE findings attempts to strengthen their reputation as dedicated to healthcare and make transgressions or culpability hard to believe. The NFL/Owners are propping themselves up against findings of Junior Seau to defend themselves against attacks in litigation by emphasizing their quality of character and partnerships for research on health problems associated with football. This quote, therefore, is also an example of justification and reformative apologia:

Following the publication of this story, NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy issued the following statement:  "We appreciate the Seau family's cooperation with the National Institutes of Health. The finding underscores the recognized need for additional research to accelerate a fuller understanding of CTE. The NFL, both directly and in partnership with the NIH, Centers for Disease Control and other leading organizations, is committed to supporting a wide range of independent medical and scientific research that will both address CTE and promote the long-term health and safety of athletes at all levels. The NFL clubs have already committed a $30 million research grant to the NIH, and we look forward to making decisions soon with the NFL Players Association on the investment of $100 million for medical research that is committed in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. We have work to do, and we're doing it." (Avila, Jim, Lauren Pearle, and Russel Goldman (2013). "Seau Diagnosed With Brain Disease."ABC News. ABC)
The NFL/Owners regarding Seau’s suicide and CTE findings reinforce the status quo through the utilization of reformative apologia to legitimize their defense and shift blame away from them. The two major themes from the NFL/Owners regarding Junior Seau both reinforce that status quo by avoiding the topic of mental health issues in sports while naturalizing masculine health risks, and by suggesting that the NFL is taking care of the health risks when they do mention these issues.

**Challenging the status quo.**

The majority of discourse by NFL/Owners regarding Seau’s suicide focuses on reinforcing the status quo, while minimal discourse challenges the status quo. Only one theme emerged as challenging the status quo, and that was blaming the NFL. Head Coach Pete Carroll challenges the status quo by blaming the NFL for lack of change, which opens up the discussion of health risks to alternatives discourses that may question the NFL’s dominant power relations, conflict of interest, and emphasize its responsibility as an employer for cultivating such a culture.

**Blame of the NFL.** The sole example of challenging the status quo among leaders of the NFL comes from an article in which Seattle Seahawks Head Coach Pete Carroll blames the organization for not assisting players transition to post-football careers and lives. By framing it in terms of work-life transition, Carroll acknowledged a gap that exists within the current NFL structure, and is appealing for change:

Pete Carroll, coach of the NFL’s Seattle Seahawks, said professional athletes need help making the transition after their playing days are over.
“Getting ready for that is more significant than people think and it’s more difficult being a player of the magnitude and scope that he lived by,” Carroll said of Seau in an interview May 4 on Fox Sports Radio. “These guys need care, and they need consideration and help because it’s such a difficult transition and nobody’s ready for it. And it can really take away a whole reality for some of the guys, and we need to help them as much as we can.” (Lopatto, E., & Novy-Williams, E. (2012) "Seau’s Brain Seen Offering Special Insight Into NFL Hits." BloombergBusinessWeek)

Carroll’s call to action to assist players transitioning to life after football is a limited form of blame which notes that the NFL needs to do more, but it also reframes ex-players’ problems as an ego and money-management issue, a patronization of player issues which still suggests an individualization of blame. This sole representation of the NFL blaming itself reinforces the fact that the NFL/Owners perspective sparingly challenges the status quo in regards to Junior Seau’s suicide. This does potentially open up opportunities for alternative interpretations of health and risk in the NFL because, even though limited, it is still an acknowledgment of blame.

**Media Commenting on Sports Level**

**Reinforcing the status quo.**

For the final level, I examined media commentators’ perspectives. In the first section, I describe how media representatives reinforce the status quo through three major themes: avoidance, individualization of blame, and praising the NFL for changing. Most of these themes reiterate the perspectives from the NFL/Owners level, where the warrior and modern warrior narrative naturalize the violent nature of health risks as part of football while simultaneously avoiding the issue of long-term mental health risks.

**Avoidance.** The first example makes Seau more relatable to the fans while creating distance from the violent nature of football by personalizing the loss and employing sensitizing terms such as buddy or friend. This avoids and distracts the audience from the issues of violence:

Seau called many of those around him "Buddy." He often referred to teammates as "my players."
Seau was voted to a Chargers-record 12 straight Pro Bowls and was an All-Pro six times. "We all lost a friend today," Chargers President Dean Spanos said in a statement. "This is just such a tragic loss. One of the worst things I could ever imagine." (Associated Press (2012). "Ex-NFLer Junior Seau Found Dead, Police Probe Suicide." CBCnews)

The second example begins by praising Seau’s “greatest game,” when he played through a pinched nerve. This excerpt praises the warrior nature of football and glorifies Seau’s self-sacrifice while naturalizing health risks as inherent to football, thus avoiding blame of the NFL and football:

Seau's greatest game may have been in the 17-13 victory at Pittsburgh in the AFC championship game in January 1995 that sent the Chargers to the Super Bowl. Playing through the pain of a pinched nerve in his neck, he spread out his 16 tackles from the first play to the second-to-last. San Diego was routed 49-26 in the Super Bowl by San Francisco. (Associated Press (2012). "Ex-NFLer Junior Seau Found Dead, Police Probe Suicide." CBCnews)

The third example comes from Paul Anderson, a lawyer who recounts his experience of learning about Seau’s death. He repeatedly refers to Seau in terms of the warrior narrative, naturalizing the violence associated with football and suggesting that the hegemonic ideal is worth emulating. This source is attempting to critically analyze Seau’s death and the NFL, but reinforces the status-quio of Seau and the warrior culture of football:

Heading into my last final of my law school career I started hearing rumors that Junior Seau had died. I tried telling myself there is no way my childhood hero could have actually taken his life, just FOCUS on your final! Turn off your phone, focus. Throughout my three-hour exam, all I could think about was the hard-hitting, ferocious, Seau…I grew up emulating this guy. There is no way he could have possibly died. I finished my exam at 4:10 pm (CST), I turned my phone on and had 16 emails – a lump grew in my throat – the same feeling I had when I woke up to the message my father had died of a heart attack. Law school was over, celebrate! But, I wasn’t satisfied, no joy, no happiness…Junior Seau…dead…of an apparent suicide. I just finished my law school career, I should be ecstatic, right? It was confirmed, my childhood hero, ICON, Mr. Say Ow……DEAD OF AN APPARENT SUICIDE…SHOT HIMSELF IN THE CHEST!!! My father would show me films of Seau; he bought me Seau’s jersey when I was in 5th grade. I wore it once a week. It was my pride and joy. It made me feel tough, it made
me feel invincible…I had Jr. Seau as my guiding force…the hardest hitting, most feared linebacker in the league. (Anderson, Paul D (2012). "Junior Seau: Dead!" NFL Concussion Litigation)

The above example praises his player persona as “Mr. Say Ow,” which not only perpetuates the warrior narrative as a hegemonic ideal. This reinforces the status quo by naturalizing and legitimizing the violence and the health risk nature of football.

The final example humanizes Seau, which creates distance from his suicide and the violent nature of football. In this example, the focus is on Seau’s smile and personality, once again creating a more relatable, positive image of Seau the person:

Quarterback Stan Humphries recalled that Seau did everything at the same speed, whether it was practicing, lifting weights or harassing John Elway. Humphries described the intensity, the smile, the infectious attitude, and said “it carried over to all the other guys.” (Associated Press (2012). "Ex-NFLer Junior Seau Found Dead, Police Probe Suicide." CBCnews)

By praising the individual characteristics of Seau, both on and off the field, the media commenting on sports avoids the conversations on health risks associated with football and Seau’s suicide. This praise of Seau makes him a more relatable, reduces social distance from fans, and creates distance from the violence that occurs in football. The next theme analyzed is the individualization of blame.

**Individualization of blame.** The first example, derived from a Fox News report, appears to blame the suicide on insomnia and suicide. This attributes the suicide to Seau’s individual issues, rather than address the possibility that these problems were related to the effects of head trauma:

Former NFL great Junior Seau, who committed suicide a month ago, suffered from insomnia for years and relied on prescription drugs to help him sleep, USA Today reported Friday.

The paper said it interviewed more than 50 friends, family members, neighbors and former teammates in an effort to piece together possible clues on why the former Chargers linebacker shot himself in the chest in his San Diego-area home May 2.
A common theme that emerged was the 43-year-old's persistent sleeping troubles, and possible misuse of the prescription drugs that were meant to help him sleep. (Fox News, NewsCore. (2012) "Junior Seau Struggled with Insomnia, Used Prescription Drugs for Years")

The second example, from Bloomberg Business Week, also attributes the suicide to personal experience, while shifting blame away from health risks and football to the private, subjective player and the life experiences associated with the individual. The author is quoting Layola University neurologist Christopher Randolph in regards to CTE and the NFL:

Conclusive data doesn’t exist on whether NFL players experience depression, substance abuse and suicide at a different rate than the population as a whole, Randolph said. Besides the concussions, NFL players have different lives than most people: an early and brief period of fame, with an outsized paycheck. Many of these athletes then fade into obscurity, and some also quickly spend their money, he said. “I don’t know if that necessarily contributes to what we’re seeing, but it’s a complicating factor,” Randolph said. Patterns of substance abuse and depression also exist in other sports, such as baseball, where fleeting fame and fortune are common and concussions are rare. (Lopatto, E., & Novy-Williams, E. (2012) "Seau’s Brain Seen Offering Special Insight Into NFL Hits." Bloomberg Business Week)

By focusing blame on the individual, this reaction shifts blame away from football and the NFL, reinforcing the status quo. These media sources covering Seau’s suicide tend to blame mental health problems on the individual, in this case Seau. They not only avoid the possibility that head trauma and football may have played a role, they trivialize the possibility by referencing drug use, personal struggles, and childhood trauma or private medical history. The media is effectively manufacturing uncertainty or at least emphasizing doubt regarding the causal link between Seau’s suicide and football. The third theme of media commenting on sports is praising the NFL for change.

**Praising the NFL for change.** The first example of this, written by Brian Trahan, defends the NFL by focusing on individual consent, claiming that they know what they are getting themselves into and legitimizes and justifies health risks based on their significant
salaries. By comparing health risks in football to occupational risks associated with military personnel, pilots, and oilfield workers, Trahan reifies and naturalizes the risks as part of the game and inherent to football. Trahan then praises the NFL for rule changes that increased player safety.

It's abhorrent to see players who ran like gazelles, who were maestros of their profession, struggle to walk and perform menial tasks in day-to-day existence. I'd rather read biographies than obituaries any day. At the same time ... the other part of me — the realist — knows that football is and was their livelihood. They signed on for this. They knew the risks. It's not easy turning a gladiator into Mr. Rogers. If you are police officer, you know entering the work force that there is a chance you could lose your life in the line of duty. You know the risks, yet you dedicate yourself to the profession. It's the same with pilots, military personnel or oilfield workers. There is an inherent danger attached to your profession.

Football players know there is a chance they will suffer when their playing days are over. It's why they are paid millions of dollars rather than thousands. The changes being made to the game are definitely altering how it's played and how it's viewed by the fans. The days of Ronnie Lott, Dick Butkus and Lester Hayes flying all over the field to inflict as much damage as possible are over. Goodell has sent that message loud clear. At first, I was against the rule changes. I was selfish as a fan and wanted the game to remain the same. "It's losing its integrity," I proclaimed after each flag was thrown. Sadly, it takes losing one of the greatest to play the game to toss me off the precipice of ignorance.

I realize now ... there is no integrity when Junior Seau commits suicide. (Trahan, B. (2012) "Brian Trahan: It Took Junior Seau's Suicide for Me to See Goodell's")

This extended quote combines several strategies previously discussed, but also emphasizes the complicated web of intertwined power relations that represent the tripartite issues involved with the status quo. To some degree, the first line of the quote admits there is a problem regarding NFL players and death, but then pivots to strongly blaming players because they knew the risks they signed up for. The quote concludes by praising the NFL’s ability to change how football is played despite a negative push back by fans. Here the NFL is willing to make procedural changes that come at a financial cost, which subverts the NFL’s lack of change regarding health risks, but the NFL and its owners still reclaim the league’s integrity and thus
their dominant power relationship as owners benefiting from the commodification of players. Again, this shows how it is possible to challenge one aspect of the status quo (NFL’s changing stance on health risks) yet continue the ownership structure of the NFL and contemporary masculinities like the warrior narrative as well. Praising the NFL for changing negates current and recent organizational flaws relating to head trauma and sports based on the progress that has been made, legitimizing the NFL’s defense by denying the contradiction that a problem occurred first that initiated these changes.

**Challenging the status quo.**

The final section of the analysis is the media level/perspective challenging the status quo based on praising the impact of Seau’s suicide to possibly improve the pending litigation against the NFL and blaming the NFL for poor preventative measures to keep players safe, as well as their conflict of interest. Both of these themes challenge the NFL’s power relations that allows it and its owners to financially benefit from, while calling into question its legal and ethical responsibilities.

**Praising Seau’s ethical impact.** The first example, from NFL Concussion Litigation RSS, praises Seau as a prominent player that can “boost litigation” to open up the possibility for more people to join the wrongful death suit. This article recognizes the significance of Seau’s CTE findings in defining it as a potential bellwether case if the litigation reaches court. The extended quote subverts the NFL’s power by arguing that Seau’s suicide will help hold the NFL legally accountable for long-term mental illnesses caused by health risks in football. The media commentator utilizes snarky sarcasm and historic facts to document the NFL’s conflict of interest while outlining the possibility for Seau’s suicide to help collectively undermine that power conflict by aiding the litigation:
In another not-so-surprising fashion, the family of the late Junior Seau filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the NFL and Riddell Helmets. This will certainly provide a boost to the litigation… Two weeks ago, it was announced that Seau’s brain showed signs of the debilitating neurodegenerative disease, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Shortly after the announcement was made, the NFL issued a statement – effectively thanking the Seau family for deciding to sue it: “We appreciate the Seau family’s cooperation with the National Institutes of Health.”

These results may have been the turning point in the Seau’s family’s decision to sue the NFL.

Seau’s lawsuit is not unique, however. There are a dozen wrongful death lawsuits pending against the NFL – the most notable are Dave Duerson and Andre Waters, both of whom were diagnosed with CTE.

Seau, however, is the youngest, and he played during an era where the alleged fraud of the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee (1994 – 2009) was likely at its peak. … Assuming the players survive all the pre-trial hurdles – which is a BIG assumption – there is a chance that Seau’s lawsuit may be chosen as the first bellwether case. In other words, the plaintiffs’ lawyers may choose to try Seau’s case because it arguably has the best facts. (Anderson, Paul D (2013). "Seau's Family Sues the NFL." NFL Concussion Litigation RSS. N.p., 24 Jan)

The final example, presented by Fox News, describes Seau’s suicide as spurring critical dialogue and self-reflection amongst current players, which open up the possibility for alternative interpretations of masculinity in terms of medical risks and health costs, both individually and collectively:

In 40 interviews with The Associated Press during the last two weeks, many players voiced growing worry about the physical and emotional toll professional football takes. Seau's suicide resonated among the 13 rookies, 17 active veterans and 10 retirees, with more than half of each group saying it pushed them to consider their future in the sport or the difficulties of adjusting to post-NFL life….It's one thing to read about hundreds of guys they've never heard of suing the league because of neurological problems traced to a career long ago. It's quite another to find out about Seau, a charismatic, recent star for the Chargers, Dolphins and Patriots who played in the Super Bowl(Associated Press. (2012) "Seau's Suicide Prompts Worries about Post-NFL Life." Fox News)

The first theme challenging the status quo by media commentary demonstrates how much Seau’s suicide may aid the players’ litigation in the future by influencing others to join and as the potential bellwether case leading up to trial, as well as how his story resonates with current
players to be more reflexive themselves. The next and final theme of the media analysis is the theme of blaming the NFL.

**Blaming the NFL.** The first example blames the NFL for historically resisting change, claiming the NFL is reactive and not preventive. The *YahooSports* report directly blames the NFL for making cosmetic changes as public relations tactics after the fact, while continuing to deny change, which opens up more alternatives for portraying the NFL as both medically and legally culpable for long-term player health:

Those sorts of personality switches are common and well-documented in cases of CTE. Judging from the NFL’s statement in response to the Seau diagnosis, you’d think that the league has been on the cutting edge of this issue for years. “We appreciate the Seau family’s cooperation with the National Institutes of Health,” the NFL said in a statement. “The finding underscores the recognized need for additional research to accelerate a fuller understanding of CTE. The NFL, both directly and in partnership with the NIH, Centers for Disease Control and other leading organizations, is committed to supporting a wide range of independent medical and scientific research that will both address CTE and promote the long-term health and safety of athletes at all levels.

"The NFL clubs have already committed a $30 million research grant to the NIH, and we look forward to making decisions soon with the NFL Players Association on the investment of $100 million for medical research that is committed in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. We have work to do, and we’re doing it."

Yes, but here’s the key: The NFL is "doing it" now only because it has to. For decades, the NFL was most certainly not "doing it" at all. In fact, the league did all it could to obfuscate the issue and tried its level best to sidetrack any connection between head injuries and long-term brain trauma. The NFL now faces lawsuits from more than 4,000 retired players.

In October 2009, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell sat in front of the House Judiciary Committee and refused to acknowledge that connection at all. He was rightfully excoriated by the panel as a result. "We’ve heard from the NFL time and time again -- you’re always 'studying,' you’re always 'trying,' you’re 'hopeful,'" said Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Caif.), whose husband played in the NFL. "I want to know what are you doing ... to deal with this problems and other problems related to injuries?"

When Goodell said that it was a priority for the league to take care of its retired players, Waters cut him off and threatened to look into the NFL’s antitrust exemption. (Farrar, Doug (2013). "NFL’s Statement on Seau's CTE Condition Shows a Total Disconnect from Its Own Negligent)
The next and final example blames the NFL for its conflict of interest regarding its partnerships with research institutions investigating CTE and head trauma linked with playing football. It challenges the status quo by questioning the researcher neutrality as bias, and the reliability of the NFL to ethically look into head trauma:

Boston University declined to comment for this story, saying “It is our policy not to discuss any completed, ongoing or potential research cases unless at the specific request of family members. Our primary goal is to learn more about the long-term effects of repetitive brain trauma by conducting meaningful scientific research.” The Boston University center does list the National Football League and the NFL Player’s Association among its sponsors, something that Dr. Art Caplan, the outgoing director at the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Bioethics, says isn’t ideal. “One has to at least raise both eyebrows when research is funded by someone that has a direct interest,” Caplan said. “In ethics we call that a conflict of bias and it means that because you have a dog in the fight, you have an outcome that perhaps could be skewed if you’re funding the research as well.” (Given, K. (2012) "Researchers Compete For Athletes Brains." Only A Game. 12 May)

Media commentators challenge the status quo by blaming the NFL for its tradition of resisting change through post-hoc policy changes, for its blatant conflicts of interest (specifically regarding research related to head trauma and sports) and by praising the impact of Seau’s suicide in potentially serving as a bellwether case that my help other players join the litigation. The analysis of the media commenting on sports perspective reveals a significant emphasis on reinforcing the status quo through avoidance, blaming individuals’ health issues, praising the NFL for making football safer, and trivializing individual and collective lawsuits by players to shift responsibility away from the NFL.

Summary

Overall, the analysis covers four levels divided into sections that either reinforce the status quo or challenge the status quo: 1) The Players Perspective, 2) The Family Perspective of the Seaus, 3) The NFL/Owners perspective, and the final level of the analysis explores is 4) The Media Commenting on Sports.
In terms of reinforcing the status quo, many commentators avoid attributing the cause of Seau’s suicide by praising Seau for positive personal characteristics, or for occupational success and achievements in a way that glorifies self-sacrifice as work-success worth desiring, in a positive image that is more relatable to fans which creates distance between Seau’s suicide and football, making his violent player nature more acceptable.

The media’s praise of recent policy changes legitimizes the NFL and depicts the organization as committed to player safety. NFL representatives similarly reinforce its commitment to player safety, legitimizing its legal defense. Combining this bolstering of acclaim with the NFL’s blame shifting frame demonstrates the NFL’s use of reformatory apologia to not only avoid responsibility and resist change, but to also disqualify the accusations the NFL faces in the potential litigation.

Another common way that speakers and commentators reinforce the status quo is by individualizing blame by putting responsibility for mental health problems squarely on the shoulders of the players themselves. Players are blamed by the NFL for not utilizing programs and for their lack of help-seeking. The problems players deal with after leaving the NFL are labeled as individual issues, avoiding structural issues stemming from football that may play a role in players’ health problems after football. In the case of Seau’s suicide and the subsequent discussion of head trauma, his mental health problems are described by speakers and commentators as personal issues rather than structural issues that may be publically discussed, individualizing blame to Seau. The remaining themes that reinforce status quo are the trivialization of the litigation process between the NFL and players, as well as the Seau family’s praise of the warrior narrative while simultaneously denying a link between football and mental illness prior to the discovery that Seau in fact had CTE.
Interestingly, some reactions to Seau’s suicide did challenge the status quo in major league football. Epideictic rhetoric in this case emphasizes blame with limited praise, which is opposite the pattern found in the reinforcing status quo themes. The most salient theme challenging the status quo was blaming the NFL, where players blamed the NFL for having low reliability, while also blaming the NFL for sending mixed messages, not supporting its players enough and being resistive to change. After Junior Seau was diagnosed with CTE postmortem, the family shifted from reinforcing the status quo through valorizing the warrior narrative to blaming the NFL for not caring enough or acting fast enough, while naming the NFL in a lawsuit for its conflict of interest. It is rare for coaches or owners to blame the NFL, but when they do, the focus was on the NFL’s role in improving players transitions to life after playing football, but the bottom-line is more can be done by the NFL and perhaps Congress needs to step in. Finally, the media commenting on sports blame the NFL for historically resisting change through poor preventive policies in place while reacting with minor changes after the issue becomes damaging to the NFL’s reputation, pointing out their conflict of interest with researching mental health related to football as well. The remaining themes challenged the status quo by blaming football and masculinity as the mechanisms cultivating norms dependent on stoicism, dependency, violence, and unnecessary health risks as values that should be questioned.

There were a limited number of challenger themes that utilized praise, but the most notable is the praising of Seau’s suicide in a way that challenges players to think about their roles in football and associated health risks. This theme demonstrates how current players and media alike make sense of Seau’s suicide in terms of spurring critical dialogue and self-reflection, where his suicide impacted players to become more aware of health risks related to football and potentially counter the masculine construction of the warrior narrative and other hegemonic
masculine values in football. Seau’s suicide is also praised by some sport commentators for its potential to improve the players’ case against the NFL in litigation either by inspiring other players to join or by possibly hindering the NFL’s defense as the bellwether case. It is important to note that throughout the analysis every single text either avoided or disqualified the notion of eliminating or banning football altogether.

The final part of this thesis will close with a critical discussion of the analysis results in context with the previously explained conceptual framework regarding health risks, masculinity, and organizational narratives relating to football. In doing so, the aim is to assess why the findings are significant, both theoretically and practically, before concluding by identifying the limitations of the thesis and what future research could explore.
Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusion

The conclusion chapter begins by answering the research questions, and continues with discussing the practical and theoretical implications. The chapter finishes with a discussion of limitations in scope and recommendations for future research.

In Describing Seau’s Life and Suicide, What Do the Narratives Praise, Blame, and/or Avoid?

Praise. Through all levels of analysis, it is evident that Seau was praised for his value as a warrior football player, friend and teammate. This praise is most present in the memorial service, delivered by older players and former coach Bobby Ross. Family members, NFL representatives and media commentators praised Seau for his devotion to the game. The majority of praise focuses on reinforcing the longstanding meanings of masculinity, health, and asymmetrical power relations well-established throughout football culture and the NFL. Ultimately, three different topics of praise are established in regards to Seau’s life: His impact on the NFL, the NFL as an organization, and his impact on litigation.

Seau is depicted as an ideal player and a modern warrior of the NFL; he is modern because he is a warrior that cared about others and looked out for other people as a “buddy.” His occupational success and physical force are also praised, whether it’s his strength, size, speed, or dedication to the sport. This is important because Seau is positioned as a violent warrior who should be feared on the field while simultaneously praising his natural leadership and charisma.

NFL representatives praise the organization for recent changes, partnerships, donations, and policy changes that are dedicated to player safety. The media commenting on sports reinforce these ideas, pointing out changes such as penalizations for certain hits and altering
kickoff, which are framed as positive changes made for the players. Praising the NFL is ultimately a contradiction because it is change to improve player safety that is being praised, but those offering praise do not acknowledge the reason that change was initiated originally. It is important to acknowledge the lack of involvement of players.

Younger players and some media commentators use praise of Seau’s relatability and name recognition to challenge the status quo. The ability of his suicide to garner major media attention creates more of an impact and inspiration for critical self-reflection both short term and long term for current players. Seau’s suicide is framed in terms of critical self-reflection, which inspires awareness of health risks related to football and makes challenging the status quo of masculinity, the NFL, and health risks as epideictically morally acceptable. Players look at his suicide and the family’s litigation as something that could be in their future or could happen to their teammates. This is evident when players refer to Seau, sometimes without being provoked, for making them think about their health, or others who stated Seau’s suicide influenced them to join the litigation because of Seau’s relatability and relevance.

Younger players and media praise Seau as relatable influences individual players and possibly fans to critically reflect on player safety in terms of short term issues of health for player safety. It also encourages players as a collective group to think about the long term impacts of health, focusing on the future and the litigation. Seau, a past player who was never diagnosed with a concussion yet suffered from CTE, is praised as a vehicle of change by former offense lineman Pete Kendall as “more impactful” despite not being a friend of Seau because “it’s simply closer to home… than a guy who played in the ‘70s or ‘80s… Junior’s situation would probably have people re-examining things” (Associated Press, 2012). The most important aspect of this praise is the difference between accepting and rejecting standard masculine norms,
such as the warrior narrative, or the relationship between health risks and football. Current players are using praise as a tool to challenge the dominant, asymmetrical power relationships of football, like celebrating the idea of joining the litigation against the NFL, or just for making players more aware of the health risks associated with masculinity through the warrior narrative. Current and former players use their epideictic rhetoric to voice issues that the organization avoids; players are recognizing their own power to challenge and subvert the violent football culture and all the discourses and ideologies that come with it. Players are allowing themselves to be both the subject and the object, repositioning themselves in terms of occupational health risks and neglect, ascribing responsibility to the NFL and enacting this through litigation.

There is a generational difference amongst players where older/former players focused heavily on praise of Seau’s occupational success, personality, and leadership, yet only use blame to privatize mental health risks from football to Seau’s personal experience and lack of help-seeking while avoiding the discussion of his suicide, the causal relationship between head trauma in football and mental health stemming from this relationship. The younger current players praise similar aspects of Seau, emphasizing his warrior nature, but also praise the impact Seau’s suicide has on their understandings of health risks, masculinity and the pending litigation against the NFL. The younger generation of players utilizes blame significantly more compared to older or retired players. Younger current players blame Seau individually less frequently than older/former players, but more so blame the NFL for not doing enough to help players and the dominant masculine culture of football for not including help-seeking.

**Blame.** Blame, also found in all levels of the analysis, is largely used to challenge the status quo in terms of NFL’s accountability. The three major themes of blame emerged in the analysis are blame of the NFL, blame of football and the warrior narrative, and blaming the
individual. It is important to recognize that players blame the NFL for unreliability, mixed messages, lack of action, and image-based initiatives, not player-improvement initiatives, but they never praise the NFL. The Seau family blames the NFL after the diagnosis of CTE, recognizing the conflict of interest and failure to respond to player safety issues fast enough. Media, like players, blame the NFL for a history of poor preventive safety initiatives and for making after-the-fact changes that are cosmetic to improve and maintain their image. Media also blames the conflict of interest in regards to the team trainers, suggesting their bias as a competitive organization outweighs their ability to enact neutrality in terms of health risks. The least represented group is the NFL blaming itself, however these examples may be the most important.

Football is blamed directly for cultivating identity dependence and reinforcing accepted performances of masculinity. Players, family, and Coach Carroll acknowledge the identity dependence in terms of the organizational responsibility to transition players out of the football culture. Players depend on football for social status and life meaning, they are held in high prestige which makes help-seeking difficult due to their position within football where solutions are readily available. Thus transitioning to life after football is increasingly difficult because solutions must be sought and that skill is not taught or reinforced. This discourse simultaneously blames players’ failure to adapt to life after football as the cause of suicides, ignoring the role of head trauma as well.

The warrior narrative is blamed for the violence which results in health issues such as head trauma, masculine norms associated with football culture of stoicism and playing through pain. A specific example of this comes from rookie player Mohamed Sanu, who expresses his concerns of the injuries and potential long term impacts, blaming the warrior narrative for the
health risks associated in football and seeing himself as more than a warrior player or a commodity, but an individual that may suffer consequences due to the violence. This blame is based on the promotion of self-sacrifice which instills the expectation of enduring pain for the betterment of the team, glorifying violence while rejecting individual health and occupational responsibility. The warrior narrative is cultivated and maintained by the NFL organization, which redirects blaming the warrior narrative, a social construct, back to the culture of football, the sustainer of this construct.

The final example is blaming the individual, which frames health risks and life after football as an individual struggle, not an organizational responsibility. Some NFL spokespersons, former players, and media blame individual factors such as Seau’s history of violence outside of football and poor self-care such as potential drug dependency and ultimate suicide. It is important to note that young players and family do not blame the individual. Former players individualize blame by suggesting that Seau should have asked for help. Similarly, the NFL blames individuals for not utilizing the resources available, which they suggest goes above and beyond normative establishments of occupational support. The media individualizes blame through epideictic narratives the most, identifying individual choices and lifestyles as the problem, personalizing the issues and making treatment a private matter. By making health problems a personal matter, media commentators avoid the macro level problems and ignore the topics of head trauma, violence in football, and causal linkage between these, ultimately creating doubt by arguing that players are aware of the inherent health risks associated with football.

Avoidance. Avoidance has been influential in all cases of praise and blame found in the analysis. It is not necessarily utilized to directly reinforce or challenge the dominant constructions of masculinity and health risks in football, but directly highlights the imbalance
present in each side’s argument. The avoided topics are consistently the opposition’s voice, empowering the counter argument. Apologia is the only theme where avoidance is intentionally utilized to strategically deny or create uncertainty regarding the causal relationship between football and long-term mental health risks, but also to shift accountability for health risks away from the NFL by the NFL/Owners. Based on this, avoidance appears to sometimes serve strategic interests while at other times it may be used to be respectful of Seau’s family.

An example of this can be seen when the NFL uses apologia to refer to its recent accolades, avoiding its history of poor player safety regulations. The Seau family blames the NFL, claiming they are not proactive soon enough, nor are they forthcoming about correlations between mental health risks and football. The Seau family, however, avoids the fact that the NFL has finally made improvements for player safety. Similar to the NFL and some players, the majority of media praise the warrior narrative directly through Seau or refer to his softer persona as a "buddy" looking out for other players, but this is done in a way that individualizes Seau while avoiding health risks and masculine culture’s influence in his death. A large quantity of the media comments examined take up the same praises the NFL made in their strategic use of apologia, commending the league on its recent changes and values to make the NFL safer. Ultimately, the media exhibits a balanced approach to praising and blaming both Seau and the NFL to remain elusive in forming an ultimate opinion. Avoidance is significant and present in blame to reinforce/challenge the status quo as well; health risks are either positioned as an individual, micro-level problem or a macro, organizational, structural, ideological problem. What is avoided by one party is utilized by the opposition as a means of forming their stance as morally acceptable. This aspect is arguably the most significant because praising and blaming depend on avoidance.
Summary. In describing Seau’s life and suicide, praise is used epideictically to reinforce the status quo as morally acceptable by glorifying the warrior narrative’s commitment to self-sacrifice, acknowledging the softer side of Seau, and praising the changes made by the NFL, yet avoids Seau’s suicide, health issues, and litigation, which are all utilized to praise Seau in a way that makes challenging the status quo morally acceptable. Blame is used epideictically to make challenging the status quo more morally acceptable by blaming the NFL, blaming football and the warrior narrative, all macro-level criticisms which avoid micro-level decisions by individual players, which is used to individualize blame as a means of making the reinforcement of the status quo morally acceptable. Epideictic literature suggests praise and blame are used for attribution, but this discussion displays avoidance as the foundation of the praise-argument or blame-argument (Chase, 1961 & Sullivan, 1993). The next research question will discuss how narratives of Seau construct and define masculinity, and how these constructions open or maintain dialogue on the costs of masculine norms.

How do these Narratives Construct/Define Masculinity? How Did Junior Seau’s Suicide Open/Maintain Dialogue on Potential Costs of Masculine Identity in NFL Players?

Praise the (modern) warrior narrative. The most evident theme in narratives of Seau’s suicide was praise for the modern warrior, largely consistent with the dominant, hegemonic construction of masculinity. The use of blame to challenge masculine norms and the culture within the NFL opens and increases critical dialogue to recognize the exclusion of health risks. Praise of Seau’s suicide based on relatability and critical self-reflection is utilized to open up critical dialogue and counter the modern warrior narrative by recognizing the costs associated with the violence. The narrative of Seau as the hegemonic ideal of masculinity will be addressed first.
The NFL and media describe Seau as the archetypal player, praising his commitment to the sport, his tough nature, and his hegemonic performance of masculinity. Seau is praised for being a pro’s pro, narrating his occupational success in terms of physical force and overall violent dominance, which is worthy of emulation. He is referred to as “Mr. Say-Ow” proudly, he is described as a leader, and he is portrayed as happy; health risks he endured and their potential effects are rejected and removed from this construction. The hegemonic ideal praises his emulation of physical violence and male domination; the general warrior narrative praises him for playing through pain, not just delivering it.

The warrior narrative is reinforced by former players who reiterate the idea that athletes should not allow injury or pain to affect performance. The widespread praise of Seau’s violent warrior nature across all levels of the analysis demonstrates the hegemony of the warrior narrative as dominant, and reified as natural, as if men and boys are supposed to play through pain and sacrifice health for glory. At the same time, praising the modern warrior narrative also highlights the sensitive masculine side. Again, his smile and his friendliness are framed as positive attributes that are not generally a part of the warrior narrative script. In these discussions, these appeals to his softer side seem to normalize the health risks associated with football by creating distance between Seau and the violent, warrior narrative. This softens his warrior side without attacking or feminizing his display of masculinity. The modern warrior can be a sensitive father, a good friend, and relatable to the audience without threatening his masculine dominance or questioning his occupational success. Praising Seau as a hegemonic modern warrior by the NFL, media, and former/older players demonstrates a shift in how we talk about masculinity. However, the context in which they were articulated also maintained the NFL’s
dominance by avoiding questions of why Seau had sudden problems with violence and depression off the field.

**Opening space for alternative masculinities.** Some commentators question dominant constructions of masculinity while opening the opportunity for alternative constructions of masculinity by criticizing the hegemonic masculine norms, the professional football culture, and the warrior narrative directly. Players, Seau’s family, and the media criticize masculine norms for ignoring health risks and rejecting healthcare, creating an alternative construction of masculinity which allows for recognition of occupational health risks. This rejects the notion of a hegemonic ideal, stating that men are not biologically constructed to be tough, strong, and successful regardless of the cost. Even when individualizing blame to reduce culpability of the NFL or football culture, masculinity is blamed as a separate scapegoat that is non-biological.

The NFL blames the players for not utilizing the resources available, individualizing the choice and decision making and defining it in terms of individual help seeking choices, thus indirectly blaming masculinity. Although Coach Carroll’s quote is positioned as blaming the NFL, it also suggests that players have problems based on individual inadequacies. Dan Fouts reiterates that help is available for people who are considering suicide at Seau’s memorial service, individualizing blame based on Seau’s not seeking help or utilizing resources. Fox News and the Bloomberg Business Week support the NFL’s blame as well, suggesting that Seau’s sleeping troubles may be to blame, his prescribed sleeping medication may have been abused, and his suicide was based on personal, subjectified experiences. Definitions associated with the warrior narrative are criticized based on a non-biological notion, which proves culpability of the professional football culture because an identity, the modern warrior, is constructed based on and emphasizing the strength and toughness associated with masculinity. Furthermore, the football
culture glorifies and commodifies masculinity as toughness and pain, creating a disciplinary power; by blaming the culture for reinforcing this disciplinary power and commercial pressure, discourse opens on what truly forms masculinity and is football worth the costs. This ultimately leads to the direct blaming or questioning of the warrior narrative for a lack of incorporating health risks. Blame allows for the questioning of masculine validity and costs associated with health risks, while praise maintains the dialogue and present a potential answer to the question: is the current dominant construction of masculinity in football worth risking health?

Current players and some media praise Seau’s suicide as a critique of the construction of masculinity, recognizing the costs associated with the violent warrior narrative. Seau is recognized as the hegemonic ideal of masculinity and the modern warrior, but this is framed by current players as a criticism of these constructs based on the fact that masculinity cannot be mutually exclusive from health. Seau played through the pain, was not diagnosed with a single concussion, was defined by the professional culture of football, and ultimately died; thus the hegemonic ideal of masculinity has created unavoidable risks associated with livelihood. By criticizing the hegemonic constructs of masculinity, current players are creating a new construction of masculinity where health is not an acceptable cost, and toughness is not biological. They are expressing uncertainty about the warrior narrative, the means of expressing masculinity in the NFL, which in turn questions masculinity in general. Questioning the dominant power relationships through blame is what opens dialogue; critical self-reflection maintains the dialogue.

The impact of Seau’s suicide is praised because of its impact on individual players who are able to apply his tragic warrior narrative to themselves; the discourse progresses from questioning the costs to questioning how to avoid the consequences associated with the
masculine identity. The masculine identity is recognized as the “other” which creates unrealistic expectations and the disciplinary power which requires a continuous performance. This also creates transition from individual to collective thinking; if the ultimate cost of the warrior narrative is degenerative or disabling injury, the NFL must not only provide compensation for this cost, but should establish preventive regulations. This is made apparent through the litigation and appeal to congress. Praise has become a vehicle for challenging the constructions of masculinity and the warrior narrative, exposing the paradox of masculinity and health, which ultimately can be altered through a collective critical discourse.

Summary. The main way masculinity is constructed through these narratives of Junior Seau is by praising him as the modern warrior and a hegemonic ideal, his warrior nature of playing through pain, and his sensitive, relatable side. This is not the only way masculinity is constructed; narratives utilize both blame and praise to open and maintain alternative masculinities which incorporate health through critical dialogue. By blaming masculine norms as not biological and impossible to achieve or maintain, these narratives question the costs of the dominant construction of masculinity which demands toughness, strength, and sacrifices that threaten livelihood. Junior Seau’s suicide has discursively opened collective attention to the projection of masculine norms and health risks associated with football in a way that questions its validity, recognizes its fragmented nature, and recognizes its incorrect interpretation as monolithic which ultimately ruptures the dominant discourse embodied by the warrior narrative. The final research question entails how the discussion of health risks in football are framed, the dominant voices surrounding this discussion, and the disruption of dominant assumptions of masculinity and power relations in sports.

How Do These Narratives Frame the Discussion of Health Risks in Football?
Defending football through avoidance, naturalization and legitimation. The discussion of health risks in football most often uses avoidance, naturalization, and legitimation through epideictically praising the traditions associated with football and the NFL, reinforcing the dominant meanings to resist change. Avoidance is achieved through the NFL’s use of apologia, praise of Seau as a hegemonic, modern warrior, and individualizing blame. The most intentional use of avoidance is apologia; the issue of health concerns, head trauma, and Seau’s suicide are strategically avoided by praising the NFL for recent changes to incorporate player safety, citing research partnerships as justification of their change while avoiding the cause for these changes. The NFL denies culpability and accountability, shifting responsibility away from themselves towards the NFLPA and players. The NFL never addresses their shortcomings, gaps in player safety regulation, and historically has denied a causal link between football and head trauma.

Another discourse which utilizes avoidance to defend football is praising Junior Seau as the hegemonic modern warrior, which avoids the discussion of health risks by praising his occupational success as a warrior while praising his friendly, sensitive, relatable nature. Bobby Ross exemplifies this in his memorial address and press release, praising Seau’s self-sacrifice for football, recognizing him as the hegemonic ideal, justifying health risk for winning, and comparing Seau to a piece of meat or pig. When players, the NFL, and the media commentators frame Seau as the hegemonic modern warrior, they naturalize the violence he experienced on the football field and distance his suicide from football and the NFL. Seau’s performance as the modern warrior is interpreted in a way that defends the NFL and the culture of football.

Seau’s suicide is framed by the NFL, media, and former players in terms of individual blame, suggesting that health risks in football are not the issue, a lack of individual help-seeking
is. This frame subjectifies mental health risks related to football as private matters, rather than public. By personalizing issues of health and risk to Seau’s subjective experiences, it attempts to limit the relatability of his experience while also removing the NFL’s legal responsibility completely. Ultimately, NFL representatives remove the organization from the conversation through individualizing blame to avoid occupational health liability, framing the discussion of health as a player issue. Through narratives of health risk regarding Seau, the NFL, players, family and media naturalize health risks in football through the warrior narrative, hegemony, and the modern warrior.

The warrior narrative is naturalized by players, especially older, former players and coaches, as the expected and inescapable behavior that is required of a football player. Seau’s ex-wife strongly reinforces the warrior narrative initially following Seau’s suicide, calling him a warrior in a positive way that frames his performance on the field as worth emulating. This flows directly into hegemony; by suggesting that Seau’s violent nature on the field is praiseworthy, it creates a model performance that can be idolized. Therefore, sensitizing the warrior narrative maintains the hegemonic dominance in the form of the modern warrior who takes risks and sacrifices his body, but adds the parameter of being a good teammate, friend, and sensitive individual. In framing Seau as the modern warrior, it maintains the dominant power relations and masculine norms of the NFL and football by naturalizing the violence, health risks and commodification of players.

By avoiding the natural consequences that come from the modern warrior narrative, the denial of contradictions is evident in the NFL, media, and players’ analysis of Seau’s suicide. Laudng the presence of the warrior narrative in football while also individualizing health risks creates a moral fiction that does not accept accountability for injuries that are a result of the
violent nature of football and discursively closes alternatives that may identify football and the NFL as partially responsible for player injuries and health risks in football. This lauding can be identified in the media’s evaluation of Seau’s best performance was when he played through a pinched nerve and continued to sacrifice his body for the victory. Social norms associated with masculinity are blamed as well as the individuals who perform masculinity, again failing to recognize the intertwining of masculinity in the creation of the warrior narrative. This is a significant contradiction attempting to conceal and avoid any culpability of the NFL in terms of health risks associated with football.

This contradiction is further legitimized when media and NFL representatives praise the NFL for recent changes but fail to acknowledge why these changes are necessary. Player safety regulations, research partnerships and campaigns are enacted post hoc ergo propter hoc, but the initiating cause in the form of debilitating player injuries, mental health issues, litigation and player deaths and suicides remain unacknowledged. Health risks associated with football are framed in a way that reinforces the status quo, the dominant meanings of masculinity and health and the dominant power relations by avoidance, naturalization and legitimation. Shifting blame off of the organization to players disciplinarily and discursively closes alternatives. There are instances, however, where the discussion is framed legally and medically to challenge and disrupt dominant assumptions of masculinity and power relations.

**Challenging football through legal and medical frames.** Player suicide such as Seau’s disrupts dominant meaning of health and masculinity associated with football because they call attention to the potentially tragic costs. The narratives used to epideictically eulogize him typically carry notions of the warrior narrative, but the disruption of meaning and lack of intent also create opportunities to challenge those dominant meanings. Some players and media
commentators framed the risks associated with football and masculinity in terms of logical medical concerns and the legal consequences of unethical decision making by the NFL. 

The first frame challenging the dominant paradigm of health risks in football questions the neutrality of the NFL. By blaming the NFL’s historic use of apologia and cosmetic initiatives, media and players acknowledge the NFL’s value of profit over player safety. Questioning the conflict of interest present in self-regulation disrupts the dominant power relations and understandings of health risks because it makes the NFL ethically and legally accountable through blame. This is evident when players, media and family praise Seau for the impact his case will have on litigation in establishing accountability of the NFL in the form of reparation and preventive regulation. The player voice becomes empowered through the legal lens because it supplies a material, collective means to question the dominant power relations as well as the warrior performance, challenging the individualization of blame and avoidance, and reframing it in terms of occupational accountability. This also repositions the NFL from a neutral position to a responsible position, where the organization can be held accountable for the health risks associated with football.

Although there are instances of players’ empowering themselves and challenging normative power relations and constructs of masculinity, it is important to note that the majority of voices heard were reinforcing the status quo. Moreover, they were primarily male accept for the mother and wife of Seau; little family voice is heard. Fans are only heard if they are also media commentators, and the player voices heard are very select. This frequency and limitation of voices exemplifies the control of the dominant power, the sports media complex, which reinforces the hegemonic masculine norms of football, commodification of players as stories, and fans as onlookers, not expert voices worth acknowledging.
The notion of banning football is disqualified and avoided altogether, which is significant because it reinforces the status quo of all dominant ideologies based on the knowledge that, regardless of critical analysis and litigation, the NFL organization and football occupation will survive. The limited voices that question or challenge the value of football can be represented by Seau’s oldest son, Tyler, after his dad’s death, in which he states that it is not worth not having a dad. One media commentator also is critical of the football culture, especially fans, for supporting and loving a sport that has such a high potential for health consequences, but neither conclude that football should be banned.

This discussion will conclude with the examination of what emerged as a counter-warrior narrative before transitioning to the practical and theoretical implications followed by the limitations and future research. Narratives regarding Junior Seau from players, family, and media contribute to this new, counter-warrior narrative which includes the acknowledgement of health risks, emotion, and change as acceptable performances within masculinity. This was most evident in the generational differences between younger/current players and older/former players who viewed Seau’s suicide as a warning rather than a criticizable act. Older players typically individualized Seau as condemnable, making his lack-of help seeking a private issue. On the other hand, young/current players individualize Seau’s suicide in terms of self, acknowledging that they suffer the same health costs associated with football and fear their warrior narratives may end the same way Seau’s did.

It is also significant that, originally, the family denied linkage between health risks and Seau’s suicide, directly contrasting their current litigation which blames the NFL for that linkage. The hegemonic ideals are so acceptable that the original family reaction is to allow Seau’s intent in suicide to be avoided altogether and the warrior narrative to be praised.
Following the findings of CTE and the recognition of a causal link between health risks such as traumatic brain injury and football, the family began blaming the NFL and football culture for denying, avoiding, and deceiving the general public in regards to the logical, medical and legal link between football, the NFL, and mental/physical health.

**Summary of findings from research questions.** In conclusion, the suicide of Junior Seau and resulting epideictic narratives reinforce dominant discourses about masculinity and the warrior narrative as well as the status quo in the NFL. At the same time, some of the discourse repositions masculinity, football, and the warrior narrative, creating a counter-warrior narrative. In this counter-narrative, health is no longer separate from football and masculinity, but is in fact directly correlated and intertwined into both. Recognition that Seau, that happy, successful football player suffered from CTE and committed suicide implicates the dominant ideologies as well as the NFL for intentional misuse of power.

These counter-narratives of Seau function as discursive criticism of dominant discourse of masculinity and health in football culture, initiating a change. The language used to describe Seau and his suicide, mainly by newer players and media, acknowledge health risks, emotion inside the counter-warrior narrative, and the change which began with the formation of the modern warrior narrative. One example where this is apparent is a masculine tension which frames Seau in terms of lack of help seeking while also framing him in terms of playing through pain and stoicism. A second example is the attribution of intent to Seau’s suicide as either certain, uncertain, or obvious. The majority of articles analyzed reported that he did not “share, disclosed, express,” or talk about his symptoms with anyone; these articles were mostly released prior to CTE findings.
Juxtaposed to this is the minority of articles following the CTE diagnosis which show that Seau attempted to hide his symptoms publicly but not from family or friends. It is significant that he is initially blamed for his lack of help seeking in a football culture which praises stoicism; how Seau was publicly depicted simply reinforces masculine norms while constructing moral fictions based solely on the contradictions present in the dominant ideologies. The fact that Seau’s suicide does not have a note allows initial intention framing to support or challenge the status quo through praise, blame, or avoidance, which is significant.

The opportunity for the counter-warrior narrative to disrupt dominant meanings of masculinity, health, and risk is made possible through intentional framing linking medical consequences associated with football and, in some instances, demands legal action. This ultimately is a means of subverting the NFL and its owners’ power structure by giving more voice to the players and their families by framing the discussion of medical risks in football in a way that better represents the impact on all parties involved. This is a shift from thinking about health in football not just for stockholders, but stakeholders, in that masculinity, health and football typically constructed in ways of maximizing profits and minimizing organization responsibility, but this counter-warrior narrative does just the opposite; stressing the importance of maximizing organizational responsibility even if it reduces profits because people (players) are more important than money in the pockets of owners and the NFL. Manufacturing doubt can support or challenge the status quo, but is mostly used to support the dominant ideologies by creating skepticism in causal linkage by citing external, individualized issues such as drug use or childhood abuse as possible motive of suicide.

Players align with one extreme or the other, fully blaming football or Seau; no examples of players transitioning their opinion or aligning with both were found. The family, specifically
Seau’s mother and ex-wife, are perhaps the most salient representation of this because of their fluidity between intention framing. Initially they agreed with hegemonic ideology, but shifted abruptly to framing Seau’s suicide in terms of obvious linkage between head trauma and football, transitioning from accepting the doubt manufactured to challenging the dominant norms, and have joined the players in litigation based on medical consequences that demand legal action. This depicts the dialogic impact of his suicide; it has opened conversations about health risks associated with football, and it has disrupted the social norms that accept football and masculinity as entities existing without health concerns. The last piece of the discussion will report the practical and theoretical implications surrounding this thesis as well as limitations and proposed future research.

**Practical and Theoretical Implications**

The practical implications regarding Seau’s suicide are a change in mental illness stigmatization, a new cultural awakening in sports regarding health risks, and the introduction of language that could lead to discussions about potentially banning football. The social construction of masculinity has allowed little space for physical illness and disability, let alone mental illness. Seau’s suicide has not only opened dialogue about men’s health concerns and diagnoses, it also creates space for a non-stigmatized discussion about mental illness. Space has been given to talk about vulnerability to health risks in football, including dementia, CTE, depression, Alzheimer’s—all results of repeated head trauma. The stigma associated with mental illness is lessened when public figures and icons are openly diagnosed, and more so when the causes are attributed to football. This is exemplified through narratives of Seau; it was easier to vilify his character and choices prior to the diagnosis of CTE, and easier to recognize the culpability of the NFL and current player relatability after. This all factors into the nascent
cultural awakening in sports regarding health risks based on the removal of deniability and avoidance as options.

Litigation will attempt to indict the NFL of neglecting player safety regulations and knowingly endangering players without incorporating an adequate form of prevention or reparation. The ultimate outcome is unpredictable, but at this point, awareness has significantly increased amongst players and doubt regarding the NFL’s capacity to self-regulate is unavoidable. Congress has acknowledged the health risks associated with football and has heard testimony requesting regulation assistance; banning football would answer all of these requests. It is an unlikely outcome, but may be the only ethical way to prevent health risks and early mortality associated with football. If the link between mental health issues to the extent of CTE and suicide is no longer deniable, perhaps the banning of football, a sport defined by the violent and forceful obstruction of one player against another, is also no longer avoidable. Furthermore, the banning of football is the only solution which removes life-impairing health risks from the sport because altering football in a way that removes health risks means changing the sport entirely. Next, theoretical implications are presented to explore the larger, macro organizational narrative, the use of epideictic narratives, agonistic dialogue, and the emergence of the modern and counter warrior narratives.

There was limited research available and explored regarding the macro-level discourses about sports that span multiple locations, times, and cultures. Organizations consist of a larger coalition of cultural structures and institutions. The NFL is one of these examples, as are the NCAA, Congress, and universities. Micro practices can be studied within these macro organizational narratives to identify the all-encompassing, dominant ideologies enforced throughout span. The NFL has the power to penalize players, frame stories in media, commodify
the sport and players, and reward players for big hits. NFL teams reward big hits with bonuses and contract extensions on a micro level in comparison to the NFL’s penalizing players when hits are deemed too violent.

The second theoretical implication is the use of epideictic organizational narratives to reinforce the dominant power norms and status quo through use of praise, blame, and avoidance. Organizational narratives have been examined based on use of praise to celebrate the existing order and blame to reinforce the importance of maintaining the existing order. In the exploration of epideictic narratives regarding Junior Seau, praise was also used to highlight areas of contradiction and the existing challenge to produce positive consensus for impending change. Blame was used to identify the contradictions in a way that found the dominant ideologies and powers at fault for abusing or neglecting factual issues, and regarding Seau, health risks linked to football. Perhaps the most important theoretical implication was the identification of avoidance present in all counter-arguments. What the NFL avoids to acknowledge is utilized by the opposition to construct their stance; praising and blaming by the counter-narrative or opposition is dependent on avoidance, in fact it is largely the foundation of the counter-argument. Organizational communication should explore all relevant stakeholders in terms of what they praise and blame, and consider the significance of what is avoided and how that influences what is framed as noble and disgraceful. The third theoretical implication is agonistic dialogue.

Junior Seau’s suicide is utilized as a significant conflict through which agonistic dialogue is enacted. Narratives challenging the status quo criticize one-way communication of the NFL and the hegemonic construction of masculinity through the warrior narrative; the suicide establishes collective advocacy in the form of the litigation and collective inquiry through blame. Suicides in the NFL, while tragic, functions as epideictic activism by disrupting meaning and
allowing voices to challenge or criticize the dominant power relations while considering justice and player needs. Seau’s suicide is positioned as a tactic of confrontational activism because it is an impractical and atypical yet effective form of protest which creates social awareness and visibility on the issue of help seeking, and points to the NFL’s conflict of interest and the contradiction that exists in masculine norms. It uses his relatability as a public player within the NFL coupled with the graphic imagery of suicide in general, specifically self-inflicted shot to the torso which leads to a slow, agonizing death, to make player safety and health a more salient issue. The final theoretical implication is the construction of masculinity in sports through what is referred to as the modern warrior narrative and the emergence of a counter-warrior narrative.

The discussion section has already detailed the emergence of the modern warrior narrative, the purpose of this narrative, and the ultimate counter-warrior narrative which also embodies the cultural awakening of health risks in sports. The existence of the warrior narrative was originally defined and explored by Jansen and Sabo (1994) and again by Sabo and Jansen (1998), establishing war-like language to celebrate and naturalize the violence present in football which is perpetuated by players, coaches, and media. What is significant here is that the counter-warrior narrative manufactures uncertainty in dominant constructions of masculinity and health to question the value of football and critically examine its potential dangers. It is an act of critical dialogue that repositions masculinity so to incorporate health risks and health consequences, no longer avoiding and dismissing injuries and treatment. It functions as the discursive vehicle of dialogue to challenge or disrupt these dominant meanings; the act of suicide disrupts meaning, but the repositioning of the counter-warrior narrative challenges these meanings. Now that the practical and theoretical implications have been explored, the final portion of this discussion section will address the limitations in scope and recommendations for future research.
Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

My perspective, present throughout this paper, is inclined towards player safety and the initial interpretation of Seau’s suicide as applicable to health risks associated with football above all other factors; this position emerges from personal investment in football, research and reflexivity which ultimately point towards banning football even though I am a loyal fan. It is important to note the difficulty of addressing suicide during a eulogy, which is a celebration of life, because it becomes the means of death is a taboo topic. What is significant, however, is that some people do bring up suicide in terms of lessons learned or in reference to improving the help-seeking nature of men without addressing the causal linkage between health risks and football. Media bias also significantly impacts this paper through the muting of NFL and family voices, and a projection of inherently biased material which filters interviews and events. Therefore, a need for ethnographic research exists that can present NFL, family, and fan voices without filtering, muting, or scope limitation. The topic limits this thesis based on time and subject; Junior Seau is the focus and reactions/responses to his life and suicide are limited to May 2, 2012 through January 24, 2013. The 2009 litigation is the only exception to this, but the analysis of this legal procession was outside the scope of the thesis. Text selection is also limited to locatable reports regarding Seau, and excluded repetitive and substance lacking pieces; covering the entire scope of reports and responses is not possible for this thesis.

Future research should include a comprehensive literature analysis and systematic review of discourse surrounding deaths that can be linked to injuries sustained during football. The litigation should also be explored as it proceeds. An ethnographic approach can be taken to this topic to incorporate key-informant interviews. Other organizational narratives in terms of epideictic storytelling should be researched to investigate the NCAA, which is another
significant topic for critical discussion on the grounds of amateurism, health issues, and legal liability when considering the most important aspect of college (education). Finally, more exploration into the football and warrior narrative’s prestige is necessary to evaluate the shield that allows rape culture to thrive individually as depicted by Ben Roethlisberger, on college campuses such as Penn State, and in towns such as Steubenville.

**Conclusion**

This thesis concludes by reiterating the major themes and findings: the significance and use of avoidance, suicide as a vehicle of critical dialogue and disruption, and the emergence of counter narratives that emphasize impending change. The epideictic narratives regarding Junior Seau demonstrate how narratives in organizations, such as the warrior narrative, serve to reinforce the dominant masculine ideologies and practice while simultaneously serve as a launching point for critical dialogue about health issues and the repositioning known as the counter-warrior narrative. The implication is not that this is the only means of creating a counter-warrior narrative or challenging the dominant power relations in sports regarding health risks, masculinity, and football. It does argue, however, that this successfully disrupted dominance and offered opportunities for both discursive and material avenues for alternative interpretations and constructions of masculinity and health in football.
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