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“Soccer is a matter of real men?” Sexist and homophobic attitudes in three Italian soccer teams differentiated by sexual orientation and gender identity

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During the 1980s and early 1990s, homophobia and sexism were pervasive in sport contexts due to their sex-segregation, male-domination, and heteronormative culture. In the last two decades, a change in attitudes toward gender and sexuality, in particular within typically masculine sports, has been observed. Notwithstanding that, no research assessing if this change also occurred in Italy was conducted. Using semi-structured focus groups and adopting the framework of Inclusive Masculinity Theory, the current study explored sexist and homophobic attitudes in three Italian soccer teams differentiated by gender and sexual orientation. Team 1 comprised openly gay male athletes, Team 2 comprised both lesbian and heterosexual women, and Team 3 comprised heterosexual men. Narratives were analysed through constant comparison analysis. Specific macro-categories were identified in each team, as follows: Team 1: need for affiliation, in/visibility, perceived homophobia, and perceived institutionalised homophobia; Team 2: need for affiliation, masculine dominance, equal opportunities, and crossing gender boundaries; and Team 3: presumption of heterosexuality, female inferiority, and tendency toward a homosocial law. The results suggest that soccer, in Italy, still represents a context organised around men’s dominance over women and the stigmatisation of gay men. Notwithstanding, they suggest also that we are witnessing an interlocutory phase where some heterosexual soccer players are starting to challenge homophobia but, at the same time, women and openly gay players still perceive a homohysterical culture. The discussion is contextualised in the social context where discourses arose.

Keywords: soccer; homophobia; sexism; homosexuality; Inclusive Masculinity Theory; femininity

Most of the research aimed at deepening the link between gender and sports, as well as on attitudes toward women and gay male athletes, has been carried out in the UK (e.g. Adams, Anderson, & McCormack, 2010; Price & Parker, 2003) and the USA (e.g. Anderson, 2014; Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). In these contexts, according to Anderson (2014), team-sport athletes have promoted a softer form of masculinity. This was due to the decline of homophobia that has characterised the two last decades (e.g. Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016).

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To our knowledge, in Italy, studies specifically addressing sexism and homophobia in sport settings have not yet been reported. Thus, we were interested in exploring sexist and homophobic attitudes within three Italian soccer teams enrolled in the championship¹ for a region in Southern Italy. The first soccer team comprised 12 openly gay male athletes, the second comprised 8 both lesbian and heterosexual female soccer players, and the third comprised 10 heterosexual men. Despite some studies exploring homophobic attitudes in sport teams and/or gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual athletes (e.g. Anderson, 2008, 2011; Price & Parker, 2003; Wedgwood, 2004), to our knowledge no studies have applied similar questions to different soccer teams taking into account the gender and sexual differences in the construction of gender discourses, homophobia, and masculinity.

In the following, we will first provide a brief overview of sexism and homophobia in sport settings where a shift in the attitudes on sexuality and gender has occurred. Secondly, we will address the theoretical framework which guided our research that is Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT). IMT was chosen as theoretical framework because it has already been applied in Anglo-American cultures and studying sexism and homophobia in a new reality could help identify cultural differences and assess whether changes in masculinities have occurred similarly to those contexts.

Sexism and homophobia in sport settings in the last three decades

During the 1980s and early 1990s, sport settings were characterised by high levels of sexism and homophobia. For instance, Connell (1987) advanced a hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight an intramasculine hierarchical structure that positioned gay men at the bottom. Pronger (1990) spoke about an orthodox masculinity, while Messner (1992) stated that boys in sport learned early that being gay was an unacceptable status. Furthermore, Plummer (1999) spoke about a socially acceptable form of heteromascularity which, according to Cleland (2015), was particularly present in the team sport of soccer. Most of the research analysing the relationship between gender and sport was based on the assumption that sport functioned as a mechanism of masculinisation (e.g. Adams et al., 2010) and as a milieu in which men's dominance over women was promoted and maintained (Pronger, 1990). As affirmed by Adams et al. (2010), this helped men to increase their masculine capital among peers. In turn, this masculine capital reinforced what Anderson (2008) called *homosocial environment*, or rather a micro-environment consisting only of men, which limited social contact with women promoting a form of masculinity imbued with an orthodox view regarding women that, in turn, ended up reproducing the patriarchy and devaluating both women and gay men. However, Anderson (2008) showed that when men have more contact with women, competing in the gender-integrated sports, they are able to positively change their attitudes toward women. Thus, in male-dominated sports, such as soccer and rugby, sexual and gender stereotypes and prejudices were used and reproduced to preserve men's superiority and power, relegating to a lower status whatever was not considered to be masculine (Anderson, 2005).

In the last two decades, research has reported a change in the attitudes toward gender and sexuality, in particular within typically masculine sports (Adams, 2011; Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2009; Anderson et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2011; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; McCormack, 2011a; Nylund, 2007). Considering, for instance, the participation of openly gay male athletes within sport settings, Anderson (2011) compared interviews with 26 openly gay male athletes who came out between 2008 and 2010 and interviews with another 26 gay male athletes who came out between 2000 and 2002. Anderson (2011) reported that the first group showed better experiences after coming out than those lived by the second group, due to less heterosexism experienced and stronger support received by their teammates. Along the same lines, in

a study exploring fans' and industry professionals' perceptions of gay professional soccer players, Cashmore (2011) reported that the majority of participants obstructed homophobia by explaining that homophobic abuses are good humour banter. At the same time, the majority of the sample welcomed gay soccer players, as their presence was perceived as transformative. Finally, in the recent work by Anderson et al. (2016), it was highlighted that there is now an ever greater acceptance toward both openly gay and openly lesbian athletes.

Summarising, as suggested by Anderson and McCormack (*in press*), while the 1980s were characterised by extreme levels of homophobia and the 1990s by a progressive decline in stigmatisation, the early to mid-2000s showed a rapid decline in homophobia, in particular in young men. Despite these changes were also quantitatively revealed (e.g. Bush, Anderson, & Carr, 2012), not all research has shown a similar decline of homophobia and sexism. For example, considering the attitudes toward gay men, Roper and Halloran (2007), in a study exploring attitudes toward lesbians and gay men among 371 American heterosexual male and female collegiate student-athletes, reported that male athletes showed more negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than female athletes and that athletes who affirmed having contact with gay men and lesbians showed more positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than those who did not. The higher prevalence of homophobia observed in male athletes compared to female athletes was also confirmed by Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite, and Southall (2009). Despite this, a further investigation by Southall, Anderson, Southall, Nagel, and Polite (2011) showed that the majority of white male athletes (74%) were supportive of homosexuality, compared to only 38% of black American athletes.

Considering, instead, the attitudes toward women, some studies showed not so positive outcomes. This seems particularly true within soccer perhaps because it represents one of the most masculine sports. For example, in a study by McDowell and Schaffner (2011) analysing the gender discourses in sports through the reality TV show *The Gender Bowl*, the authors reported that the show was predominantly structured as a "battle of sexes," due to the tendency of male participants to maintain male athletic superiority and the parallel tendency of female participants to promote equality between opponents. Furthermore, McDowell and Schaffner (2011) analysed the consequences of the women's entrance into traditionally masculine sports. They argued that women ended up appropriating masculine behaviours and language practices with the aim of being successful and that women generated fear in men related to the possibility of losing the game and, thus, the likelihood that gender boundaries will be surpassed. Thus, as also reported by Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker (2012), female athletes who exhibit power and strength threaten the male hegemony.

The theoretical framework: Inclusive Masculinities Theory (IMT)

The relatively rapid changes that occurred in sport settings, and generally in society, in societal norms regarding sexuality and gender probably lead Anderson (2009) to develop a theory based on the concept of multiple masculinities co-existing without any hierarchical disposition. IMT is based on the empirical evidence that behaviours of young heterosexual men have become more inclusive in the US and the UK contexts. For example, they reject homophobia, include gay peers in their networks, are physical tactile with other men, etc. (McCormack & Anderson, 2014). IMT is strictly interrelated with the concept of "homophobia," or rather the fear of being perceived as gay where a homophobic culture exists. According to Anderson (2009), a culture can be defined as homophobic if three conditions are satisfied: this culture maintains antipathy toward gay men, there is a general awareness that in that culture a great number of gay men exist, and there is the belief that gender and sexuality are conflated. If these three conditions are met, homophobia becomes a weapon to police gender, because

people are afraid to be perceived as gay. In these cultures, men's behaviours are strongly restricted and a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995) is accented. IMT postulates that a deep change in masculinities occurs when homophobia decreases, and this decrease is associated with less hierarchical stratification of masculinities and with a smaller degree of stigmatisation of femininity in men. It means that the change in attitudes toward gender and sexuality in sport may be read as a decline in homophobia which, in turn, made masculinities more fluid.

An interesting application of this theory is represented by McCormack's (2011b) four-stage model of homosexually themed language. This model is based on the assumption, revealed from the previous literature, that what makes language homophobic is its pernicious intent and its negative social effect. McCormack (2011b) adds a third requisite which makes the language homophobic, its use in a homophobic environment. In times of high homophobia, men use homophobic language to consolidate their masculine and heterosexual identity, and thus a phrase such as "that's so gay" has a pernicious intent and negative social effect. This is the first stage of the model, called "homophobic language." On the contrary, when homophobia is absent and the culture is gay-friendly, men do not need to consolidate their identity, nor to adapt to a heteronormative ideal. In this case, "that's so gay" has a positive social effect because this pro-gay language is not used with some specific intention, but as a mechanism for bonding boys through emotional intimacy or inclusion of openly gay peers. This represents the fourth stage of the model, called "pro-gay language." Between these two extremes of the continuum, there are two other stages. The second stage, called "fag discourse," occurs in those environments that are slightly less homophobic, but in which there are also people who support gay rights. Thus, in this context, some young men use fag discourse with pernicious intent, while other men not. The third stage, called "gay discourse," occurs in those environments where young men are not particularly worried about being perceived as gay. In this case, "that's so gay" is used to express dissatisfaction and frustration, but not to marginalise gay men. Indeed, young men using this expression feel that "gay" is not associated with same-sex desire and behaviours.

However, IMT was criticised for different reasons. For instance, De Boise (2015) argued that homophobia has not declined and is still prevalent, and claiming otherwise is dangerous. Furthermore, De Boise (2015) argued that homophobia fails because it does not account for institutionalised heterosexual privilege. Another critique of IMT is that this theory does not account for the role and nature of patriarchy (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; O'Neill, 2015). For an overview of the answers to these critiques see Anderson and McCormack (in press).

Recently, some authors (e.g. Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) proposed *hybrid masculinities* as a useful concept in making sense of changes in contemporary young, White, and heterosexual masculinities in Western cultures, or rather those categories concentrating power and authority in the gender order. As stated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), research exploring hybrid masculinities is concerned with the "selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalised and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities" (p. 246). Thus, this concept focuses on the ways in which straight, young, and White men selectively incorporate different performances of masculinities that historically were associated with non-hegemonic masculinities. In opposition to Anderson's IMT, authors proposing the hybrid masculinities concept (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001) posit that, paradoxically, these forms of masculinities obscurely reproduce contemporary systems of gendered and sexual inequalities.

The current study

The current study aims at exploring through semi-structured focus groups sexist and homophobic attitudes in three soccer teams differentiated by gender and sexual orientation, taking into account

the gender and sexual differences in the construction of gender discourses, homophobia, and masculinity, and assessing whether the decline of homophobia has occurred also in the socio-cultural context of this study. Specifically, we were interested in deeply exploring three main issues. The first one concerned the role and the perception of gay male athletes within soccer and how the discourse surrounding this presence was organised in a supposed heterosexual-dominated sport. The second one was related to the role and the perception of women within a sport considered as typically masculine, such as soccer. The third one concerned motivations and needs related to the creation of a team comprising openly gay male athletes and by both lesbian and heterosexual women, comparing their experiences, opinions, and perceptions with those by the other team, comprising heterosexual male athletes.

This study may also fill a gap in the Italian literature. Indeed, despite sport in the US and the UK having been shown to be rather inclusive in accordance with IMT, we do not know what is occurring in Italy. Currently, there are only a few Italian studies in the sport field that have considered the link between gender, sexuality, and sport. For example, Capranica and Aversa (2002), analysing the 2000 Summer Olympic Games through a gender perspective, observed a strong male hegemony in sport-related careers in Italy. Another study by Scandurra et al. (2013) exploring knowledge, opinions, and attitudes related to gender and sexual issues in sports among a sample of undergraduates in Movement Sciences, reported a high percentage of incorrect notions about these issues, as well as higher levels of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in males than in females.

Notwithstanding this, no Italian studies were directly addressed to investigating gender and sexuality in athletes. For this reason, we used a qualitative approach, letting the data talk about these issues. Despite this, in creating, conducting, and analysing focus groups we bore in mind IMT as a theoretical framework.

Methods

Procedures

This study was initially aimed at exploring the perception of homophobia within a team comprising openly gay male soccer players and regularly registered in the championship of a Southern Italy region. This team, recently established, was founded as a gay political activism group. The first attempt to interview the team after the end of a championship match failed. Due to organisational problems, we were not allowed to use any space on the soccer field. The interview was then postponed for a week and conducted at an office of an Italian gay association. The focus group with this team highlighted the need for a comparison of data collected in other sport settings. From the comparison between researchers which occurred after the focus group was conducted in order to share the experience and develop new ideas, the need for understanding how other soccer settings perceive homosexuality became clear. We thought that one way to create a clearer picture was to interview two other soccer teams, one comprising only women and another one with only non-gay men. This would have made possible the examination of gender and sexual differences in the construction of gender discourses, shedding light on those processes which produce and reproduce masculinity and, in turn, homophobia and sexism. We thus proceeded with collecting data from these two other soccer teams. Recruitment took place through personal contacts of one of the co-authors of the current study, as a female professional soccer player. We paid particular attention to not interviewing players previously known by this co-author, in order to avoid social desirability and possible inhibitions. Furthermore, the teams did not know each other and never played together.

Nevertheless, we encountered a number of difficulties organising the research depending on the team to be involved. For example, with respect to the team with only women, some soccer

players accepted the proposal to participate in the focus group, considering it to be an interesting experience. Notwithstanding, not all team members accepted the proposal in the same way, and some of them refused to be interviewed. The greater resistance, however, was expressed by the coach who, after understanding the theme of the focus group, postponed the research for over a month. Despite these problems, we decided to go on with this team, precisely because the reticence of the coach seemed to increase the motivation of those participants who agreed to participate in this study. Indeed, as we will see, these participants expressed their displeasure toward the coach as a representative of male power, acting a form of resistance through their participation in this study. With respect to the team with only non-gay men, the first contact took place through the athletic trainer who was sensitive to the political discussions related to the world of soccer and thus accepted the proposal, acting as an intermediary between our research group and both the coach and the team. The athletic trainer, indeed, beyond this job, also ran a local newspaper column where every week he wrote about championship matches played the previous weekend, highlighting the sporting values of inclusion and fair play. We did not know him and thus we contacted him to get in touch with the team for which he served as a trainer. In this case, different from the team with only women, the greater resistance was expressed by the soccer players themselves. Indeed, some of them refused to take part in the focus group. The focus groups for these teams were both carried out in the locker room, after the end of a match.

It is clear that the relationship between researchers and participants may have influenced the research process. All participants were informed about the aims of the study and researchers presented themselves as both psychologists and expert in gender studies. Furthermore, we informed participants that one of the interviewers was also a soccer player. This might have had an influence on the responses that participants provided to the questions. Notwithstanding, we paid specific attention to the relational dynamics and, in the informed consent, we stressed the importance of answering honestly, emphasising that no right answers existed, that each participant could leave the study at any time, and that identity of each participant would be masked in any scientific publication.

All data were collected following the Italian Law on Privacy and Data Protection 196/2003. They became the property of the *Blinded for Review*, and were stored in a database accessible only to the Principal Investigator, the first author of the current manuscript.

Participants

A total of 30 athletes participated in the current study. Specifically, 12 openly gay male athletes (Team 1), 8 female soccer players (Team 2; among whom 4 declared to be lesbian, 2 heterosexual, and 2 did not specify their sexual orientation), and 10 heterosexual male soccer players (Team 3) participated. We called them Team 1, Team 2, and Team 3, to maintain the privacy of each team. All participants were Caucasian and their mean age was 26.6 ($SD = 6.45$). The mean age of each team was as follows: Team 1 (28.8 ± 8.5), Team 2 (24.2 ± 5.62), and Team 3 (25.9 ± 2.96).

Focus groups

One semi-structured focus group was conducted with each soccer team, separately. Each focus group lasted on average an hour and a half and was conducted by two clinical psychologists, whose functions were clearly differentiated. One psychologist who is an expert in group conduction and gender issues ran the focus group, while the second psychologist assumed the role of co-conductor, paying particular attention to non-verbal communication and group dynamics. We conducted focus groups so that all participants would have the opportunity to express their own thoughts. Indeed, a drawback of conducting focus groups was the risk that one or more

leaders might monopolise or dominate the discussion. To address this possibility, we had to ask different questions beyond the semi-structured ones for various reasons, such as to collect more information about a specific discourse, to deepen or stimulate the production of latent discourses, or to guarantee the equal participation of all participants.

Due to the evidence that relational processes related to prejudice occur and born within social and collective systems (Brown, 2010), focus group was considered a method more suitable than individual in-depth interviews. Thus, as suggested by Hughes and DuMont (2002), focus groups represent one of the most useful techniques to provide insight about social and psychological processes occurring within particular cultural groups, casting light on their social realities.

In this study, the focus group included seven semi-structured questions, some of which were changed on the basis of the specificity of each group. Specifically, we asked Team 1 participants the following questions: 1) "In your opinion, as a gay male athlete in a sport setting, in particular within soccer, is this different from being a lesbian female athlete? If yes, how?"; (2) "What do you think about homophobia in sports, and in particular in soccer?"; (3) "Have you ever experienced difficulties or troubles during your path? If yes, what kind of troubles, and where? How did you feel about them? And now how do you feel about them?"; (4) "Why did you create your team and what objectives did you have?"; (5) "What has changed in your life since you have become part of this team?"; (6) "Do you think institutions should implement actions to combat homophobia in sports? If yes, what kind of institutions do you think should intervene?;" and (7) "What would you recommend to young people who share a similar experience?"

With regard to Team 2, we asked all the previous questions, with the exception of questions 1, 4, and 5. In their place, we asked three different questions: "In your opinion, as a lesbian and/or female athlete in a sport setting, in particular within soccer, is this different from being a gay and/or male athlete? If yes, how?", "What does being part of a female soccer team mean?," and "In your opinion, how is a girl playing soccer viewed from the outside?"

Along the same lines, with regard to Team 3, in the place of questions 1, 4, and 5, we asked "In your opinion, as a heterosexual male athlete in a sport setting, in particular within soccer, is this different from being a gay male athlete? Furthermore, is this different from being a lesbian and/or female athlete? If yes, how?", "What does being part of a male soccer team mean?" and "In your opinion, how is a male playing soccer viewed from the outside? And what differences exist between a male and a gay male?"

The questions about homophobia in sport and related difficulties, as well as that concerning the role of institutions in combating homophobia, were inspired by *Out for Sport*, a Scottish survey aimed at exploring the barriers for LGBT people in sport. Other questions were created ad hoc and were aimed at achieving our objectives. Specifically, we created questions so that we could assess how gender and sexual differences of participants contributed to the construction of gender discourses, homophobia, and masculinity. In addition, in creating questions, we were also interested in assessing the level of perceived homophobic culture according to IMT, as well as the stage of the homosexually themed language expressed by heterosexual participants according to the McCormack's (2011b) model. Each question represents the outcome of a reflexive comparison between researchers. Indeed, all authors are expert in gender studies, and the presence of the co-author who is also a female professional soccer player allowed us to deeply understand resources and criticalities that are present in the realm of soccer.

Data analysis

Before collecting the narratives from the focus groups, participants gave their informed consent. Focus group transcripts were recorded and, at the beginning of each group, researchers asked participants for their informed consent, guaranteeing privacy. Narratives were analysed through

constant comparison analysis (Glaser, 1978, 1992) which originated from grounded theory. All narratives were treated from an inductive position, in which each interaction of the discourse was considered potentially meaningful (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008). Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), this kind of analysis consists of three phases. The first phase consists of chunking the data into small units and assigning a code or a descriptor to each unit. The second phase consists of grouping the codes into categories. Finally, the third phase consists of identifying core themes to express the content of each category. We treated the three narratives as separate, repeating all analysis phases for each group, separately.

As suggested by Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran (2009) the constant comparison analysis is appropriate in particular when multiple focus groups are conducted within the same study. Furthermore, through this analysis, researchers are able to assess possible saturations within and across groups. Lastly, each phase of the constant comparison analysis was performed independently by three expert researchers in gender issues. They discussed any divergence with the aim of achieving, when possible, an agreement. This procedure ensures reliability and validity of the results. Indeed, the above procedure met the requirements of the crystallisation method (Ellingson, 2008), taking into account different voices and points of view, as well as letting the data speak and accepting the partiality of understanding.

Results

Team 1: openly gay male soccer players

Within the first team comprising openly gay male soccer players, the following four macro-categories were identified: (1) need for affiliation; (2) in/visibility; (3) perceived homophobia; and (4) perceived institutionalised homophobia. Table 1 reports the results in a schematic form, displaying each macro-category with corresponding relevant words.

Considering the first macro-category, *need for affiliation*, creating and belonging to a team comprising all openly gay players highlighted the need for affiliation, understood in terms of aggregation, with the aim of establishing a secure place where all members could feel included (e.g. “I thought ‘So ... I’m not the only gay who likes playing soccer!’,” or “I have played soccer for many years but since knowing this team I realized there was someone else like me, that I was not the only one.”). In this macro-category the basic need to be together and cultivate a common passion, rather than the need to win, was in the foreground (e.g. “The idea was simply to aggregate gay boys who wanted to play soccer ... so, at the beginning the competitive pressure was not present ... the aggregative pressure was stronger ... we have become friends”).

With respect to the second macro-category, called *in/visibility*, it seems that the desire to become visible and to reduce the perception of the invisibility related to homosexuality and strongly perceived within soccer settings were in the foreground (e.g. “There are people who wanted to be protected, who were afraid of showing themselves in public,” or “To know that there are people like me playing soccer made me more self-aware and it is a way to send a message also to other gay boys who remain in obscurity”). This macro-category shows the core of the team that was born for gay political activism. This represents a form of political resistance to cope with a society perceived as still heteronormative that makes difficult to come out “of obscurity.” This macro-category was linked to the third macro-category, or *perceived homophobia*. Gay soccer players, indeed, felt that others viewed them as feminine. Specifically, they felt that others associated gay soccer players with being an effeminate gay (“Others imagine us playing with heels”) who have sexual relationships with other teammates (“Many people think ‘Who knows what they do when they play together!’”), and thus a man not suitable for soccer which is identified as a predominantly male sport (“Soccer is male!”). Furthermore, this category

Table 1. Macro-categories and relevant words from constant comparison analysis performed with Team 1 (openly gay men), Team 2 (heterosexual and lesbian women), and Team 3 (heterosexual men).

	Macro-categories	Relevant words
Team 1	Need for affiliation	Decide together, Way to be together, Aggregate, Friends, Teammates, To not be alone, Team, Share, Express, Comfortable.
	In/visibility	Official presentation, Visibility, Obscurity, Gay image, Crowd, Pictures, Video cameras, Television, Message, Coming out, Public.
	Perceived homophobia	Faggot, Fag, Half men, Pansy, Jokes, Weakness, Effeminate, Feeling alone, Feeling little, Locker room gossip, Distress, Fear.
	Perceived institutionalised homophobia	Law, State, Federation, Coach, Social censorship, Bigotry, Lack of protection from the law.
Team 2	Need for affiliation	Team, Sharing, Free expression, Support, Friendship, Comprehension, Family.
	Masculine dominance	Man, Masculine, Coach, Father, Power, Referee, Overbearing, Physical contacts, Physical strength, Violence, Decision.
	Equal opportunities Crossing the gender boundaries	I can do, Strong, Talent, Passion, Possibility, Equality, Difference. Excluded, Removed, Targeted, Lesbian, Look like a man, Masculine, Tomboy, Muscles, Solitude, Locker room, Shower, Division.
Team 3	Presumption of heterosexuality	Faggot, Target, There is none, Coach, Injury, Error, Weakness.
	Female inferiority	Women, Sissy, Real man, Cry, Unfeminine, Masculine, Podgy, Womanhood.
	Tendency toward a homosocial law	Bother, Locker room, Tranquillity, Problem, Fear, Group, Corner, Demonstration, Competition, Normal.

also included the perception of the possibility of being subjected to verbal abuse (“faggot,” “fag,” “half men,” and “pansy”), as well as the perception of being excluded from the dominant group due to the stigma associating gay males with “weakness.” For example, a player stated:

The error in field is associated with weakness. In turn, weakness is associated with a lack of masculinity and the use of the word ‘fagot’ is associated with all of this ... if you are not aggressive it means that you are ‘fagot,’ or rather weak, a half man, a pansy.

In turn, it seems that this last association included the risk of leading to the concealment of sexual orientation (“In the soccer world you can’t say ‘I’m gay’”), as well as a discomfort linked with self-devaluation (“feeling alone,” “feeling small,” “locker room gossip”). According to IMT, these last two macro-categories seem to show the perception of a relatively strong homophobic culture due to the perceived antipathy toward gay soccer players and to the conflation of femininity and male homosexuality.

Finally, a last macro-category, named *perceived institutionalised homophobia*, concerns homophobia within social institutions. A perceived heteronormative culture, in which some forms of religiosity and institutions permeated, represented a strong barrier to personal realisation and self-determination (“social censorship,” “bigotry,” and “lack of the law protection”). Some examples of this macro-category were: “We live in a catholic society where those who get divorced can no longer receive communion. Who can really receive support from such bigotry? Nobody. It’s all the context that is fallacious,” “I don’t remember a player in Italy who came out. Here, this opportunity doesn’t exist! In the world many players come out ... in Italy no ... ,” or

In my experience those who live in soccer can't come out and thus live such a deep distress ... and despite realizing this situation, they do not have the strength nor the courage ... because there is not a push from society, media, federation ... there is not a push to come out. It is better not to look, not to know ... they told you that it is better to keep quiet.

The examples reported show that participants felt strong institutional and structural barriers that prevent the possibility of coming out. These barriers are represented by religious institutions, sport federations, and media that are perceived as non-gay-friendly. Furthermore, participants also felt a great gap between Italian context and other Western realities. Actually, the first example of an Italian athlete coming out dates back to 2014 and was done by an Italian female professional hockey player. Until now, no professional athletes have come out in the sport of soccer.

Team 2: lesbian and heterosexual female soccer players

In the soccer team comprising both lesbian and heterosexual women, the following macro-categories were identified: (1) need for affiliation; (2) masculine dominance; (3) equal opportunities; and (4) crossing gender boundaries.

Similarly to Team 1, in this team the macro-category called *need for affiliation* was also identified. The team was experienced as a place for sharing, a place of authenticity. For instance, two lesbian participants stated: "I got closer to this sporting context because I thought I found a place where I could freely express myself, where I could meet people who would share my passions," and "I have had the opportunity to be who I am without having to hide." Different from the first team, in this team competition and victory were considered as an integral part of the game. This difference is probably due to the perception of a *masculine dominance* which, in Team 1, did not emerge explicitly, perhaps because it comprised only men. It seems that the values of competition and victory were linked to the need for affirmation and of re-appropriation of a space that is considered to be masculine, contrasting what Connell (1987, 1995) called hegemonic masculinity, or rather that masculinity representing a clear sign of a homohysterical culture according to IMT. Indeed, it emerged clearly in the image of men as exclusive holders of power. To this end, two heterosexual participants stated "In the past, we could not play because we are females," and "Males are overbearing, everything is always owned by them," while a lesbian participant affirmed "I just wanted to be male to be able to decide something." Probably, these issues arose from the group also due to the reticence that the coach expressed toward the study, as a symbolic representation of masculine dominance. The perception of a masculine dominance seems to have created a phenomenon of social cohesion related to the in-group, because most of the participants tried hard to put forward some reasons to confirm the perception of a male predominance in soccer.

The discourse around male power was then slowly directed to the demand for the right of *equal opportunities* within sport settings, a demand that was related to the recognition of personal skills and talent. For instance, two heterosexual participants affirmed "We are there too and we are not so different," and "I am a woman, but I play soccer much better than many of my male friends." Thus, some female participants seemed to claim to be recognised for their performances rather than for their gender identity. This implies that they felt that male players look at them primarily as women and only secondarily as soccer players, placing their gender before all.

Furthermore, the focus group clearly discussed discriminations based on *crossing gender boundaries*. Many participants, in fact, said they were "excluded," "removed," or "targeted" from the coach or their father because these male figures perceived them as lesbians who wanted to deal with a predominantly male activity ("If you say you play soccer others will automatically think you're a lesbian," [not declared sexual orientation] or "Others think we do strange things in the locker room" [heterosexual participant]), as unfeminine women ("They told me that I

look like a little masculine,” or “They say we’re squat and we have masculine muscles” [lesbian participant]), and a gender roles transgressor (“My mother hoped that I would be a ballet dancer” [not declared sexual orientation]).

Team 3: heterosexual men soccer players

In the soccer team comprising heterosexual men, three macro-categories were identified: (1) presumption of heterosexuality; (2) female inferiority; and (3) tendency toward a homosocial law.

The most visible issue was that, in contrast to the other two soccer teams, for Team 3 homophobia in soccer settings did not exist (*presumption of heterosexuality*). Indeed, participants thought that gay players were few or non-existent (“Among us there is no one of them” or “I think that a gay man does not begin to play soccer... It would be like drawing a target on your back and going around shouting ‘shoot me!’”) and that homophobic epithets are ironic jokes used to have fun or terms used to indicate weakness or ineptitude (“I call everyone a faggot when they are wrong, but this has nothing to do with gay people,” “Also the coach calls you ‘faggot’ if you miss a shot,” or “Among us it is a saying, and everyone knows that one must not feel offended”). This macro-category shows some ambiguities. Indeed, according to IMT (e.g. Anderson, 2009) and McCormack’s (2011b) model on homosexually themed language, it might seem that these participants were non homophobic and that homophobic epithets were unhooked from same-sex desire and behaviours, being nearer to the third or fourth stage of McCormack’s (2011b) model. Notwithstanding, we paid particular attention to the emotional and relational climate where these discourses arose, and the tone with which statements were made that were relatively injurious and offensive. Thus, we cannot affirm that all participants were homophobic but, using McCormack’s (2011b) model, the social climate was rather homohysterical and some participants had a pernicious intent, while others did not. Concluding, we think that “fag discourse” is the stage where these discourses should be placed.

Furthermore, the perception of a clear *female inferiority* emerged. The female-related terms were, indeed, used to highlight the men’s dominance over women (“Soccer began as a sport for males ... in the past women could not play”). Participants seemed to join a gender stereotype according to which soccer is a matter for “real men.” Therefore, if a woman is able to play soccer it means that she is a lesbian, masculine, or unfeminine (“If you are able to play soccer, it means that you are a half man,” “I saw women playing soccer and are not at all feminine ... they have short hair, they are physically big, they are podgy,” or “If you’re not a lesbian, I think that you draw attention to your womanhood ... on the contrary, if you conceal your womanhood or if you don’t have it, it means that there is another reason”).

Finally, it was possible to observe that participants created social cohesion dynamics related to what we called *tendency toward a homosocial law*. Indeed, participants turned to each other aggressively and competitively, highlighting the status of leader according to power dimensions related to seniority and to winning status. To this end, an interesting exchange between participants related to masculinity and homosexuality occurred when we asked them if a difference between gay male athletes and lesbian female athletes exists in a sport setting and in particular within soccer. Participants started to say that the main difference has to be traced to injury and respect. For instance, some participants argued that if a player is a gay man playing soccer, people will make fun of him, while if a player is a lesbian woman playing at a male sport, such as soccer, she will probably be respected. Participants argued also that a woman playing soccer was very masculine and that masculine women – those with muscles, short hair, and dressing jeans – are surely lesbian. In line with that, other participants argued that if a woman is not lesbian, part of her femininity is surely exhibited. On the contrary, this woman would not hide her femininity. This last point started a debate around what has to be intended for homosexuality and masculinity. The following is an exchange between three members of the team:

Member 1: “The right word is heterosexual, not normal ... you are homophobic ... please, do not be rude. And do not speak unless I ask you.” Member 2: “But who thinks of you? Do you really believe that if one of us were gay, they would look at you while you shower ... as ugly as you are ...” All other members laugh. Member 3: “He goes to the hairdresser every week ... every time he meets a mirror, he stops to adjust his locks. So, should I automatically think that he is a faggot just for this?”

In this interesting exchange, homophobia is contested and criticised, being perceived as something rude. In response to the accusation of being homophobic, the second member starts with a new accusation, or rather that the first member is so ugly that no gay men would look at him while he showers. The first member seems to be more contemporary in his vision of the homosexuality, and as a result accuses the second member of being homophobic and, thus, conservative. In response, the third member starts to question these opposite positions, opening a discourse whose focus might be represented by the question “what is homosexuality?” Substantially, it seems that participants question whether the old stereotype on masculinity is still valid. Indeed, the third participant provocatively asked the second participant: “We are friends ... Supposed that tomorrow I come to you telling you that I’m gay. What will you do? Will you not speak to me anymore?” The second member answered: “I would continue to speak with you, but surely I would be sorry for you and I would understand what happened to you, hoping to change your thinking.”

In this exchange, along the lines of the concept of hybrid masculinities, it is possible to note that these heterosexual male participants have incorporated performances of non-hegemonic masculinities, such as going weekly to the hairdresser, looking in the mirror to adjust their locks, or paying attention to one’s own image. Even if it might seem that new forms of masculinity have been developed, the fact that they are wondering whether this means or not being homosexual indicates that there is still a confusion between softer forms of masculinities and homosexuality. Thus, it probably means that these new forms of masculinity have not yet been fully established, and that we are witnessing to an intermediate stage, namely an interlocutory phase.

Discussion

The objective of the current study was to explore homophobic and sexist attitudes in soccer settings within three soccer teams differentiated by gender and sexual orientation, to analyse how gender and sexual differences influence the construction of gender discourses, homophobia, and masculinity. Furthermore, this study was also aimed at assessing the level of homohysteria culture according to IMT, as well as the stage of homosexually themed language expressed by heterosexual participants according to the McCormack’s (2011b) model. It was indeed possible to observe how discourses around masculinity were shared within each team and how they were contextualised according to different groups. From a standpoint related to the observation of relational dynamics, we observed a relatively strong internal cohesion that was building around the themes proposed, or rather around sexual and gender issues.

Generally speaking, on the basis of our results and according to recent theories of masculinities, it seems correct to us to think that we are attending a progressive decline of homophobia similar to that noted in the 1990s studies on Anglo-American cultures, and that participants in the current research did not express yet the rapid decline in homophobia noted in the early to mid-2000s. Of course, we cannot generalise our results to the whole of Italian society given that this is a case study consisting of interviews of a few members belonging to only three Italian teams.

Anderson and McCormack (in press) argued that one of the processes that evidence progressive change leading to a decrease of homohysteria and, thus, homophobia, is the legal change that has occurred in the last 30 years, such as anti-gay discrimination laws. Italy is still lacking such

laws and just recently, precisely on 5 June 2016, recognised same-sex civil unions. To this end, some recent Italian studies have observed widespread high levels of sexist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes and behaviours (Amodeo, Vitelli, Scandurra, Picariello, & Valerio, 2015; Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011; Lingiardi et al., 2016; Prati, Pietrantoni, & D'Augelli, 2011; Scandurra, Amodeo, Bochicchio, Valerio, & Frost, 2017; Scandurra, Picariello, Valerio, & Amodeo, 2017). On the other hand, Italian women still experience violence and discrimination (ISTAT, 2015). In Italy, the justice system seems to change very slowly. For example, just recently, in 2013, a law against femicide was approved. This might mean that probably we still have to wait for masculinities to become softer. Thus, these data suggest that Italy is still a predominantly homophobic and sexist EU country and this evidence may contribute to the explanation of the relatively discriminating and male-dominated discourses that arose from the focus groups in the current study. Furthermore, following IMT, these evidences might suggest that Italy still expresses a relatively strong homohysterical culture. Notwithstanding, as aforementioned, some participants seem to contest and criticise homophobia, suggesting that we are witnessing an interlocutory phase. Indeed, the above-mentioned Italian laws, together with all social movements that made visible the needs and voices of minority groups, perhaps led to the beginnings of a reshaping of old forms of masculinities.

The thematic categories emerging from the focus groups were differentiated by group, although there were interesting overlaps. First of all, we felt that the discourses of all teams, in different ways, were organised around in-group–out-group dynamics. Therefore, interesting differences shed light on the functioning of each team observed. Indeed, while Team 1 perceived the out-group mainly in the social environment, or rather in the heteronormative institutions which make homosexuality invisible, Team 2 identified the out-group mainly in the ideal male, perceived as more appropriate to the soccer world and, thus, discriminating against women, because he perceives them as unfeminine, tomboys, or lesbians. We think that this difference can be explained from two different perspectives. Team 1 comprised only men and, although participants declared themselves to be openly gay, they are men, White, and have an advantaged social status. To this end, Han (2007) reported that a strong difference between Caucasian and wealthy gay men and non-Caucasian and less wealthy gay men exists. This author, indeed, reported that often the gay community excludes non-Caucasian gay men from leadership positions and gay establishments. Differently from the heterosexual and White majority, also White and wealthy gay men can fall into a power position. So, it is clear that the out-group cannot be represented by heterosexual males, but only by heteronormative institutions that, at times, deny basic rights. From another perspective, the difference between Team 1 and Team 2 may be explained by the original motivations for creating Team 1. Team 1 was born as a movement of gay political activism, with the aim of fighting against discriminations and sexual and gender prejudices. Perhaps this matter was mirrored in the discourses that tended to perceive social institutions, such as the Church, the State, and so on, as the main obstacle to obtaining rights and as the primary cause of discrimination. These discourses suggest that openly gay men athletes still perceive a homohysterical climate.

Considering Team 3, it seems that the out-group was perceived by women who try to have access to a world perceived as predominantly male. On the contrary, gay men are made by some participants totally invisible, as if their participation in soccer was not even thinkable. At the same time, other participants questioned what being gay actually means, giving voice to this population. Notwithstanding, it seemed that the woman-out-group was also stigmatised as lesbian and, thus, in a complex mechanism of social construction of the discourse, the out-group also becomes homosexual, overlapping gender and sexual orientation. To this end, Cox and Thompson (2001), in a study that might be collocated in the homohysterical period in which we are positioning our participants, affirmed that a woman playing soccer often encounters the

assumption that her participation in sports represents an indicator of her sexual orientation, or rather that she is lesbian. According to the authors, this assumption is related to a misogynist homophobia which becomes part of the culture of sports and of the ways in which women experience soccer. Furthermore, this study was also in line with the past concept that sports, and in particular soccer, represented a mechanism of masculinisation in which the masculine capital among men increased and reinforced (Adams et al., 2010). Along the same lines with Anderson (2008), indeed, it seems that a predominance of the homosocial law which tends to create a social cohesion around masculinity and heterosexuality still exist in our participants. This form of social cohesion feeds itself because sexual and gender stereotypes and prejudices have the function of reproducing male superiority.

Another important element which represents a cross-cutting theme is the reason connected to affiliation that seem to be very different in the teams interviewed. In this case, although with some differences, Team 1 and Team 2 had in common a particular form of affiliation that harkens to the community connectedness that is typical for minority groups. As reported by Frost and Meyer (2012), community connectedness is central in establishing a collective identity and, especially in sexual minorities, is fundamental in understanding involvement, identity, and health outcomes. This form of community connectedness was very evident in Team 1 participants, because they were all openly gay and the team was born as a form of political activism to fight against sexual stigma. Although, however, not all women in the Team 2 were lesbian, we observed a similar connectedness. Indeed, according to Broad (2001), the participation of women in sports can be interpreted as a *queer resistance*, destabilising the heteronormative order. Thus, it seems that Team 1 and Team 2 had in common the need for felt connection and affiliation around one's own minority identity and that used this form of connectedness as a struggle and resistance weapon against heteronormativity, or rather as a self-affirmation instrument. This datum may explain why disagreements from these groups did not arise, in contrast to what was observed in Team 3 regarding what is meant by masculinity and homosexuality. Indeed, in contrast to the two teams that were strongly affiliated around minority identity, Team 3 seemed mainly unified by their desire to win. However, when the discourse on the participation of women and gay men within soccer settings was inserted in the context, the reason for affiliation shifted to the need to feel themselves connected as men, the perceived holders of power in the soccer world. Thus, faced with the possibility that its world was "polluted" by the presence of women and gay men, this team ended up using the same tools as Team 1 and Team 2 that is an attempt to affirm itself by reproducing masculine dominance and masculine capital.

Finally, another important element was represented by the similarity of the macro-categories *perceived homophobia* and *crossing gender boundaries* in Team 1 and Team 2, themes that were clearly lacking in Team 3. The common element was the perception of both teams that their participation in soccer was viewed from the outside as an attempt to "feminise" males or "masculinise" females. Namely, participants of both teams thought that heterosexual soccer players, as well as institutional representatives, such as the coach, perceived them as "half men," both in the case of openly gay players and women players, or, again, as "pansy" or "lesbians," respectively. Essentially, it seems that soccer was perceived as a world hardly accessible to those who are not considered "real men" and that being able to have access to this world implied an extreme effort that forces women and gay men to come to terms with boundaries, limits, and social institutions.

Limitations

The main limitations of the study are the local level of the participants and the exploration of the themes of sexual and gender issues only within the sport of soccer. This might not allow us to

generalise our results either to the whole Italian context or to all sports. Furthermore, due to the composition of Team 1 born as a response to the gay political movement, an exploration of the sexist and homophobic attitudes experienced and perceived by Italian openly gay male athletes not belonging to a gay team is lacking. Notwithstanding, the explorative nature of the study allows looking at these limits as relative.

Conclusions

The results achieved in the current study suggest that soccer in Italy still represent a social institution organised around masculine dominance for which some forms of masculinity are acceptable while others are denigrated. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that we cannot generalise our results until other research is conducted in other Italian regions and within other sports. Although recent studies observed an important positive change in sports related to attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g. Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009; Anderson et al., 2016; McCormack, 2011a), in the current study this improvement was not observed. We cannot say that all participants were homophobic or sexist. Indeed, it seemed to us that we were witnessing an interlocutory phase where some heterosexual soccer players are starting to challenge homophobia but, at the same time, women and openly gay players still perceive what Anderson (2009) would call a homohysterical culture.

This interlocutory phase should lead Italian researchers to explore the homohysterical dimension in other sports. Furthermore, similarly to the study by Anderson (2011), making a comparison between both heterosexual and gay soccer players playing in the past and in the present may shed light on the changes that have occurred over time in Italian sport settings. This exploration should also be done in other sports.

Note

1. Italian championship is organised in nine levels: the first three levels are professional, while the remaining six are amateur. Soccer Italian championship is a set of national and regional tournaments instituted by the Italian Soccer Federation. While the National Professional League organises professional championship, the National Amateur League organises amateur championship. All teams interviewed in the current study participated in this last kind of championship.

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