

TRANSCENDING THE HETERONORMATIVE IN SPORT : MASCULINE SPORTING IDENTITIES, SEXUALITY AND IN/EXCLUSIVE PRACTICES*

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« Most lesbian and gay community sports simply have reproduced dominant sporting practices for homosexual people by making them more accessible, thus emphasizing the liberal lesbian and gay political agenda, which is not to challenge fundamental sociocultural structures but to give lesbians and gay men the opportunity to conform to these structures. »

Pronger, 2000, p. 242

« Respecting human rights is not an option for sport authorities, it is an obligation that derives from the responsibilities of states under the rule of law. »

David, 2004, p. 256

The central premise in this paper is that every individual should have the right to enjoy their bodies through physical activities (Bailey, Wellard and Dismore, 2004). Initiatives which seek to counter inequalities in sports tend to become meaningless if they do not take into account the rights of all human beings¹. However, within contemporary formulations, experiencing the thrill of physical activity is invariably incumbent upon one's ability to conform to social constructions of what is understood to be appropriate sporting performance. Often, tensions emerge when

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1 – In this paper I am making distinctions between Physical Activity, Sport and Physical Education. The World Health Organisation defines Physical activity as all movements in everyday life, including work, recreation, exercise and sporting activities. For the purposes of this paper, Physical Education is defined as activities taught as part of the National Curriculum for PE in the UK, or Structured, supervised physical activities that take place at school, whereas, sport is seen as competitive and skilful forms of physical activity other than PE.

having to deal with taking part. For instance, Pronger (2002) describes the conflict he faced when attempting to accommodate his love of physical activity and his own sense of masculinity.

« From the time I was young, I loved physical activity, especially swimming and bicycling. I was not competitive and never raced. I just loved moving. There was an intensity in it that was very important for me. But the insight that I took in that way of life gradually eroded as I approached adolescence and started to realize that in my culture physical activity for boys is primarily about sport and competition, about building masculinity, about learning to take up space in aggressive and domineering ways. That did not appeal to me. » (Pronger, 2002, p. xi)

I have used this quote on many occasions as it has a resonance with many of my own experiences. Sexuality was not an issue as a child, but I was aware of the bodily performances expected from me in relation to gender and this was particularly the case in sports. Many of these gendered expectations detracted from my love of physical activity. However, I was able to compromise and still take part, unlike many others for whom their gender or disability was an obstacle.

Mainstream sport can still be considered a site of discrimination on the basis of a range of social « distinctions » such as gender, sexuality and bodily ability (Pat Griffin, 1992 ; Scraton, 1992 ; Mesner, 1992 ; Wellard 2006a). Many of these social constructions of « ability » in relation to sport (Wellard, 2006a) are formed in the early years of childhood and consequently shape future participation. According to Paechter (2003), the bodily practices found in mainstream sports, in effect, exclude a majority of boys and girls from being able to participate in it freely without recrimination. As such, they shape children's future understanding of their own bodies in relation to gender, their role in sport and indirectly their own physical and social bodily identities. It is important to recognise that particular social structures inform how sport and physical activity is understood and how the notion of « ability » can be interpreted as a means of displaying competence or bodily hexus (Bourdieu, 1990) rather than, necessarily, specific skills. Therefore, the concept of « abilities » within sport participation becomes particularly significant. Thus, from the point of view of a sporting « game » for gay men and women, we need to be even more concerned

with questions of who is « able » to take part and how does this affect their potential participation and enjoyment. To an extent, there are similarities with the problems associated with school based physical education and the application of sport, as it is here that forms of consciousness are embodied through the practices and rituals associated with it (Evans, 2004).

School experiences for many gay men and women are where their understanding of their position within sport is formed. For many, this was not a pleasurable experience.

« My shivering, bespectacled and disinterested frame did not endear me to my team members or the PE teacher as I repeatedly failed to rehearse narratives of hegemonic masculinity within these public performances and rituals of the body. » (Vicars, 2006, p. 352)

The school sports field remains a prime site for displays of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995 ; Mac an Ghail, 2001 ; Frosh et al, 2002) as well as a place to learn the dynamics of the hidden curriculum of physical education (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993, 1997). Reflecting upon the range of experiences of gay people in school sport provides a useful background against which to raise questions about the gendered body and, most importantly, explore the ways in which the social informs the individual experience of physical pleasure and often limits the extent to which individuals can participate in sports and engage in physical activity. At the same time, within the context of sports, it is important to recognise a particular form of bodily hexus which effectively presents a social performance of where the individual is located within the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990).

Post-structuralist accounts have been more explicit in highlighting the extent to which the body has been regulated and disciplined (Foucault, 1984, 1986), and it is through these descriptions that we can explore further the ways in which the gendered and sexualised body is limited in its quest for bodily pleasure by the restraints of heteronormative assumptions (Butler, 1993). This is clearly the case within the arena of sport, where bodily pleasure achieved through physical activity is still regulated by social constructions of the appropriateness of particular bodies and bodily performances considered necessary to participate. Thus, the pleasure (or « jouissance », Barthes, 1977) and the thrill of physical play (Huizinga, 1970)

to be found in sport is often not an option for many men and women (gay or straight) who are unable to present « exclusive masculinity » (Wellard, 2002, 2004).

Queer and Sport

« Queer » as a theoretical movement has developed, in a short space of time, a voice for not only sexual minorities but also a broad range of other subordinated groups. In doing so, it has provided a means to challenge normative understandings of, for instance, gender and race ². However, some of the issues raised within these debates become more problematic when applied to the arena of sport, for it is within this context that the body is fore-grounded and specific bodily performances are prioritised. Queer theory has been successful in highlighting the tensions which exist within normative understandings of categories such as sexuality, gender and race. However, within the context of sport, although these tensions remain, they are preceded by the prominence of bodily performances which dictate the level of entry or participation, which, in turn, highlights the dominance of heteronormativity. Much of queer theory has been inspired by the personal experiences of « outsiders » to the normative, often through the insight of a writer who is gay, female or non-white. But queer experiences framed through and within the specific context of sport have, until recently, been rare. Pronger (1990 & 2000) has been an exception and provides more of an insider account which is often absent in much critical analysis of sport. He suggests that although gay sport has provided lesbian and gay people the opportunity to enjoy sports in an inclusive and safe environment, ultimately it has made these people conform to the established norms, particularly those based on oppressive male heterosexual practices. Thus, the initial possibilities which arise to challenge established understandings of gender, sexuality and sporting participation can be lost in the effort to adopt (hetero)normative performances of mainstream sport.

² – Jagose (1996) provides a comprehensive overview of the emergence of 'queer theory'. Heather Sykes (2006) applies a detailed analysis of queer perspectives on sport.

In his more recent work, Pronger (2002), drawing upon Drucilla Cornell's (1992) « philosophy of the limit », describes the potential, or « puissance » (2002, p. 66) to be found in bodily pleasures which exist « outside » the boundaries of conventional thinking. Within the limits of mainstream sports, though, alternative forms of bodily expression are restricted or not even allowed. Queer acts, then, could be considered as a means of « bringing to light » alternative ways of contemplating the body, particularly in relation to sexuality. However, the theoretical underpinning of Queer Theory grounded as it is in « post-event » textual analysis and elite cultural texts (Edwards, 1998), risks understating the influence of everyday lived practices and the rituals associated with taking part in an activity like sport. Often, the transformative potential of queer is held in check by the gay participants themselves. I argue that it is important to recognise the social processes and rituals which inform general understandings of how sport « should » be performed and the extent to which these modes of behaviour are shaped by heteronormative assumptions. Previous research³ into the experiences of gay people in mainstream and gay sport demonstrates that the realities of taking part are incumbent upon a range of social factors, which in many cases outweigh the original principles.

Why do people join gay clubs ?

Being gay does not automatically assume a shared set of values. A gay sports club involves acknowledging a set of conflicting values, which not only brings into question sexuality and gender, but also issues relating to understandings of traditional sport, competition and etiquette which in turn relate to a wider social climate. The social processes at play in understanding sporting practice may eventually alter the original aims hoped for during the formation of the club, whether these were formally expressed or unwritten ideals.

The majority of gay people seek out a club specifically for gay people because of a desire to socialize with other gay people and at the same time experience an environment where the constant

3 – For instance; Owen, 2002 ; Parker and Price, 2003 ; Van Ingen, 2004 ; Wellard, 2002.

need to hide one's sexuality is not necessary. The research I conducted in a gay tennis club provided examples (Wellard, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). For instance, Keith (46) described,

« You didn't need to worry about being gay. It was such a relief, such a relief... you can also talk about gay issues, even if it's just your life, which pubs and clubs that you go to and talk about it with a gay perspective... you couldn't do that in that (straight) club... so I think it's absolutely vital. »

Keith did not possess sporting capital and although he had for a short period belonged to a straight tennis club he found it to be unwelcoming and also repressively organized. He remembered how there was a hierarchy, with middle aged men occupying the key roles and an emphasis upon playing ability. For Keith the important aspect of the gay tennis group was the social element and he placed less importance upon ability. At the gay tennis club he was able to feel that he could fit in without feeling constantly aware of being different and having to conceal this difference in the best way.

In contrast, Peter (33) had a greater and more successful involvement in mainstream sports during his life, but still provided a similar reason for joining the gay tennis club.

« I found it quite difficult to pick men up because I didn't really want casual sex and then I found it quite difficult in a club environment cos either I'd get drunk and then not know what I was doing, I wasn't very confident about doing it. And then, so I thought, I'll join one of the social groups that I saw at the back of « Gay Times ». So I did primarily come to tennis to get a boyfriend. (laughs) It's a sad thing, so I did do it, I tell people that's what I did come to it for. »

For Peter, the gay tennis club provided the opportunity to meet other gay men and the possibility of forming a relationship. Not just in terms of a venue where there would be other gay men, but it was an environment where he could be more relaxed and in turn he felt he would be able to instigate conversations in an atmosphere less predatory than that of pubs and nightclubs. Peter had been quite open in declaring that his main reason for joining the gay tennis club was to find a partner, which he had succeeded in doing. One of the main reasons for gay sport is the social factor. Peter acknowledged the importance of the social aspect in the gay tennis club in comparison to a straight club he belonged to.

« Well, the gay one is more of a social do and you talk about things more to do with your life than you would at the straight club. I mean, the point I'm... the odd thing about a gay sporting club is you're there because you're gay not because you're sporting. »

Van Ingen (2004), in her study of gay and lesbian participants in a Toronto-based running club, found similar reasons given for attending a gay sports club as opposed to a mainstream (heterosexual) one. The men in the tennis club I observed appeared to have developed their understandings of traditional sport through their wider social experiences gained at school and, to varying degrees, through organized sports clubs. Their experiences were not uniform in that there were some who had participated successfully, whereas others had either found difficulty fitting in or had little opportunity in the first place because of their inability to perform hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). What is important, though, is the realisation by each of the men that their sexuality was considered a « problem » in that it was something which either precluded participation or needed to be masked or managed.

Much of the emphasis in mainstream heterosexual sport is on playing skills and the ability to perform in a particular manner (Messner, 1992). This has led to many men and women (gay and straight) to feel anxious about their own abilities and also to be aware of the constant scrutiny of others. For many of the members, part of the initial appeal of a gay tennis club was to escape this form of discrimination, but the structure of the club and the focus on bodily performance made it difficult to achieve. Playing ability and bodily performances were the indicators of successful participation. The criteria for determining appropriate behaviour were based upon hegemonic heterosexual distinctions between masculine and feminine bodily performances where masculine equated with strength and feats of power and feminine equated with weakness and passivity. The discursive binary distinctions between men and women evident within heterosexual hegemony appeared to be reproduced in the gay club between men through gendered bodily performances.

Although the social aspect was a general reason for joining a gay tennis club, the expectations of how this was to be achieved, varied depending upon previous experiences of

sport. The research revealed that those who were previously able to take part successfully in mainstream heterosexual sport unconsciously (or consciously) continued the same practices. Competition and sporting performance remained the central factors for participation and there was often little realisation by those who took part that discrimination was more likely to be experienced by those without the appropriate sporting capital. Therefore, the members of the gay tennis club who were less able to perform hegemonic masculinity shared similar experiences to non-macho heterosexual men, women, elderly people and the disabled in mainstream heterosexual sport. The established practices found in contemporary sports provided the focus for the gay tennis club but ultimately, rendered the « fluidity », so often described as a part of queer identity, more static.

The cultural understanding of sport as expressed through hegemonic heterosexual male practices provided the mainstay of sporting practice within the gay tennis club. The members who were able to display evidence of established sporting practices were also able to wield the most power to the extent that their previous experiences of mainstream sport were merely replicated within the environment of the gay tennis club. Consequently, issues relating to gay politics, broader discriminatory gender practices and inclusive participation were overlooked in favour of established mainstream sports practices.

On several occasions during the course of the fieldwork, there were comments from members of the gay tennis club about how similar the club was to other « straight » clubs. This was not, however, a criticism, but meant as praise and an affirmation that the club was successful in terms of its ability to be the same as other straight clubs. There was often a sense of pride displayed when there was evidence to suggest that the club was just like any other (straight) tennis club. On one occasion, I was with a group of other members waiting for the next available court and watching the players on court finishing their game. One of the men commented, « You'd never know it was a gay tennis club. » The remark was made as a compliment and demonstrated how the gay club, and gay sports, were

considered as inferior to mainstream (heterosexual) sport. A mark of success was the ability to appear like mainstream sport rather than contest it.

Similar conflicts of interest were found in recent UK-based studies of a gay rugby club (Price and Parker, 2003) and a gay rowing club (Owen, 2002). In these, the practices inherent within traditional sports restricted much of the focus upon « gayness », often to the extent that hegemonic masculinities were reinforced at the expense of subordinate ones. Consequently, the emphasis within gay sports is generally placed upon activities and practices established within the context of traditional sport. The « queer acts » which Butler (1993) describes are supposed to disrupt the formulation of normative gender and make people reinterpret public signs. The evidence collected during the research suggested that the gay tennis club continued to produce more signs of « straight acts » than queer ones.

Pronger (2000) suggests that the emancipatory power which appeared initially within the gay and lesbian community, particularly in its approach to sport, has been quelled in recent years through the attempts to « normalise » and become part of mainstream sport. This is not to say that the gay sports clubs have « failed » as they have been successful in providing the opportunity for some gay people to play sports in a relatively safe environment and that, similar to the wider achievements of the lesbian and gay movement, it has contributed to making gay sport more visible. However, those who are granted greater opportunities to freely participate in gay sport are more likely to have had less traumatic experiences of mainstream sport as children. The evidence in this research suggests that amateur sporting practices in gay sport continue to reinforce discriminatory practices based on bodily performance and heterosexual configurations of gender. Political issues were more often than not displaced by concerns with how sport « should » be played. Consequently, in many cases, playing sport the « right way » becomes the focus, rather than the more complex political and ideological issues which have created the need for an alternative gay space in the first place. Gay sports have attempted to prove their « normality » without fully taking into consideration their relationship to normative constructions. Many gay sports organizations seek legitimisation from traditional sports authorities.

Muñoz (1999) suggests disidentification as a means to resist and challenge generalised understandings of identification. However, within the process of taking part in sports, the individual is more likely to attempt to identify with established practices, rather than contest them. Pronger (1990) suggests that gay sport irony is a step towards challenging heterosexual sensibilities. There was evidence of this within the gay tennis club, but it was not significantly acted upon (Wellard 2002). However, the practice of sport and the on-court performances of the men where greater capital was conferred upon hegemonic masculine displays appeared to diffuse many further opportunities for queerness during the off-court activities.

I was interested in the potential of « queer » when applied to sport as a means of challenging many of the prevalent attitudes found within it. However, as the research progressed, it did appear that there was a wide gulf between the theoretical claims of academic queer theory and the « real » or lived practices of those who took part in sport.

There are instances, such as Pink Flamingo⁴, which may provide opportunities to contest heteronormative assumptions. However, in many cases, these are seen as « light relief » without the critical reflection upon why it is considered such.

Queer acts are important in that they have the potential to disrupt normative understanding. We need to get away from the reiteration of heteronormative assumptions about gender, sexuality and ability. Rather than create a situation where medals are given to gays who « play for real » and, consequently, reinforce heterosexuality as the norm, we need to find ways to embrace physical activities which include all people and allow them to enjoy their bodies in their own terms. The 1st Out Games International Conference on Human Rights held in Montreal 2006 was the first large scale event which incorporated human rights as a central principle in its framework and, from this, we have the opportunity to take a critical look at the practices in mainstream sports which discriminate against other gay people. Much of the research I have been involved with chronicles instances of discriminatory practices within the field

4 – Pink Flamingo is an aquatic event which incorporates a mix of drag, costumes and choreography in the setting of a swimming pool.

of sport and the continued dominance of a heterosexual-based hegemonic masculinity. However, given that gay sports are a relatively recent phenomena and that little critical research has been conducted within this field, I take the more optimistic view that by incorporating human rights as well as individual bodily pleasures within the context of sport and physical activity there is the possibility that gay sports can be adapted to fit the needs of gay people and, at the same time, also provide a visible means to challenge many of the existing discriminatory practices which occur in mainstream sports.

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