

Changing positions: The Sexual Politics of A Women's Field Hockey Team 1986-1996

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Abstract

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Despite a huge expansion in the literature on individual aspects of sexual identity and sexuality, and the growth of studies on women in sport, there are still relatively few investigations into women's sporting and sexual subcultures. In addition, practical difficulties frequently preclude the adoption of longitudinal research designs when studying sport groups. This research describes the micro-dynamics of a particular women's field hockey team, tracing the shifting composition of the team from predominantly heterosexual to almost entirely lesbian over the ten year period 1986-1996. A retrospective, longitudinal design was used: data from semi-structured interviews with 26 players were matched against data depicting the changing distribution of heterosexual and lesbian players during the ten year period. Two major findings emerge: first, that the women's sexual identities were more fluid and complex than most of the literature on women in sport implies. Secondly, the status system of the club was more strongly influenced by organisation sexuality than it was by structural tradition. Consequently the status system changed from one based on structure (i.e. years of experience in the club) to one based on culture (i.e. identity as a lesbian organisation) as the number of self-identified lesbians increased beyond 38%.

Keywords:

Sexuality, group, idioculture, women's field hockey

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Sexuality and women's sport

MacKinnon (1982) has argued that control by men over women's sexuality is central to the power that men exercise over women's participation in sport and physical activity. The 1970s concept of 'role conflict', frequently used to justify the discomfort felt by female athletes pursuing their sporting interests, has been roundly criticised by cultural feminists seeking a more sophisticated explanation of gender relations in sport (Hall, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994). Poststructural feminism has helped to deconstruct the link between sex, gender and sexuality and Queer Theory has subverted what were once taken to be 'normal' categories of sexuality - heterosexual, homosexual and bi-sexual (Butler, 1994; Stein, 1997). For social institutions such as sport, that have adopted heterosexual gender as an organising principle (Kolnes, 1995) this presents a severe challenge. Paradoxically, sport is structured around clear sex divisions but at the same time focusses on the physical in a way that allows both individuals and groups to explore and redefine their gender relations and sexual identities.

Fear of homophobic judgement or retribution has caused many lesbians to hide their sexual identity (Clarke, 1994 and 1995; Griffin, 1998; Sparkes, 1994; Woods, 1992). Blinde and Taub (1992) have identified coping strategies adopted by some women in sport in order to distance themselves from the lesbian label. These include adopting overtly feminine features (known as 'apologetics', Felshin, 1974), making fun of lesbian athletes and criticising homosexuals, especially when in conversation with non-athletes. The fear of being labelled as deviant is one device that separates women with different sexual identities from one another: in some cases it has led to lesbians forming their own clubs or associations (Griffin, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994).

This paper reports a study of one women's field hockey team (Shire, 1999) in a British university. Students normally compete for three or four years, depending on the duration of their degree course. Student sport in Britain is not subject to the direct governance of individual universities but is generally organised through the auspices of the Student Union (SU). The SU receives some financial support from the University but also levies fees from individual students. Very few teams have paid coaches and it is not uncommon for teams to coach themselves, as was the case here. Data were collected retrospectively about the composition of the team as it moved through a ten year cycle (1985/6-1995/6) and as it changed from being almost totally heterosexual to being dominated by lesbians. Longitudinal research designs, however, are relatively unusual since they do not fit easily into research funding cycles. The chance to capture data from an entire decade thus represented a rare and exciting opportunity. The aim of the research was to examine how the specific culture of one team, or 'idioculture' to use Fine's (1979) term influenced and contributed to the sexual identities and socialisation of the individual women members.

The study

The study began with a short series of pilot interviews, with three former netball club members and six field hockey club members from the same era and the same university. The purpose of these interviews was to establish the context of the relationships between the netball and hockey clubs at that time and to generate items for the main interviews. Twenty six semi-structured, in depth interviews were conducted with members of the Borough University Hockey Club (BUHC) who had played for the club at some point during the ten seasons.

The interviews focussed on:

- players' socialisation into hockey
- their sexuality in relation to others in the same club and outside it
- team relationships
- the part the hockey team played in their social lives
- how they came to identify themselves as a member of the club
- what influenced their choices in continuing to play hockey after leaving university
- their perceptions of how the sexuality of the team was seen by both the players and outsiders.

The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, focussed particularly on: group relationships and processes within the club; the culture of the club; and the sexual identities of each member. Participants were also asked to discuss their own sexual experiences and the ways in which they identified themselves in terms of sexual orientation.

Because of the sensitive nature of the research (Lee, 1993), a number of ethical issues had to be addressed such as consent of participants (Bell, 1987; Breakwell *et al.*, 1995; Holland *et al.*, 1995; Oakley, 1981; Robson, 1993), confidentiality and sensitivity. For example, several of the participants were actively involved in physical education teaching, for whom exposure as lesbian might have had professional consequences (Clarke, 1996). Under Section 28 of the United Kingdom Local Government Act (1988) employees of Local Education Authorities are proscribed from promoting homosexuality as a "pretended family relationship". Anonymity was therefore assured, and all names, places, competition names and other identifying features were changed. Participants were also given the right of veto over their transcripts.

Team lists were created for the ten years under review by combining old, original team sheets, photographs and the recall of the players who were members at the time. To enable season-by-season comparisons to be made, only players who had played predominantly in the first team at that time were considered. The sexual orientation of each player was recorded, to allow monitoring of organisation sexuality within the group

over the ten years. Those who had had sexual relationships with a woman were defined as 'lesbian' and those who had had relationship with a man were defined as 'heterosexual' for the purposes of the study. This yielded three phases, early years (heterosexual dominance), middle years (lesbian ascendancy and dominance) and late years (lesbian dominance and consolidation) (see Table 1). A stratified quota sample was used to select interview participants, with 14 players identified as lesbians and 12 as heterosexual being interviewed within each of the three time phases.

[Table 1 about here]

The interview transcripts were analysed following the guidelines recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), with the materials coded and patterns matched to the research questions. The texts were scrutinised for regularities, contradictions, patterns and explanations. The analysis was both deductive, drawing out materials to support or refute ideas explored in the literature, and inductive, generating new ideas from the data.

Discussion

Club life - the early years

Consistent with previous literature on girls' socialisation into sport (Greendorfer, 1977; Higginson, 1985; Mota & Queiros, 1996) the participants in this study had been influenced by parents and peers. However, the physical education teachers of the interviewees had had a particularly important impact on their sport choices in adolescence (Hightower, 1982), encouraging them to join local hockey clubs and to enter higher education courses in physical education (of the 26 interviewed 22 were enrolled in such courses). Field hockey (hereafter called hockey) was the main sport of all but two of the interviewees and so the BUHC was regarded as an automatic choice when they arrived at university.

The social life these women experienced in their local clubs before university was fairly limited and many commented how playing for BUHC was very different and that they were unaware, at first, of how significant the club would be in their lives. The wider culture of the university was an important backcloth to their experiences in hockey. Sport was prominent within the university, with rugby and football having the highest profile for men, and hockey and netball for women. All these sports shared some common subcultural features such as 'circle games' (explained below), initiation ceremonies and certain songs. However, as Fine (1979) suggests, each group developed its own particular culture, or idioculture, which was both salient and central to the functioning of the groups of players that comprised the club. The players inherited and consolidated shared systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and customs. There was an underlying hierarchy in the structure of the BUHC, based on players from different years. This status hierarchy was based on the categorisation of the players as 'first', 'second', 'third' or 'fourth' years, with those from the higher years afforded higher status.

On arrival at the university, newcomers to the club attended the 'freshers fair' where they signed up to join various clubs and societies, including BUHC. At the first training session, new members were inducted into the rituals and customs of the hockey club. Several interviewees described their feelings towards this session as being 'nervous', 'intimidated' and 'in awe' of older players. Players had to observe written policies, for example, 'no train no game' and a dress code for away games based on a common university uniform but differentiated by the colour of sweater specific to BUHC. They also had to accept that if two players went for the same team position, the older player was usually given preference.

Up until the first season under study, the captain had selected the teams for games. The players, however, decided that this was undemocratic so in 1985 a new policy was introduced whereby the captain, vice captain and one player from each year made up a selection panel. When a panel member's own position was under discussion she had to leave the room. At the end of the first training session of the new season, the captain and vice captain were thrown into a pond near the training pitch. This simulated a baptism of these two players into their newly-held posts of responsibility. It also served to demonstrate the hierarchical structure of the club since only second and third year members were involved: freshers, who had no knowledge of this ritual and were not invited to attend it, were thus excluded, reinforcing their low status in the group.

Two of the most important customs that newcomers had to learn were singing in the bus on the way back to the university after away games, and playing drinking games. These drinking games were conducted with team members sitting in a large circle (hence called 'circle' games), presided over by a 'madam chairwomen' who was sometimes a third, but more usually a fourth year. Once the players were sitting in this formation, strict rules applied. Those who did not conform could often incur severe drinking penalties. Kelly recounted that she did not want to co-operate by drinking as excessively as some others, even though she wanted to be in the club, so she found ways to subvert the pressure to conform

I can remember them being ...set up as...what seemed to be picking on first years. Rhian got a name for herself in the first week of being gobby and she seemed to get stitched up quite a bit. I didn't want to be like her every Sunday morning [i.e. hung over] so I just kept my mouth shut and watched and listened and learned what to say and what not to say. (Kelly, middle years)

After a traditional fixture early in each season, new members faced their main induction into the club. Each new player had to buy a pint of beer, then the older players placed a condom over the top of the pint and squeezed cream over the top of the condom. The new players had to stand in a line and, on command from the fourth years, had to lick the cream off, bite through the condom and 'head' their beer (drink it down in one go). Until 1986, this custom had been performed without the condom but a member instigated the addition of the condom at that time saying that she felt the captain and vice captain were 'far too nice'

compared with those of previous seasons. However, in her interview, she also identified several lesbian players in the team and described herself as homophobic whilst she was at university.

It is possible that this particular custom was introduced to reinforce what, at that time, was the dominant (hetero)sexuality of the club (see Table 1). Sheard and Dunning (1973) talk of initiation ceremonies in rugby, where the connotations are sexual. They suggest that, during many of these ceremonies, the central theme is “mocking, objectification and defilement of women and homosexuals.” (Sheard & Dunning, 1973, p.7). In the case of BUHC the same homophobic purpose was served. But the response of lesbian players was one of horror. For example, Nadine, a lesbian, said

I hated it because like, sex to me (with a man) was horrible I can remember the picture of us all ...I just got mine out of the way as quickly as possible...you know the thought of having to bite through that was disgusting.
(Nadine, early years)

Some players, especially the ones who identified themselves as lesbians, tried to avoid going on the trip as they knew what was to happen after the game. However, others viewed it as “harmless fun” and felt that it helped to create a sense of belonging to the club.

Although each element of the idioculture held different meanings for individuals, once they understood and had learned them, they provided the basis upon which members could identify collectively with the hockey club. Identifying with a sports club was important to the players due to the salience of sport within the wider university community and especially to the physical education students.

The hockey club was your social life really. More than your year group because although you went to your lectures with your year group the sort and level of sport you played added to your prestige.
(Alex, early years)

Club life - the middle years

Interviewees identified a number of changes to the idioculture that may be explained with reference to both internal and external factors. In 1990 the university merged with another and changed from offering single discipline degrees to modular courses. This weakened the identity of self-contained degree routes, such as physical education. The number of students also increased markedly, and the centrality of physical education declined. The university authorities banned circle games, consequently reducing the moments when the status of the players was most publicly on display. Many of the traditions associated with the early years of the club were changed by these wider organisational triggers. One player said of the club traditions “...it was almost trying to maintain that tradition to try and hold onto something that was slipping through your fingers.” (Mary, middle years).

One of the most marked changes as the club developed from the early to middle years was that members began to spend social time more and more with those who shared the same sexual identities rather than with those from their year group. Sexuality, then, assumed greater importance than year of study as the ten year period went on. Those players identified by the interviewees as being the most influential at this time were all lesbian. Holly explained the influences of those who were considered to have dominant personalities

The people that started to head the circles used to be done by years so Sonya would always head the circles but when she went [1992] that all changed in that it became...it wasn't a year-divided group any more and people like Christine and Sharon who were below me would head circles...and the type of character that somebody was tended to give them that right to be able to do what they wanted.
(Holly, middle years)

Christine and Sharon had had relationships with women before arriving at university: they were known as lesbian and continued to have same-sex relationships during their student years. When asked what could distinguish between the groups who spent social time together, all the early years interviewees answered that it was based on year groups: all the middle and later years members interviewed said that it was based on sexuality. Thus, during the ten year period of study in the club, there was a shift from a *structural status system* based on year of study, to a *cultural status system* based on the players' sexuality.

At around this time, a major national hockey competition for students, that BUHC had won in the 1991/92 season, was discontinued. Several of the participants said that they not only perceived a decline in the competitiveness in the BUHC at this time but also detected a change in social cohesion. Typical of these comments was

...you know we had great fun and the [national competition] just pulled us together so much and maybe that's why the team was so strong...the spirit in the team in my first year was very strong when it was building up to the [competition] but then in my first year the social side was quite heavy and in my second year it slowly dropped off.
(Lesley, late years)

The national competition was a marker for the team to channel their energies and to develop positive group relationships. Without this specific goal to aim for the team as one entity began to fracture into a series of smaller groups. Of course, this process was also influenced by differences in sexual identities and personalities of the players but without a shared sense of direction it seems that the single idioculture could no longer be maintained.

Club life - the late years

Towards the end of the 1991/92 season, and continuing into the next season, arguments began amongst the team and some players' friendships began to weaken. This centred on dissatisfaction with the club captains

and the break-ups of lesbian relationships within the team. As a result, the club mixed less as a whole group and more in the small groups which had become defined by player's sexual identities.

Up until the fourth year it [social life] just tapered off really...that was due to the whole atmosphere of the hockey club and people not liking people or certain captains, just unrest in the hockey club in general.
(Katy, late years)

The social side of things changed a lot in my fourth year...Basically we still had a social life but it was as a consequence of us all [the lesbian members] being friends and going out anyway, rather than going out because it was the hockey club.
(Christine, late years)

In 1993 the university bar, which had been the focus of much of the club's previous social activity, was closed and moved. The lesbians began to go to two gay pubs in the town rather than the new university bar. They also eschewed the night club that most students attended in favour of a gay disco, which served to reinforce the growing divide between the gay/lesbian and straight/heterosexual members of the club.

The change in the status system from structural (based on year of study) to cultural (based on sexual identity) led to changes in the team's customs and rituals. Fewer games were arranged and the songs which had previously been passed down the generations were now written into a songbook for fear that they might be forgotten.

At the end of our fourth year (1995/96) because the away trips weren't as often the first years wouldn't be getting involved in that much singing...I could reel off all the songs in the world and I bet you now some of those first years wouldn't have a clue...in our first year we used to sing through the whole song book but by the time it got to our fourth year we'd be singing a couple of [songs] so it was definitely fading out.
(Diane, late years)

Several of these songs were taken from the men's rugby song repertoire that had overtly heterosexual content and were derogatory both to women and to homosexuals (Sheard & Dunning, 1973). As the number of lesbians in the group increased it became uncomfortable for the club members to sing such songs. Several players felt that they drew unwelcome attention to the sexuality of the players and thus these songs fell into disuse.

'Circles' were also performed less often and were conducted on a more social basis with less emphasis on drinking. This was affected partly by the internal shifts in group dynamics and also by bans imposed by the university authorities (especially in 1987 and 1992) after students became drunk in the circles and damaged university property.

...you would go to the pub, drink in a circle...and that probably happened for about two years solidly on a Wednesday and Saturday night and then later on it didn't become such a big deal. In fact the circle game deteriorated but that was all to do with the change in the [head] of the

university. The [new head] tried to ban things, I think the whole structure of the university was beginning to change. They were trying to get rid of this image of a hardened PE university.
(Ann, early years)

New entrants to the university were worried about becoming involved in playing in circles because they had been warned by the staff in their first week that they might be sent home if they were caught participating.

...as soon as you got into that shape it was hassle, plus at the time in my third and fourth year the university was trying to ban 'circles' so we had 'squares' but because of the hassle of having them I think that's partly why initiations and circles weren't as prominent because the university were trying to ban them.
(Katy, late years)

Some players during this period also felt that they did not want to enforce on newcomers the same pressures that they had experienced as freshers. Recruitment to the BUHC was proving more problematic and interviewees said that the lesbian image of the team contributed to their recruitment difficulties. Whether this was due to the homophobia of those who did not join the team is not possible to say as these people were not interviewed. However, many of the women interviewed said that they knew of potential members who did not join for fear of being labelled lesbian. Griffin (1993, 1998) and Lenskyj (1991) agree that such a fear serves to separate women of different sexual identities within sport. One of the players confirmed this

I mean I had one incident in my fourth year when I was talking to a friend and...we were talking about joining clubs and she said 'I'm not joining the BUHC' and I said 'Why?' and she said 'They're all gay and it's not a very nice atmosphere' and she went on and on about it.
(Kelly, middle years)

Whereas previously the netball club and hockey club members had often spent social time together, they now began to drift apart and no longer shared initiation ceremonies. The two clubs had been on many away trips together before 1990/91 but after this season their relationship deteriorated and they arranged separate fixtures. The women interviewed felt that this was because the netball club wanted to disassociate themselves from the BUHC because it was labelled by outsiders as lesbian and because this became its defining feature.

I think from the netball club,...they were embarrassed [by the sexuality of the hockey players]. You know when you go off to play a fixture together then I think they were very embarrassed by it all.
(Rhian, middle years)

One incident in the local bar illustrates this. During a quiet time, one netball player who was in the bar with a group of her team mates, shouted across to a hockey player to ask her if she was gay. Although the netball player apologised the next day the hockey player felt humiliated "...its [the BUHC] sexuality was becoming a real issue, enough for her [the netball player] to feel that she wanted to confront me." (Sharon,

middle years). This public display of homophobia was one means by which the lesbian label was used to control and humiliate BUHC members.

The selection policy of the BUHC became gradually less democratic as the idioculture shifted towards cultural domination by lesbian players. Individuals in authority began selecting the teams alone, overlooking the selection panel that had operated in the early years. Lesley (late years) complained about this and felt that it was unfair since she had trained hard to earn a place on the team. Holly (middle years) also said that the club

...sort of ran itself by [my] last years [1992-94]...you know that same group of people ...would always play and those that you didn't want to play were put in the second team. Then they disappeared.

As the club moved towards the end of the ten year period under study, it became perceived as a lesbian club, even though the actual numbers identifying as lesbians slightly declined (see Table 1). This perception, in turn, influenced recruitment of new players. Clearly, the changing organisation sexuality was only one factor in the overall changes going on in the lives of the members of the BUHC at this time. There were also structural changes in their degree courses, their university and the number and type of students in their cohort. In addition, there were the personal freedoms and identity challenges associated with being away from home for the first time and the risks and attractions of resisting various sanctions imposed by the university authorities. It is not possible to say which of these might have affected the players most but it is clear that the specific idioculture of the club offered a medium for the exploration of multiple sexualities and that the lesbian sub-group within that idioculture found the hockey club an affirming space.

Straight-gay relations

According to those interviewed, the sexuality of individual players was spoken about more by heterosexual players in the early years than by lesbian players. Heterosexual players said that comments were made to them, mainly by players from other sports clubs, specifically the men's football and rugby clubs and the women's netball club. Jokes were directed at the heterosexual players, intimating that they, too, were lesbian and others outside the club also tried to find out which players were lesbian. Despite this, the netball and hockey players remained on good terms and spent time together socialising after games. The heterosexual women's jokes may well have reflected their own perceived threats about being labelled as lesbian. One, Sally, recalled how she and Gemma had discussed this at the time

*I just think she [Gemma] just suddenly thought to herself... "Oh my god I'm going to be lumped in as a gay hockey player" and she just thought "I don't want that: as much as I don't mind **them** being it I don't want people to say 'hockey-player-you're-gay'".* (Sally, early years)

Woodward (1997) suggests that identities are frequently constructed in terms of binary opposites, such as straight/gay, normal/deviant. If the heterosexual players in the hockey club perceived that outsiders were labelling the club as lesbian then they may have felt that their self-identified status as heterosexual was threatened. They joked about the lesbian women in order to reinforce their heterosexuality to others. Whilst only a few of the heterosexual players said that they found the lesbian presence disturbing, and whilst most continued to like and be friendly with the lesbians in the team, they generally went along with the outsiders' criticisms to avoid having their own sexuality questioned. Ann said

I probably laughed it off [comments about the hockey club]. I probably separated the people I lived with who were gay, from other gay women...but I was probably as guilty about making comments about other gay women that I didn't know as well... (Ann, early years)

Differences in sexuality amongst close friends were, then, rationalised as more acceptable than differences in sexuality amongst the unknown. This social process of separation maintained homophobic prejudice, perhaps because the lesbian hockey players themselves were apolitical. They did not have collective consciousness with their non-hockey playing lesbian sisters nor become engaged in struggles against wider social structural oppressions. To this extent, they typified many closet lesbians in sport who choose an individualised path in order to avoid dealing with wider social conflict.

Whilst social relations were generally good amongst the straight and gay members of the BUHC, there were, from time to time, flashpoints amongst them. Gemma (early years) recounted how she had lost control of a circle game one night and ended up confronting several of the players in the circle about their sexuality. She said she was "...homophobic at the time...I'd just never come across it before and I didn't know how to react...that was the reaction I thought I ought to have."

It appears that the changing organisation sexuality had a more profound effect on the members from the early years, when the club seemed to be virtually all heterosexual, than it did on the later groups, when lesbianism was more visible. Clarke (1995) has also found, in her work on lesbian physical education teachers, that lesbians in predominantly heterosexual groups feel a greater need to conceal their sexuality. For Sally, the homophobic fears stopped her having a 'best friend', as she had at school and Gemma said that having a boyfriend throughout her student days acted as a safeguard against being labelled as gay. The alibi of being heterosexual this afforded her acted like Jan Felshin's (1974) concept of the 'apologetic' in providing an overt demonstration of her heterosexual femininity to pre-empt questions about her being a 'real' (i.e. heterosexual) woman. Both Ann and Lee (heterosexual, early years) said that they were worried about being labelled as lesbian and that they gravitated towards the men's clubs for their social life as they perceived the lesbians in the hockey club spending more and more time together.

The lesbian players' increasing openness about their sexuality also added to the amount and type of attention that was being focussed on the hockey club. In 1990-91 an incident took place where two women who were together in the bar after a game had their arms around each other. Men from the football and rugby teams approached Kelly (middle years) and said that 'something needed to be done'. Kelly felt she had been approached because she was heterosexual and because the men had not wanted to confront the lesbians directly. Kelly went to the club captain, Nadine, and Nadine held a meeting to raise the issue. *'...everyone in the bar was almost waiting for a confrontation...and I thought that it was getting into a very threatening situation and that's why I said something.'* (Kelly, middle years). This incident coincided with the increase of lesbian club members from 38% to 58% and with recollections by many players that this was a time of more open aggression towards the club by outsiders.

Griffin (1992) maintains that labelling all women in sport in this way has been used to intimidate and control women's participation in sport and this was certainly the case for the players in this study. In the following year (1991/92), however, there was virtually no change in the organisation sexuality (Hearn, 1989) of the club, either culturally or structurally (with 58% and 57% respectively being lesbians). The club won the national championships and players from this period identified it as one of the most successful seasons, with good internal relationships and fewer adverse comments from outsiders. With a stable base and players and non-players alike adjusting to the composition of the club, BUHC had perhaps moved to the final stage of Tuckman's (1965) four stages of group development, that of 'performing' after first forming, storming and norming.

The 1992/93 season was seen by many of the players as especially relevant. Twelve new members joined the club who, either that year or previously, had had a relationship with a woman. They thus shared not only year group status but also sexuality. Indeed, Holly (middle years) remarked that *"the outsiders became those people that were straight."* One of the new insiders, Christine (late years), said *"Because there was so many of us...we didn't actually need any of them [heterosexuals] to be having a good time and we just made our own group."*

That year the club gradually separated into two groups, lesbian and heterosexual. They mixed at different places and at different times of the week and this, in turn, led to the demise of the club's rituals and customs. Christine (lesbian, late years) said *"...we didn't need to be accepted by them because if they didn't accept us we were quite happy on our own."* Similarly, at the same time as the heterosexual players were wishing to avoid being labelled as lesbian and putting more social distance between themselves and the lesbian player, they also began to feel excluded from the lesbian group's in-jokes. The lesbians developed their solidarity in various ways. One included keeping a list, held behind the bar, of all those who were perceived to be gay but had not 'come out'. A soft toy was awarded regularly for fun to someone on this

list by the gay women who worked behind the bar and they sometimes teased heterosexuals in the club about being ineligible for the award.

As with other studies of student life (Moffat, 1991; Golden, 1987), 'being away from home' was mentioned several times as a primary reason why women took the opportunity to have same-sex relationships. Nadine went on to have a lesbian relationship in her first year. At that time there were four self-identified lesbians in the club who started to spend time together and develop a sub-group, causing the heterosexual players to feel somewhat left out.

I can remember sometimes feeling a bit shut out. I can remember being chatty and pally with Alex and Fiona as individuals but then quite often you'd get to training and you'd been out on a Tuesday night and thinking I'm not really here...I'm not really fitting in now and then all starting off after a hockey game and having beers together and then by the end of the evening it was definitely an 'us and them' situation.
(Gemma, early years)

As the club moved towards its late years period the proportion of lesbian players reduced but the organisational, lesbian ethos of the middle years continued. As players progressed into the later years the physical education major course ended and new players arrived from courses that had little or no connection with sport. The animosity experienced by the lesbian players in 1992/93 had led to the student bar being closed for a while so these players had begun to spend social time as a group off campus in local gay bars and discos. Circles took place less frequently and were less strict. After games, the heterosexual and lesbian players might have a drink together and make tentative arrangements to meet up again later but the two groups usually gravitated towards their own social spaces and developed their own idiosyncratic norms.

Lesbian relations

More than half the women interviewed knew lesbians from their previous hockey clubs. Some talked about close but non-sexual friendships with school friends who influenced their later sexual experiences with women. Only two women claimed having a 'gay lifestyle' before commencing university. Four had had one or more relationships with other women that they had kept hidden. All those interviewed had boyfriends at one time or another before or during their student days. During the course of their time at university fourteen of the 26 women interviewed had either one or more relationships with a woman.

The group structure, social behaviour and organisation sexuality all influenced and supported the women's choices of relationship. Fiona (early years) identified as lesbian and considered herself to have had a 'gay lifestyle' before university but was closet (not open about her sexual identity) at first. She became more open when another player, Alex, came out to her and the two of them subsequently developed a strong friendship. The next year, Nadine arrived at university and joined the hockey club. She had had no previous

same-sex relationship although she said she knew lesbians before becoming a student and that she identified closely with them.

I think at that time when I hadn't admitted to myself, you look at people and you... not fancy them but would admire them be the right word? ...you'd want to be like that and that was probably how I felt...I think it was...being away from home for the first time and you can go off and do what you want...actually go off and do something about it. (Nadine, early years)

Many of those who experienced their first same-sex relationship as a student said they were intrigued when they became aware that there were lesbians in the team

...because it was the unknown... I suppose it was because the intrigue and the wanting to know but also the intrigue of what it was like and what happened ...that led you deeper into the social group and also the wanting to talk to certain people or having conversations with certain people in the group. (Mary, middle years)

During the middle years the proportion of lesbian players in BUHC increased to 50% and eventually to over 80%. It was during this time that the players saw the club as a lesbian club. More and more women in the hockey club were having relationships with each other and were 'coming out' as they found it easier to be open about their sexuality. They were more relaxed and enjoying a safe environment in which to explore sexual identities.

...in my fourth year there were definitely groups and the lesbians I felt...were much more open about their sexuality. Jamie, Belinda, Mary, Sharon and they were involved in very open relationships...and I think everyone was very much aware of who was and who wasn't [lesbian] but in the first and second year it was kept more under wraps...I think there was a lot of guessing. (Sonya, middle years)

These findings support Cahn's (1994) argument that women's participation in sport has enabled them to explore unconventional sexual identities. Despite the homosexual stigma that has beset women who participate in sport, *these* women found themselves in an environment that allowed the opportunity for self-expression. The findings, however, contradict those of Gramick (1984) who found three-fifths of her sample had arrived at some kind of recognition of their sexuality as lesbian before entry into lesbian circles. In BUHC the number was less than half. Gramick suggested that the homosexual community 'may not function as a significant factor in developing lesbian awareness' (p. 41) whereas here, it was precisely the community of the BUHC that enabled many of the women to explore their sexuality. This may be linked to the age and student status of the women studied here and also with Birrell and Cole's (1994) suggestion that physical education has acted as a 'field of force' to lesbians because they are drawn by the sense of difference it offers, the physical focus and the female culture it nurtures.

By 1990, 58% of the women in the club had had a lesbian experience and by now the perception of outsiders was that the club had become predominantly lesbian. This was the pivotal year when the status hierarchy shifted from one based on year group to one based on sexual identity. New members therefore

viewed the social life of the club as evolving around the lesbian players. This resulted in them spending more time with lesbian members and often culminated in them establishing a same-sex relationship from that group.

I was intrigued by it all. I liked the company of the people I was going around with and probably going round with them, that did make a difference and I got to like those people in a... more than just a friendship way with some of them and it just went from there...if I hadn't met them then maybe I would never have tried it. (Elaine, later years)

Hart and Richardson (1981) suggest that some women build on positive same-sex relationships from adolescence when they become students and this certainly happened in this study. Newcomers to the team related to and admired the high status, lesbian-identified players and knew that failing to identify in the same way risked ostracism from them.

I just always saw them out enjoying themselves after a game and thought that ...well, that would be quite nice...so I suppose I did try to get into that group because they seemed to have a lot more fun than the other group...I think I was intrigued by it because there was so many of them that were [lesbian] I just thought I'd try it out to see what happened. (Kay, later years)

So 'trying out' their sexuality was made more comfortable by the open environment and social atmosphere of the hockey club. "...it [BUHC] was a really tight-knit community and you had time and space to feel secure in what you were doing." (Holly, middle years). This also supported those who had had same-sex relationships before coming to university and helped them to become a close, self-sustaining community despite negative comments levelled at them by outsiders.

...it actually became a more and more safe relaxed environment...it was just because we were all doing the same thing we all understood and could be ourselves...whereas there actually was quite a lot of hostility towards the hockey club in the end because the more it was seen by other people and other clubs to be gay the more hostile people became really. (Jamie, middle years)

Lesbian players used social events at gay bars and discos off campus to consolidate their sense of community and to induct new players whom they thought might have the potential for same-sex relationships. "...they would only ask you to that disco if they thought that you were ready for it or if you were accepted within it for them to see that part of you." (Mary, middle years)

The established lesbian players targetted particular newcomers:

...we'd include them more, pick on them more in circle games...you'd give them more attention...you made more of an effort to make them feel comfortable and you'd chat to them more and you might say 'Oh, we're doing this, do you want to come with us?' (Jamie, Middle years)

...once people got an inkling [someone could be lesbian] people were, like 'Go on come out with us'...so, yeah if there was any kind of doubts about their sexuality they were more likely to get asked than someone that was going to be straight or had a boyfriend, definitely. (Tina, late years)

So, from the players' own accounts, as the organisation sexuality of the club shifted to be more openly lesbian, the more supported the players who had had previous same-sex relationships felt and the easier it was for those exploring their homosexuality to do so. However, despite the fact that all those interviewed for this study either identified themselves with a group seen by outsiders as lesbian, only five BUHC women self-identified as 'lesbian or gay'. Of these, three identified as lesbian before university, one of whom, Nadine, had waited until she got to university before actively pursuing a same-sex relationship because she *"didn't want to let her family down."* Of the nine players perceived by other interviewees as 'lesbian', three said they found both men and women attractive but two of those said they were actually having relationships with women. The third said she *"fancies people and I don't consider people have a sexuality"* (Christine, late years). Sharon (middle years) did not *"consider that people are heterosexual or gay"* and felt she could have relationships with either. Diane (late years) said she saw herself at university as *"straight and having a relationship with a women"* yet she identified others who had relationships with women as 'gay'. She now saw herself as *"more for women but still wouldn't stick a label on myself"*. Although Holly did not identify herself as lesbian or gay she said she would not have had a relationship with a man and, as was the case with Diane, her subsequent relationships since leaving university have all been with women. Elaine (late years) saw herself as continuing to have relationships with women but at some point she did want to marry and have children, although she was unsure how this would happen! Kay (late years) felt she was attracted to both men and women and was equally open to having relationships with either.

Deconstructing sexuality

In line with Queer Theory (Butler, 1994; Stein, 1997), many of the women interviewed for this study perceived their sexuality as something fluid that they constructed differently at different points in their lives to suit themselves. Although many of the women identified others in their friendship groups as gay or lesbian and considered themselves to be part of that group, they were reluctant to use the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' to identify themselves. They preferred to see themselves as women who had relationships with other women. More women used the word 'gay' in their interviews when describing some other women's sexualities: 'lesbian' was very seldom used and when it was, it was normally used in a derogatory way when describing how they thought outsiders saw the women's hockey club.

Gramick (1984) maintains that it is frequent same-sex behaviour that contributes to a lesbian identification and that there is a link between maintaining a stable lesbian relationships and sexual identity. Few of the relationships that the women in this study had whilst in BUHC would be considered stable, since they

commonly lasted only a few months. The women frequently changed partners and this may help to explain why they did not consolidate a lesbian identity. It was the players who had left in the early and middle years who tended to identify themselves more clearly as lesbian or gay and most of them, since leaving university, have had longer, more stable relationships with women. Ten of the twelve women who were labelled 'heterosexual' at the start of this study (see Table 1) also self-identified as heterosexual and the other two said they would not close themselves off to the possibility of a relationship with a woman at some point in the future.

The process by which the women in this study came to identify themselves and their sexualities was and is complex. Many of those interviewed, especially those considered lesbian, said they found it difficult to answer how they perceived their own sexuality during their student days. It was also clear that most of them did not want to label themselves as lesbian or gay. This was probably because of the negative ways in which they were viewed by outsiders and the negative stereotypes associated with the terms. Nevertheless, all but two of those identified as lesbian for the study have continued to have relationships with women and to evolve their social lives with and around women.

Clearly, many of the women faced conflicts in dealing with their own sexual identities as students. They were confronted by two opposing viewpoints: first, they saw women having relationships with other women in ways considered open and normal. Their social lives revolved around each other and they had many positive experiences that developed in a community that was supportive of their choice to have same-sex relationships. At the same time, however, they were faced with abusive and threatening behaviour from outsiders and the fact that heterosexual women left the club because of its 'reputation'. They were therefore confronted with situations in which they had to defend their own behaviour. One coping mechanism was to avoid using the terms 'lesbian' or 'gay', even when discussing how others saw them, because of what the terms had come to mean. They saw their relationships with other women positively and none expressed regret at having same-sex relationships: their view was supported and influenced by the community of the hockey club.

Conclusions

The student hockey club at the centre of this study provided an environment that was conducive for women to feel that they wanted to explore their sexuality by having relationships with other women. This was influenced by the fact that they were away from home and not in jobs, thereby escaping the surveillance of either family or employers. The hockey club provided both role models and a supportive, idiosyncratic community where there was freedom to experiment with same-sex relationships.

The results of this study show that, as the organisation sexuality of BUHC began to change, so did its idioculture. In the three seasons 1987-1990, players from the early years (1986-1990), specifically the heterosexual players, felt that a particular group of women within the club began to mix separately at certain times. This group was recognised as associated with the players' sexuality. During the early years of the study, when lesbians in the club held minority status, the relations between players of different sexualities were friendly and the idioculture of the club centred around training, matches and going out together on each of these occasions.

At the start of the 1990/91 season the tip in the balance occurred, with lesbians becoming a majority for the first time. At this point, although relationships remained positive within the club, the players recognised that the lesbian members were beginning to mix together off campus and at local gay pubs and discos. Up to this point, the status hierarchy within the club had been aligned with year of study but in 1992, when an especially high number of new players joined the club, and who were later identified by other players as lesbian, a crucial shift took place. With the percentage of lesbians during the season rising to 84%, the *structural status system* (based on year of study) was replaced by a *cultural status system* (based on sexuality). Subsequently, relationships between the heterosexual and lesbian players were affected negatively. As long lesbians were in the minority, it appears that the heterosexual members did not feel that their own sexual identity was questioned by outsiders. Once lesbians players were in the majority, however, then heterosexual players felt that they had to defend themselves against the label 'lesbian' and this served to divide the club even further along sexuality lines.

It could be argued that the changes evident in this group were a function of sexual maturation, not of organisation sexuality, especially given the age of the students involved. Certainly there is a strong likelihood that the combination of maturational and situational factors was at work here, with sexual identity formation ongoing and the away-from-home setting giving relative freedom for sexual experimentation (Moffat, 1991; Golden, 1987). In order to test this supposition it would be necessary to find and monitor an equivalent-aged group of non-student/club athletes whose membership rotated over a ten year period. In practice that would be extremely difficult to do. It might also be suggested that the maturation/location nexus studied here would yield similar results for a group of male athletes. However, that proposition falsely presupposes equivalent conditions in the surrounding gender order when it has been demonstrated repeatedly that the gender culture provides males athletes with a very different relationship to power and sexuality than their female counterparts (Messner 1992; Hall 1996). As Brian Pronger (1990) has shown, orthodox all-male sport promotes homo-eroticism, whether student-based or not, yet inhibits sexual boundary violation by gay males because of its strong association with heterosexual manliness. Paradoxically, this reinforces homophobia in sport at the same time as marking sport as a potential gay male space.

This study indicates, as others have done (Cahn, 1994; Krane, 1996; Palzkill, 1990), that there appears to be a higher than expected proportion of lesbians in sport and that sport offers a community in which women are able to celebrate, enjoy and explore their sexualities. Whilst at university, the women in this study formed their own community and created an idioculture which, at that time, was central in shaping their sexual lives. Despite the homophobic attitudes they faced, both from some heterosexual team mates and by outsiders, the women continued to play sport, in stark contrast to some other lesbian-identified women who face the same situation (Wolf, 1990; Yates *et al.*, 1984). Added to this, all but two of the players identified as lesbian in this study have continued to have same-sex relationships. Many said how important the hockey club they now play for has become in supporting them in continued explorations of their sexuality. These communities have indeed provided them with some kind of sanctuary where they can be open about their sexual orientation. In contrast, many of them have had to conceal their sexual orientation in their working lives for fear of losing their jobs. As Clarke (1995, 1998) has also found, this is especially so for the schoolteachers for whom, because of English Law, open lesbianism is still an occupational hazard.

Note

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Table 1 Sampling frame for the main interviews showing time phases, false names and number of 'lesbians' and 'heterosexuals' interviewed

Year	Season	% Lesbian	Phase	'Lesbians' interviewed	'Heterosexuals' interviewed	Total interviewed
1	1986/87	8%	EARLY YEARS	Fiona	Gemma	8
2	1987/88	31%		Alex	Sally	
3	1988/89	42%		Trixie	Lee	
4	1989/90	38%		Nadine	Ann	
5	1990/91	58%	MIDDLE YEARS	Rhian	Kelly	9
6	1991/92	57%		Jamie	Sonya	
7	1992/93	84%		Sharon	Helen	
				Mary Holly	Lesley	
8	1993/94	65%	LATE YEARS	Christine	Beth	9
9	1994/95	65%		Diane	Katy	
10	1995/96	65%		Elaine	Susan	
				Tina Kay	Yvonne	
			TOTAL	14	12	26