



This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/>) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.


C O M M O N S D E E D

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

 **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

 **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

 **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the [Legal Code \(the full license\)](#).

[Disclaimer](#) 

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

Challenging “a man’s game”: women’s interruption of the habitus in football

**Paper presented at the BERA Annual Meeting,
September 2009, Manchester, UK**

Joanne L. Hill, MA

Loughborough University, UK

Corresponding author:

Joanne Hill, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU
j.hill@lboro.ac.uk

Challenging “a man’s game”: women’s interruption of the habitus in football

Abstract

This research investigates the ways in which women football players construct their body experiences and negotiate discourses within a traditionally male-dominated sport. It presents qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with women active in recreational football in the south-east UK. Football remains constructed around such physical attributes as strength, aggressive behaviour, and forceful actions, associated with the social construction of masculinity. In this paper, Bourdieu’s (1990, 1993) notion of the habitus is used to theorise women’s embodiment in the context of football and to reconceptualise the ways that women (re)construct their body experiences while making sense of conventional gendered practices. Two major themes were identified in the data analysis. Firstly, the participants challenged social constructions of football and made sense of the game in alternative ways. Secondly, football can be an empowering location for women to challenge conventional femininity, gender divisions, and to disrupt the gendered habitus. Crucially, the contexts or environments where the participants played football were experienced as inclusive and positive spaces for expressing fluid and non-constraining identities. The potential for the notion of inclusive spaces and interrupting the gendered habitus in physical education contexts can thus be explored.

Introduction

To investigate the place of women in football we must have an understanding of the place of sport in heteronormative, gendered structures, the construction and performance of masculinities and femininities, and their place in the discourses of heterosexuality (Hall, 1996; Griffin, 1998). Heteronormativity is central to the construction of Western sport cultures (MacDonald, 2001), trivialising the experiences and marginalising the positions of participants who do not fit the norm. Exploring the concept of the habitus – dispositions, attitudes and social values learned and embodied over time – enables an examination of how women in football are positioned, or position themselves, in the discourses surrounding their sport, and how they work to disrupt gendered bodily practices.

Discourse, power/knowledge and subjectivity

This paper addresses the construction and contestation of identities within the discursive narratives surrounding football and gender, allowing an exploration of embodiment and construction of physicalities and exploring the power, contradiction and contestation of discourses both hegemonic and local. The social construction of gender works through powerful discourses. To understand the fixing of meanings on the body, we must identify the discourses in which they are embedded. Following Foucault (1978, 1980), discourses are knowledge systems, articulated in language and practice, incorporating meanings and ways of understanding social reality. Power resides in the systems of meanings that are widely considered to be true, fixing reality.

Dominant institutions, those with power, are able to have their discourses reproduced through everyday language and practices, so that their knowledge becomes truth. Yet this fixing of reality is temporary, for knowledge must be constantly reiterated to retain power. Following this, powerful discourse can be challenged and reworked. Discourses also enable individuals to give voice and meaning to experiences and thus to create a consciousness and subjectivity. Identities are assumed by subjects when they take up a position within a discourse, but are continually redefined following multiple interactions with contradictory discourses. Connell (1996: 220) notes that discourses offer individuals a place in a gender order, but individuals ‘determine how they will take it up’. From Davies and Harré’s (1990) theorisation of positioning it can be argued that discourses offer subject positions or possible ways of being that girls and boys come to embody by learning or resisting expected bodily practices.

Gender and habitus in sport and physical education

Socio-cultural norms must be written on the body if they are to be viable – through ritual and constant practice we embody the discourses we negotiate. Body practices position individuals within the multiple discourses they negotiate, including heteronormative discourses (Hauge, 2009), which can be pertinent in understanding the negotiation of deeply embedded meanings in football, embodied gender roles and women’s ability to renegotiate their positions within football. In a number of fields of society, such as sport or education, individuals and groups learn to fit within their conditions of existence because of their habitus, which generate and organise practices and positions so that the individuals adapt to and become compatible with structures and their demands without conscious thought (Bourdieu, 1990, 1993). An individual’s ‘practical sense’ equips her with a ‘feel for the game’ whereby she is predisposed ‘to refuse what is anyway denied’, having a taste only for those things allowed (Bourdieu 1990: 54).

For instance, researchers have shown the ways in which young people develop the embodied dispositions and take up and/or resist physical activity practices in their ongoing negotiations of gendered discourses of the body (Gorely, Holroyd & Kirk, 2003). They find that masculinities and femininities are socially constructed based on notions of gender-appropriate activity and an awareness of the movements and behaviours that would transgress these categories. Findings from this research provide a clear illustration of the processes of learning to become a girl or a boy that young people engage with in their everyday bodily practices. Young’s (1980) process of learning to ‘throw like a girl’ and the gradual development of hampered movements manifests the inscribing of gendered dispositions on the female body. While we can negotiate subject positions in fluid ways, the habitus reminds us that social memory structures, but does not determine, those negotiations. Together, interpretations of sport or sport-based physical education practices, and the inclusive communities where physical identities can be rewritten, enable empowering and multiple subjectivities to develop (Gorely et al., 2003).

Sites of sport practices such as school PE, clubs, and playgrounds represent pedagogical sites central to the social construction of masculinity (Whitson, 1990) and femininity (Paechter, 2003). Sport-based practices support conventional social values of ‘what it means to be a man’ (Griffin, 1998: 16). To learn masculinity boys must display interest and competence in acceptable physical activities. Sports-based

masculinity defines and distinguishes itself by policing of subordinated masculinities and rejecting “feminine” qualities (Wellard, 2006). To accuse a man of “throwing like a girl” is to devalue him, based on stereotypes of the inferior physical capabilities and bodies of women and girls. Despite this, masculinities should be seen as a plurality, produced through practice and embodied, and different social locations may construct different characteristics as hegemonic (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The body practices, shapes and identities in mainstream sports exclude many boys and girls (Paechter, 2003). The range of “acceptable” masculinities offered to boys remains narrow and constrains their PE experiences (Gard, 2008). “Kinaesthetic” bodily movements and sensations are gendered even if they are in reality common to all genders, constraining boys and girls in their range of experiences (Sykes, 2009). Football in the UK has a place in constructions of masculinities with classed as well as gendered implications. Working class masculinities can be locally dominant while also under threat, and working class boys invest heavily in compulsory heterosexuality (Smith, 2007). Performance in football provides a preeminent way of displaying successful masculinity, gaining physical capital that enables men to be treated as high-status, to be viewed as a valued body (Bourdieu, 1984; Messner, 1992; Sparkes et al., 2007).

With regards to school playground football Clark and Paechter (2007) note the investment of boys’ identity into football, attempts to prove their knowledge and expertise, and their ownership of the pitch. Male referees in women’s football have been found to reiterate gender difference through the referee’s affirmation of his authority and of the players’ ignorance or incompetence (Meân, 2001). Here, women in football interrupt the routine production of masculinities.

Embodied practices of heteronormativity

Ideal femininity is constructed as complementary and oppositional to ideal masculinity in order to maintain a heteronormative gender order (Segal, 1997; Weedon, 1999). The discourse of compulsory heterosexuality highlighted by Rich (1980) brought into view the ways in which masculine and feminine bodies are regulated, producing boundaries for identities, marking those we are permitted to have (gender norms) from those we are not. Heterosexism is a system that privileges heterosexuality while stigmatising and marginalising LGBTQ identities and expressions.

With the body central to understanding gender, Butler’s (1990) idea of ‘gender performativity’ explains that gender is something we do, not something we are. Gender is constructed through the gestures, movements and styles of the body, a ‘stylised repetition of acts’ given gendered significance by society/culture that, as they are repeated over time, come to be seen as natural, giving the illusion of ‘an abiding gendered self’ (Butler, 1990: 140). Complicit agreement to afford credibility to gender hides the performance factor: ‘the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness’ (Butler, 1990: 178). However, the persistence of “incoherent” genders provides opportunities to question the intelligibility of the heterosexual matrix. This is taken up in more depth by queer theory that resists the stability of heterosexuality, finding gender ambiguity and mismatches of sexed body, gender presentation and sexual desire (Jagose, 1996). The consequence of deconstructing

gender is that the regulatory heterosexual imperative producing sexed bodies loses its force.

Women in sport

The identification of sport with men and masculine characteristics finds women trespassing on male territory (Theberge, 1985; Bryson, 1987). While heterosexuality constructs men as strong and women as weak or passive, binary gender roles lose their power if women are seen as capable of developing the characteristics and bodies previously reserved for men. However, even just by their presence in sport women can resist and challenge dominant discourses of sport and gender roles.

The myths surrounding the women and girls who participate in sport and physical activity often centre on suspicions of sexual “deviance” and have worked to alienate women from sports or constrain their experiences. Accusations of lesbianism let women know that they have crossed the gender boundary and have threatened male privilege (Griffin, 1998). The association of sport with masculinity ‘feeds an assumption that lesbians are not “real” women’ (Griffin, 1998: 62), and has a massive impact on sense of self (Kidd, 1983; Clarke, 1998, 2004). It leads to perceiving that lesbians unfairly dominate sports over the inferior bodies of heterosexual women. These accusations serve ‘an important social-control function’ in making women defensive, encouraging them to limit their participation and return to the “safety” of femininity and female-appropriate activities (Griffin, 1998: 20). Because of the heteronormative construction of footballing codes and their place in the construction of heterosexual masculinities (Bryson, 1987), all women, whether straight or gay, are affected. The closet in sport is inhabited by all women who fear the accusation of lesbianism, for homophobia can jeopardise the positions of any teacher, coach or sportswoman, thus it successfully polices behaviour (Clarke, 1998; Griffin, 1998).

Many women and girls feel pressure to avoid accusations of lesbianism by performing hyperfemininity (Lenskyj, 1994), providing proof of femaleness where the activities of the body threaten successful reading (Choi, 2000; Stevenson, 2002). Kidd (1983) points out that women’s activity (from the point of view of heterosexism) should mould a fashionable body and the skills for wife/motherhood, part of a complex message that sportswomen may compete as long as it does not distract from their heterosexuality. Where women are granted access to football, in mixed or co-ed settings they are nevertheless expected to perform to a lower standard than their male teammates (Henry & Comeaux, 1999). Clark and Paechter (2007) found that girls must reject femininity in order to embrace football even in the informal setting of the playground. As a result, it can be seen that dominant discourses are intricately negotiated in the lived experiences and everyday gender negotiations of women footballers.

Understandings of “being a girl” are localised, thus the space or culture within which women and girls play is crucial. Within collegiate football, recognised as a heterosexual environment, ‘the women appeared to be developing their own distinct identity as football players’ (Harris, 2005: 187) yet these players constructed themselves as different to other teams whose combined lesbian identity made it easier for them to transgress boundaries of acceptable femininity. This is similar to Caudwell’s (1999, 2002) identification of “dykespaces”, spaces ‘infused with

lesbianism’ (Caudwell, 2002: 24). However, she finds anxiety surrounding heterosexual appearance and behaviour still apparent. Lesbian football players must remain within the glass closet, behaving as though they are not out, for they may give all women footballers ‘a bad name’ (Caudwell, 2002). Butch lesbians face hostility ‘because the glass closet relies on an unmarked sexual identity and the overt appropriation of masculinity/ies shatters any notions of invisibility’ (Caudwell, 1999: 400).

Although researchers have provided valuable findings that evidence how dominant gender discourses work to normalise women’s bodies to the feminine ideal, further feminist work is needed to conceptualise how women also resist discourses in sport in fluid ways. Therefore, this research aimed to investigate how women fit into football cultures and how they work out multiple, conflicting identities. This study addressed the following research questions: 1) How do women footballers construct their body experiences in the context of football? 2) How do women footballers negotiate the habitus within discursive narratives of football and gender?

Methodology

A small-scale study was conducted as partial completion of the dissertation for Master of Arts in Gender Studies. An exploratory, qualitative method was used (Patton, 1990). Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months in the summer of 2008 with six women active in recreational football in the south-east UK. The open-ended interview questions were developed around the following themes: the participants’ introduction to playing football, experiences on the pitch, social life, local football culture and representations of the body. A call for participants was made through university message boards with no stipulations regards the background, age or race of participants. Snowballing led to further contacts. All respondents were white and educated beyond tertiary level. Ages ranged from early 20s to early 40s. Due to time and resource constraints one interview was carried out via email correspondence. All in-person interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, to be coded into themes and analysed. The themes presented in the analysis were noted and developed throughout the transcription; coding processes and readings of early interviews helped to restructure and focus the direction of subsequent interviews (Patton, 2002). All participants were offered pseudonyms for anonymity.

Feminist poststructuralist philosophies guided the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Skeggs (1997: 19) points out that ‘theories always bear the mark of their makers’. The position of the primary researcher in relation to football and gendered discourses potentially impacted on the data collection and analysis. Although a long term fan of football, the researcher’s experience of playing the sport was restricted to school PE lessons between the ages of 10 and 13, after which time circumstances meant that football was no longer offered. Although the researcher’s dispositions towards the sport were constructed by her teenage lack of opportunities, the researcher was able to establish conversation with the participants either through her early football memories, position as a football fan, or in discussions of other sports and physical activities of which she did have experience. Keeping in mind the limitations of a study with a small number of participants, this project aims to provide examples of various ways in which women *may* negotiate gendered discourses and disrupt the habitus. As participants cope with gendered discourses in multiple ways

based on their experiences and the context, results in this study should be understood as contingent upon the specificity of the research setting.

Results and discussion

Two major themes arose: challenging the construction of football, and challenging the construction of the self. Football was experienced as an inclusive community where women have agency in disrupting the dominant meanings and practices both of their sport and of sportswomen, such that empowering identities can be experienced and expressed.

Not just a man’s game: challenging constructions of football

Many of the participants spoke of their introduction to the game through male family members or school football clubs. Some experiences were due to opportunities to play for the school boys’ team, as ‘there were so few girls playing football at that age [primary school]’ (Kate). That these early interests were ascribed to having access to the game through boys could indicate that girls see football as a boys’ game (see Scraton, et al., 1999; Cox & Thompson, 2000). Previous experiences of the impact institutions, including schools, the FA, and the media, can have upon resources and opportunities, or simple acceptance of women in football, have a big influence on the positions women can occupy. Karen recalled at age twelve being picked for her school’s boys’ team because of a shortage of players. She saw this as natural since ‘when you’re twelve the physical differences aren’t so much, they [the boys] weren’t that much bigger’. However the school was in a position to take the opportunity away:

there was a huge fuss afterwards, the authorities at the school ... were absolutely furious...we didn’t get that opportunity again.

For Karen, playing the match was a positive experience but she considers the school inexplicable in its reaction. Bourdieu (1993) argues that the habitus provides a tendency to refuse what is anyway denied and this could have subsequently affected Karen’s dispositions to the extent of curtailing the types of football she subsequently felt suitable for. As the habitus puts emphasis on early experiences, this may have an effect on the long-term perceptions of women towards their legitimacy in football. Learning what is “appropriate” for one’s gender means practicing the skills ‘for a competent performance in particular activities’ (Evans et al., 1987: 64). However, as demonstrated by the ability of the women in this study to participate, habitus can be disrupted.

Nuanced understandings of gendered bodies were evident in the participants’ articulations of men’s and women’s football. Perceptions that men are “better at football” because of an inherent physical superiority were rejected, while the participants acknowledged that football was largely considered a men’s sport because boys’ footballing skills are ‘nurture[d] from an early age’ (Jules). The respondents constructed the successful footballer in terms of strength and speed (‘strong legs, good low centre of gravity – I’m just listing all my qualities’ – Rhiannon), but also other skills including agility, ‘teamwork and good vision’ (Kate), or ‘a good touch’ (Rhiannon). The importance of teamwork and support deserve reiteration:

I think girls are just more, they less want to show off so much, and try to be the best, maybe, I don’t know, *that’s a generalisation*. They kind of look out for each other, the 13 year old girls, they think well she hasn’t had the ball in a while, let’s pass to her. And that is good because the passing game is good. (Rhiannon; emphasis added)

For Rhiannon, while her involvement in coaching girls enables her to take a knowledgeable position, she is keen to use that to advantage and present the girls in a positive light, despite acknowledging her generalisation about girls’ and boys’ behaviour. Karen also constructed her teammates as supportive of ‘the women who are a bit weaker, you know if they do something well they’ll get congratulated on doing that, or you’ll cover their back’. Additionally, Karen believed that exercises and fitness activities typically associated with women, such as Pilates, could introduce something new to men’s training programmes, for she considers that few male footballers ‘are bothered about their health’. Importantly, skills were expressed as capabilities that could be developed by anyone who put in the hard work.

It is certainly not the aim of this paper to compare and contrast the relative merit of men’s and women’s football and it is worth reiterating that ‘it’s [women’s football] just a different game... It needs not to be compared to men’s football but just accepted in its own right’ (Jules). However, Jules’ juxtaposition to media debates on the merits of women’s football and the frequent need for the women’s game to “prove” itself is betrayed by a later statement:

the women’s premiership is never going to be the same standard as the men’s premiership because they’ve been playing longer and it’s just a matter of - it’s historical and there’s the resources pumped into men’s football and you get the money in men’s football and you get better quality players in men’s football. But I think women’s football in its own right is a really entertaining sport and actually I’ve seen much better women’s football games than I’ve seen men’s games! Because men’s games can sometimes be really dull and boring. (Jules)

Karen pointed out that as more young girls experience regular training, they will start to develop the skills for football in the same way that young boys do already. Football is a site where a range of female identities can be embodied. Rhiannon suggests that involvement in a strong football community ‘gives me a certain identity and so if you feel like you’re a footballer it gives you an identity of playing football’. Although the participants were able to justify their positions within football, it is difficult for them to resist all gendered assumptions that are often reiterated in socio-cultural settings:

Rhiannon: If you’re in the pub and watching the game and then chatting to someone, I always feel like, I like telling people I play to qualify it, so they go ok yeah she can talk to us about football. Rather than as a girl who’s just watching the game.

Interviewer: It’s more legitimate for you to talk about football because you’re a player?

Rhiannon: Yeah, yeah. Definitely. That’s sad isn’t it? Lots of blokes aren’t footballers but they’ll happily talk about football all the time.

While Rhiannon constructs herself as a football fan, her subjectivity is mediated by her perception of how her position will be reacted to by other men, so she must add the position of footballer.

Challenging constructions of the self (1): Sporting selves and “soccer bodies”

For all participants, football was one element of a generally active lifestyle. All spoke about other sports and activities they took part in alongside football. The dispositions and behaviours developed in football provide women with confidence and satisfaction in playing. Although previous research has found that having a “soccer body” leads women to embarrassment in their physical capabilities, causing heightened displays of femininity at other times (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Harris, 2005), the participants in this study were unambiguously pleased with the bodies and skills they had developed through football, as Jules demonstrates:

now I’m first team captain, which gives me quite a lot of confidence, and quite a lot of satisfaction as well... I used to be quite a lot bigger you know, and without having football I wouldn’t have had that kind of enthusiasm in getting fit (Jules).

They found little reason for female players to be treated differently because of their gender, preferring to see differences in physical capability more greatly affected by age. Both Jules (age 31) and Karen (age 42) constructed themselves as more skilled and fitter than older male players they encountered, while Karen and Mary (early 40s) mentioned their inability to keep up with younger male and female opposition.

Challenging constructions of the self (2): Heteronormativity in football

The complexities of women’s negotiations of dominant discourses are evident in Denise’s narrative of encountering prejudicial behaviour towards female footballers:

I was coaching one day with this other guy, and he said to me “You can’t be a footballer you’re not gay”. Think I was in shock once he said this to me. He obviously had no idea about women’s football.

Denise challenges her colleague’s presumption through her feminine (read heterosexual) appearance and secondly through her footballing skills:

when I hear people say things about women’s football, I like to prove them wrong and show them that we are just as tough as the men and we sometimes can be better.

Denise was a highly skilled footballer who had tried out for top level clubs and had received a scholarship to study and play football at a US university. She appears to recreate narratives of male superiority in this story, by awarding authority to the dominant position and being only temporarily able to contest it through her actions. Yet she uses the opportunity to resist while reconstructing the notion of a “good footballer” to include women. The habitus she has gained in football has provided her with the confidence needed to defend her place. Although she has been made aware of her marginalised position, she works through practice to transgress it little by little.

Emerging from the conversations were conflicting narratives of sexuality. Stereotypes of women have been seen, in other studies, to negatively affect women’s feelings of confidence within sports (Griffin, 1998; Caudwell, 1999; Harris, 2007). Denise said, ‘most people think that women footballers all have to have short hair and the biggest muscles’, a description that is meant to imply lesbianism. Indications that women’s football inherently attracts non-heterosexual women were refuted, partly because interest in football develops in girls who are yet to define their sexuality:

Loads of women started playing really young, and they hadn’t really thought about their sexuality and so I don’t know why it does attract loads of lesbians (Rhiannon).

Initial comments would be around, oh you’ll be playing with a load of dykes, things like that. But it’s strange for me because when I played for teams, that wasn’t really part of it at all, we’re normal girls, it’s almost as if, you’re so young that we haven’t [thought about our sexuality] (Kate).

Kate’s previous, childhood, experiences were in predominantly feminine, and by implication, heterosexual environments, a group consisting of ‘quite popular girls who were pretty’. However, ‘particularly feminine’ players can sometimes be marginalised: ‘they kind of get gently teased about that’ (Mary). Karen was the only participant to say she felt more comfortable playing for a ‘dyke team’:

I’d contacted this team and said can I come along, watch you play and I went down there ... they all had long hair. And the team they were playing against all had short hair! I thought oh that’s interesting, and so I joined *that* team.

Scraton et al. (1999) found players described themselves as ‘other’ to norms of feminine identity or behaviour. Karen constructs herself in opposition to those she considers to be ‘girly’ footballers who have long hair. She sees no need to perform femininity or heterosexuality and is able to inhabit a position outside of straight cultures. Cox and Thompson’s (2000) investigation into straight female football cultures found that long hair was used to display femininity, to “avoid being mistaken for a man” and to differentiate oneself from the “stereotypical” lesbian player. Yet other participants were members of women’s clubs with a mix of straight and GLB players, where a strong gay identity was nevertheless possible. Rhiannon pointed out that straight players may feel uncomfortable in a team that socialises in gay pubs, but also suggested that:

if you’re a straight girl playing football you might not feel pressure to be feminine because football gives you a good chance not to have to be feminine (Rhiannon).

Both Karen and Rhiannon spoke of purposely seeking out lesbian football communities. All teams need to be ‘gay friendly’ because ‘there’s a lot of gay women that want to play football [although] I know plenty of teams that aren’t predominantly gay’ (Jules). Lesbianism in footballers is not always a source of ‘discomfort...anxiety [and] loathing’ (Caudwell, 1999: 396). On the contrary, it was framed as useful by Rhiannon for advertising the game among lesbians:

I think that like some lesbians join because it's full of other lesbians and so it's a social thing... I love it because I'm a lesbian, so it is a good way to meet people as well.

Separate GLB sports clubs may be a reaction to constraints in mainstream clubs, while also being spaces for resistance (Elling et al, 2003; Elling & Janssen, 2009). Greater tolerance in wider communities and mainstream sport groups will not always remove this need, as it may be more comfortable to be out among people with similar experiences. GLB sports create the opportunity to be an insider, to gain solidarity in an “imagined community” (Pronger, 1990). Hargreaves (2000: 154) highlights women who seek ‘prejudice-free space’ both to enjoy being with other women and to value their own muscular physicality without shame or judgement.

To Karen, women’s sport is the Other to the male norm:

when it does get promoted, it’s always about *ooh women* doing this, it’s framed in a different way from just the sport itself.

She indicates that women’s sport is a novelty and is not watched for the sporting ability but sexualised images (‘they talk about the length of the shorts and stupid stuff’). Karen points to elite women’s tennis to demonstrate the objectification that threatens to be a part of the future of football: the ‘attention ... photo shoots and things like that’, and which can already be seen in places:

last weekend there was a woman footballer posing in her underwear [for a magazine] ... I think this was a let down for all the women footballers as she mentioned that she done it [sic] for women’s football (Denise).

Media disregard for women’s and gay sporting events marginalises while trivialising them, negating claims to legitimate sporting status (Messner, 1992). However, this is a complex area. Rhiannon constructs the sexualisation of sportswomen in a positive light (‘there’s loads of fit women running around, the guys should love it’) because it brings popularity and thus revenue to the game. She sees little danger of women’s football becoming sexualised like tennis because ‘for a start the whole team would have to do it [wear sexy clothing], not just one person’, but this does recall narratives that women’s worth is in their heterosexual attractiveness.

When asked what drew them to football, the participants often constructed an identity around representations of ‘tomboy’:

I guess you’ve got to have that kind of tomboyish thing about you in order to play football (Jules).

Tomboy is used as a positive and acceptable example of female masculinity in the creation of a successful sporting identity and transgression of normative gender roles (Paechter & Clark, 2007). Football and the tomboy image may demonstrate a shift in acceptable female behaviour but physicality remains associated with men and boys, and gender binaries are not challenged. It may lose its acceptability as girls enter adolescence, suggesting that negotiations of gender and sexuality discourses change over time (Hauge, 2009). Although tomboy denotes a certain level of freedom in

doing gender, it ‘valorizes masculinity, boys and men – it does not transform existing gender relations’ (Scraton et al., 1999: 105). By subverting femininity ideologies, tomboys retain a role in perpetuating narratives that “girly” behaviour is at odds with excitement and adventure as a child. Other alternative female identities are similarly contested; Denise constructs herself in opposition to tall, ‘hooligan’, players, recalling abjection of the butch female body (Griffin, 1998; Caudwell, 1999):

I remember my first training, this 6ft 2 girl was running behind me and she kicked the back of my foot and fell on the floor, she got up and was shouting at me full throttle. I couldn’t do anything - she was a football hooligan with no teeth.

Even progressive spaces have a way to go before they are truly inclusive of contested, non-normative subjectivities. Resisting dominant discourses and subject positions requires continuous psychological work (Reay, 2002).

The women’s location in and around a gay-friendly city had a major impact on their perspectives on sexuality, the playing environments available to them and their positions in relation to football and other activities. Often considered to be “the gay capital of the UK”, this city’s inclusive “anything goes” atmosphere provides a safe environment for gay and queer communities:

I thought [my city] would be a bit more open minded about football teams, being quite gay friendly I suppose. So when I moved down here – I never had the urge when I was in London ... I don’t know, it’s just got a more of a community feel about it I suppose, so I thought there’d be something a bit more easily accessible ... [I can be who I want to be], [my city] has a massive impact on it, I don’t feel like I have to dress a certain way or look a certain way (Jules).

Whenever I tell people I play football they seem very unsurprised by it, but you know I live in [the city] (Mary).

Both lesbian and heterosexual players in this city are able, because of their positions in this gay-friendly city, to be differently disposed towards heterosexual expectations. It provides both a safe gay social scene and a place where competitive women’s football is acceptable. Questioning the “truth” of heteronormative and homophobic discourses removes their power. If the community provides a location where it is ok to be whom you wish, the heterosexual imperative has little force in constructing the bodies, subjectivities and experiences of the city’s inhabitants, including women who play football. A visible lesbian presence can dislocate “leaky” compulsory heterosexuality (Caudwell, 2002).

Footballers are aware of and engage with the discourses around them and where gendered discourses do not match their experiences they reshape them through practice and speech. The findings of this study do not present a united position and are often contradictory, but present alternative narratives of the lived experiences of a “man’s game”. The ways that women disrupt the habitus in football are not straightforward. However, the experiences of the participants indicate what is possible within inclusive spaces. It is crucial that wider communities, and not only sporting

locations, are inclusive of multiple identities and sporting bodies. The participants were empowered through playing football and showed agency in reconstructing the discourses surrounding the sport.

Educational implications

Although this research was not conducted in a school-based setting, findings emerging from these women’s making sense of their embodiments in the traditionally male domain of football offer insights that might be useful for understanding young women’s embodied learning in other physical activity settings. First, as the participants in this study experienced, football has the potential to support empowered bodily meanings for women. As Hargreaves (2000: 160) has argued with regards to lesbian sportswomen, ‘principles of inclusiveness and supportive enthusiasm can have a profound psychic effect on individual performers’. Clarke (2004) demonstrates how the spaces of PE are not neutral but powerful in schooling bodies. Sport and PE sites that reproduce conventional masculinity and femininity mark strongly the bodies that transgress gender conventions, with research finding young people make heavy investment in heterosexual conventions of appropriate activity, behaviour and appearance (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Gorely et al., 2003, Smith, 2007). Gorely et al. (2003) suggest that discourses of shape, size and muscularity present PE as a risk to femininity for girls engaging in physical activity, noting that:

physical education ... has been shown to be so strongly linked to the reproduction of the gender order and to the celebration of hegemonic masculinity (Gorely et al., 2003: 443).

While the “hidden curriculum” is still prevalent in school PE (Wellard, 2006), drawing from these findings it can be agreed that engaging girls in football-based curriculum models (e.g., the Sports Education model) might create learning environments empowering for young girls’ physicality, if constructed in a gender-sensitive manner (Gorely et al., 2003).

Second, as young people negotiating a gendered habitus experience contradictions in the way they position themselves and are positioned by others, their ongoing negotiation might be sustained by pedagogies of the body that allow them to become aware of their decisions and actions in order to challenge and disrupt fixed gendered meanings (Azzarito, Solmon & Harrison, 2006). Open critical conversations about issues of the body, gender, and practices must be created in school PE in order to destabilise the sedimented gendered habitus. Precisely because bodily dispositions and practices are learned, not natural, they can be changed over time. An inclusive, gender-relevant (Gorely et al., 2003) and body-focused (Armour, 1999) PE could disrupt the gendered habitus whereby gendered movements have been learned, allowing and encouraging girls’ and boys’ positive participation and full use of bodily capacities in sports and other activities in and out of school.

Third, to offer further directions in making sense of the multiple ways in which young people interpret and embody meanings, while this study explored the experiences of white women, gender constructs also have a racial and class element, and heteronormative discourse also affects men and boys but in very different ways to

women. This study shows the possibilities for challenging boundaries, resisting heteronormative discourses and rewriting football discourses where the embodied subjectivities developed in a progressive environment disrupt gendered physicalities.

Acknowledgements

The data collection for this research project was carried out by the author while enrolled at the University of Sussex. Thanks and acknowledgement to Dr. Alison Phipps and the Department of Gender Studies, University of Sussex.

References

- Azzarito, L., Solomon, M.A. and Harrison Jr, L. (2006). “...If I had a choice I would...” A feminist poststructuralist perspective on girls in physical education. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 77, 222-239.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bryson, L. (1987). Sport and the maintenance of masculine hegemony. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 10, 349-360.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of ‘sex’*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Caudwell, J. (1999). Women’s football in the United Kingdom: theorising gender and unpacking the butch lesbian image. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 23, 390-402.
- Caudwell, J. (2002). Women’s experiences of sexuality in football contexts: a particular and located footballing epistemology. *Football Studies*, 5, 24-45.
- Caudwell, J. (2003). Sporting gender: women’s footballing bodies as sites/sights for the (re)articulation of sex, gender, and desire. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 20, 371-386.
- Choi, P. (2000). *Femininity and the physically active woman*. London: Routledge.

- Clark, S. and Paechter, C. (2007). ‘Why can’t girls play football?’ Gender dynamics and the playground. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12, 261-276.
- Clarke, G. (1998). Queering the pitch and coming out to play: lesbians in physical education and sport. *Sport, Education and Society*, 3, 145-160.
- Clarke, G. (2004). Threatening space: (physical) education and homophobic body work. In J. Evans, B. Davies and J. Wright (Eds.) *Body knowledge and control: studies in the sociology of physical education and health*. London, UK, Routledge, 191-203.
- Cockburn, C. and Clarke, G. (2002). “Everybody’s looking at you!” Girls negotiating the “femininity deficit” they incur in physical education. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 25, 651-665.
- Connell, R.W. (1996). Teaching the boys: new research on masculinity, and gender strategies for schools. *Teachers College Record*, 98, 206-235.
- Connell, R.W. and Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19, 829-859.
- Cox, B. and Thompson, S. (2000). Multiple bodies: sportswomen, soccer and sexuality. *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 35, 5-20.
- Davies, B. and Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: the discursive production of selves. *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20, 43-65.
- Elling, A., de Knop, P. and Knoppers, A. (2003). Gay/lesbian sport clubs and events: places of homo-social bonding and cultural resistance? *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38, 441-456.
- Elling, A. and Janssens, J. (2009). Sexuality as a structuring principle in sport participation: negotiating sports spaces. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44, 71-86.
- Evans, J., Lopez, S., Duncan, M. and Evans, M. (1987). Some thoughts on the political and pedagogical implication of mixed sex grouping in the physical education curriculum. *British Education Research Journal*, 13, 59-71.

- Flintoff, A. and Scraton, S. (2001). Stepping into active leisure? Young women’s perceptions of active lifestyles and their experiences of school physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 6, 5-21.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1971-1977*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Gard, M. (2008). When a boy’s gotta dance: new masculinities, old pleasures. *Sport, Education and Society*, 13, 181-193.
- Gorely, T., Holroyd, R. and Kirk, D. (2003). Muscularity, the habitus and the social construction of gender: towards a gender-relevant physical education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24, 429-448.
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets: lesbians and homophobia in sport*. Champaign: Human Kinetics.
- Hall, M.A. (1996). *Feminism and sporting bodies: essays on theory and practice*. Champaign: Human Kinetics.
- Hargreaves, J. (2000). *Heroines of sport: the politics of difference and identity*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, J. (2005). The image problem in women’s football. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 29, 184-197.
- Harris, J. (2007). Doing gender on and off the pitch: the world of female football players. *Sociological Research Online*, 12. Retrieved 27 July 2009 from <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/1/harris.html>.
- Hauge, M. (2009). Bodily practices and discourses of hetero-femininity: girls’ constitution of subjectivities in their social transition between childhood and adolescence. *Gender and Education*, 21, 293-307.
- Henry, J.M. and Comeaux, H.P. (1999). Gender egalitarianism in co-ed sport: a case study of American soccer. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 34, 277-290.

- Hesse-Biber, S. N., and Leavy, P.L. (2007). *Feminist research practice*. London, Sage Publications.
- Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer Theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Kidd, D. (1983). Getting physical: compulsory heterosexuality and sport. *Canadian Women’s Studies*, 4, 62-65.
- Lenskyj, H. (1994). Sexuality and femininity in sport contexts: issues and alternatives. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 18, 356-376.
- McDonald, M.G. (2001). Queering whiteness: the peculiar case of the Women’s National Basketball Association. *Sociological Perspectives*, 45, 379-396.
- Meân, L. (2001). Identity and discursive practice: doing gender on the football pitch. *Discourse and Society*, 12, 789-815.
- Messner, M. (1988). Sports and male domination: the female athlete as contested ideological terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, 197-211.
- Paechter, C. (2003). Power, bodies, and identity: how different forms of physical education construct varying masculinities and femininities in secondary schools. *Sex Education*, 3, 47-59.
- Paechter, C. and Clark, S. (2007). Who are tomboys and how do we recognize them? *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 20, 342-354.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3rd ed. London: Sage.
- Pronger, B. (1990). *The arena of masculinity: sports, homosexuality and the meaning of sex*. New York: St Martin’s Press.
- Ramanzanoğlu, C. (1993). Introduction. In C. Ramanzanoğlu (Ed.) *Up against Foucault: explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Reay, D. (2002). Shaun’s Story: troubling discourses of white working-class masculinities. *Gender and Education*, 14, 221-234.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, 5, 631-660.

- Scraton, S., Fasting, K., Pfister, G. and Bunel, A. (1999). It’s still a man’s game: the experiences of top-level European women footballers. *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 34, 99-111.
- Segal, L. (1997). *Slow motion: changing masculinities changing men* (2nd ed.). London: Virago.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of Class and Gender*. London/New York/New Delhi: Sage.
- Smith, J. (2007). ‘Ye’ve got to ‘ave balls to play this game sir!’ Boys, peers and fears: the negative influence of school-based ‘cultural accomplices’ in constructing hegemonic masculinities. *Gender and Education*, 19, 179-198.
- Sparkes, A., Partington, E. and Brown, D.H.K. (2007). Bodies as bearers of value: the transmission of jock culture via the ‘twelve commandments’. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12, 295-316.
- Stevenson, D. (2002). Women, sport and globalisation: compelling discourses of sexuality and nation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26, 209-225.
- Sykes, H. (2009, April). Beyond girls and boys: intersex, trans and non-trans subjectivities in physical education. Paper presented at the AERA Annual Conference, 2009, San Diego, CA.
- Theberge, N. (1985). Toward a feminist alternative to sport as a male preserve. *Quest*, 37, 193-202.
- Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory, and the politics of difference*. Oxford and Maldon: Blackwell.
- Wellard, I. (2006). Able bodies and sport participation: social construction of physical ability for gendered and sexually identified bodies. *Sport, Education and Society*, 11, 105-119.
- Whitson, D. (1990). Sport and the social construction of masculinity. In M. Messner and D. Sabo, *Sport, men and the gender order: critical feminist perspectives*. Champaign: Human Kinetics.

Young, I.M. (1980). Throwing like a girl: a phenomenology of bodily comportment, motility and spatiality. *Human Studies*, 3, 137-156.