The Changing Nature of Gay Rugby Clubs in the UK

Rugby has traditionally existed as a leading definer of masculinity in British culture, which has included overt homophobia. However, cultural attitudes towards homosexuality have improved rapidly in the twenty-first century. To assess the impact of wider societal change on gay rugby teams, we employed a multiple methods investigation across five gay rugby teams in England. Results show that, whereas athletes once played for these teams to escape homophobia in broader rugby culture, this is no longer true. Affiliation with gay clubs is now primarily for social purposes, and gay rugby clubs now protect the physical safety of gay men from being less-prepared to play the game, whereas before it was safety from homophobia. This research shows that gay rugby clubs have undergone an organizational shift in response to the increased social acceptance of sexual minorities.

Keywords: Sport, gay rugby, homosexuality, inclusive masculinity, masculinities

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Introduction

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the display of physical prowess and heterosexuality in traditionally masculine areas, such as combat, manual labour or business, has slowly eroded (Roberts, 2018). Organized team sport was one such avenue for displays of patriarchal structure, physical prowess and heterosexual domination (Hargreaves, 1986; Murray & White, 2017). As a result, it has traditionally reinforced an orthodox form of twentieth century masculinity that is linked to those who are white, middle class, able-bodied and, most important to this analysis, heterosexual (Stasi & Evans, 2013).

For a long time, this unwelcoming environment forced gay males to either conceal their sexuality or to remove themselves from mainstream sport (Pronger 1999). In this sporting context, and a twentieth century where cultural homophobia remained prominent (Loftus, 2001; Park and Rhead, 2012), sexual minority participation occurred primarily at amateur levels or in gay-only leagues (Symons, 2010). A variety of local gay leagues sprang up in the 1970s, in both Europe and North America, while the inception of an international multi-sport competition, the Gay Games, in the 19980s, proved to be a further catalyst for an increasing number of gay inclusive sports events and teams. Since the 1990s, there has been a growth in gay teams, with gay rugby clubs formed in countries such as the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom (Gaston & Dixon, 2019; International Gay Rugby, 2019).

Rugby was developed in the British Public School system and continues to have an enduring link to the forming of traditional masculinity for schoolboys (Light & Kirk, 2000; White & Anderson, 2017). It has since evolved into distinct codes; the two most popular, rugby union and rugby league, separated in the 1890s and have forged substantially different games (Hogarth et al., 2016); league utilizes fewer on-field players than union, whilst rules regarding

engagement offer further differences (Cross et al., 2015). However, in both codes, the sport maintains strong associations with aggression and physicality; factors which have traditionally linked it to masculine domination over both femininity and homosexuality. Yet, shifting narratives on the experiences of gay men in sport suggest an increasing acceptance of gay players and teams within mainstream rugby competitions (Gaston & Dixon, 2019; Willis 2015). This paper builds on previous work in the exploration of sexual minorities within gay rugby clubs, to understand the purpose and culture of such environments in a modern society where attitudes towards homosexuality have significantly improved in recent decades (Watt & Elliot, 2019).

The Relationship between Sport and Masculinity

Sociologists first began to question the role of segregated sport in the 1970s and the production and reproduction of masculine identities in the mid-1980s (Dunning, 1986). The evidenced cultural zeitgeist resulted in negative engagement with sport by women and gay men (and other sexual minorities), impeding athletic success for members of these minority groups (Barber & Krane, 2007).

Researchers who have examined the issue of same-sex attracted males, specifically, in sport within the 20th Century, and bleeding into the 21st century, concurred that that organized sports were, monolithically, a highly homophobic institution (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf Wendel, Toma & Morphew, 2001). Drawing on his study of heterosexual males in the late 1970s, Messner (1992, p. 34) wrote, “The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys (in sports) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable.” Even researching community

sport athletes in the late 1990s, Hekma (1998, p. 2) found that gay men in the Netherlands "…who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise." And Pronger (1990, p. 26) noted of Canadian gay men at the time that, "Many of the (gay) men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with team sports…orthodox masculinity is usually an important subtext if not the leitmotif" in team sports.

This cultural hostility was the genesis for segregated sporting spaces for gay men. The most prominent example is the International Gay Games, a quadrennial multi-sport event which began in San Francisco in 1982. While inspired by the Olympic Games, The Gay Games was introduced to foster inclusion in response to the "apparent racism, sexism, nationalism, homophobia and elitism" present in the mainstream games (Symons, 2009, p.1). As gay sporting competitions grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the types of sport upon which inclusive teams were formed also grew: the first investigation of a gay rugby team was undertaken by Price and Parker (2002), who found the club principally organized around escaping perceived or actual homophobia in mainstream rugby.

The new millennium, however, brought changes in attitudes towards homosexuality, not only to society, but also to mainstream sport (Anderson, 2014). The first comprehensive investigation of the experiences of gay males playing on ostensibly heterosexual teams was conducted by Anderson (2002), finding gay men beginning to come out in sport in American high school and collegiate teams. These initial findings were supported by subsequent research on improved attitudes towards gay male athletes in 2011, which showed further improvements amongst straight male athletes (Anderson, 2011).

While decreasing hostility towards homosexuality varies according to class, race and geography, subsequent research has found a wide demographic shift toward increased acceptance of homosexuality (Anderson & McCormack, 2015; Anderson, Magrath & Bullingham, 2016; Bush, Anderson & Carr, 2012; Gaston, Magrath & Anderson, 2018; Magrath, 2017; Willis, 2015).

This acceptance is associated with the changing perceptions of masculinity amongst heterosexual males. Boys and young men are today moving away from orthodox versions of masculinity that are rooted in tenets such as violence, aggression and misogyny (Light, 2007). In line with this, Anderson (2009) developed *Inclusive Masculinity Theory* to explain the changing nature of masculinities. The theory accounts for masculine performances that embrace femininity and are "less concerned with mitigating homosexual suspicion through homophobia and heterosexism" (Anderson, 2005a, p.339). Anderson's (2011) theory exists as a macro-level stage model, based on temporal events of 1) attitudes toward homosexuality; alongside 2) cultural belief that homosexuality exists. Anderson suggests that today, "multiple masculinities coexist harmoniously, but also fewer behaviours will be associated with homosexuality" in mostly Western cultures. Research utilizing this theory has since validated its use in more diverse demographic populations, particularly relating to social class (McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2018), which broadens its application to wider research (see Jarvis, 2015) and international contexts (Piedra, García-Pérez & Channon, 2017). As with all theories, there have been published critiques, and responses to those critiques. See for example, a symposium in Sex Roles in the 3-4 editions of Sex Roles (McCormack & Anderson 2014a, 2014b), and a revision of the theory in 2018 (Anderson & McCormack 2018), which address critiques.

Athletes that exhibit the archetype (third stage of the model), also called inclusive masculinity, are found to be more accepting of both women and gay males in sporting environments (Bush, Anderson & Carr, 2012). There is also evidence for increasing societal acceptance of gay athletes and a softening of media attitudes towards gay male athletes in both the United Kingdom and America (Cleland, 2018; Kian & Anderson, 2009).

Rugby Union and Masculinity

Rugby, which Dunning (1986, p.81) identified as a combat sport that has traditionally embodied "the expression of *macho* values in a relatively unbridled form", has long been associated with masculinity and violence (Fields & Comstock, 2008). It has epitomized characteristics associated with orthodox masculinity, such as aggressive competitiveness, toughness (Wright & Clarke, 1999) and risking the body, and has traditionally been described as "a leading definer of masculinity among both youth and university-aged English men" (Anderson & McGuire, 2009, p.249).

The school system plays a central role in pushing boys towards hegemonically masculine sports, such as rugby, reinforcing the pressure for boys to be tough and strong 'men' (Light & Kirk, 2000). In their research into collegiate rugby, Muir and Seitz (2004) found a desire to play or associate with rugby often stemmed from a wish to link oneself to the exaggerated form of masculinity that is found in the sport; physicality and aggression are also cited as influential factors in women taking up the sport (Chase, 2006; Fields & Comstock, 2008). Given these conditions, it is unsurprising to find that rugby has long been associated with enabling a culture of homophobia and misogyny (Muir & Seitz, 2004; Price & Parker, 2003).

Dunning (1986, p.84) identified post-match rituals and initiation ceremonies as some of the key traditions that have reinforced traditional notions of masculinity. These activities include drinking to excess, stripping new players naked, singing obscene songs and the "mocking, on the one hand, of women, and on the other, of homosexuals". In this manner, twentieth century rugby players consolidated their masculinity with rugby serving to privilege heterosexuality.

Contradictorily, rugby players are often noted for the propensity to both engage in stripping naked together and engaging in homoerotic behaviour with teammates, particularly during initiation ceremonies (Anderson, McCormack & Lee, 2012). As a high-profile example, French rugby team, Stade Français, have released a range of products (from calendars to DVDs) under the title *Dieux du Stade* with their players posing semi-nude in erotic poses (Coad, 2008). Those engaging in these behaviours are, nominally, heterosexual, meaning that it is not possible to create a binary between masculinity and homophobia.

Anderson and McGuire (2010) used interviews of rugby players to analyze a potential shift in rugby culture in England, finding more tolerance towards women and homosexuals and a less macho environment. McCormack and Anderson (2010) identified that it was primarily the (older, heterosexual) coaches who made use of homophobic discourse in an attempt to build masculinity in their (younger) players. They found players were supportive of gay rights and there had been an observable decline in the frequency of use of homosexually-themed language. Thus, there has been a softening of the culture associated with playing rugby, driven by younger players coming through the system who are increasingly rejecting, if not challenging, the previously accepted use of homophobic discourse that is used by older members of the rugby community.

The presence of gay players in the hypermasculine, physical rugby environment, may be the ultimate subversion of the myth of gay men being effeminate and un-masculine (Symons, 2010); very few male athletes reveal their sexuality during their rugby careers, however there are some, and the response has generally been encouraging (Ruck, 2019). Still, even with a handful of out players, the under-representation in the mainstream sport may lead to speculation that gay players have found greater acceptance playing for gay teams rather than alongside heterosexual peers.

Gay Rugby Clubs

In the last five years, gay men's teams have begun to gain a foothold in rugby: from less than a dozen clubs one decade ago, there are now eighty-four clubs in Western Europe as recognized by and registered with IGR (International Gay Rugby). However, they remain under-researched, hence the central focus of this research to investigate the function of gay rugby clubs in the United Kingdom. It is important to note that, although commonly referred to as 'gay clubs', a more accurate description would be 'inclusive', whereby a range of sexual orientations and gender identities are welcomed, not solely gay men.

According to Jarvis (2006), gay athletes chose to leave mainstream sport in favour of inclusive clubs for a multitude of reasons, often remaining in these teams for the rest of their sporting lives. Price and Parker (2003) found the overriding reason for players joining one gay rugby team was that the club offered a "safe and friendly sporting environment" and a haven for those who had been excluded or ostracized from the mainstream rugby culture.

For their analysis, Price and Parker (2003) examined the Kings Cross Steelers Rugby Football Club, an amateur rugby club based in London and the self-claimed world's first gay

rugby club. Players predominantly identified as homosexual but both bisexual and heterosexual individuals were also present. These players reported to have earlier felt alienated by organized sport at school due to a combination of their sexualities or the distinct “macho” culture that had already been ingrained within sport participation at school level. In the club’s formative years, they played “friendly” matches against those clubs that Price and Parker note as being “willing” to play against an openly gay team as there were no other gay teams. The unsaid, yet implicit alternative, is that numerous teams were initially unwilling to play against a gay team. However, acceptance into the mainstream rugby culture has been increasingly found, even if Anderson (2005b, p.105) highlights that this acceptance was based on the club presenting “an image of ‘normality’ for everything except for their sexual orientation”. Part of this normalizing involved refuting notions that the club’s sporting activities were linked to sexual relationship networks, sexual politics or the wider “gay scene”.

Research on Ireland’s first gay rugby team identified it as having the potential to transform the traditional heteronormative culture acting as “a subversion of gender norms and a threat to the gender order” (Madden, 2013, p.255). Contrary to the Steelers, the Irish team played on traditional gender stereotypes, particularly in their initial recruitment materials that showed masculine players with feminized props (such as high heels and feather boas). The juxtaposition of the emphatically masculine bodies with the female props associated with drag artists challenged established discourses surrounding rugby and masculinity and yet the club has been widely accepted by the media and rugby administrators.

Most recently, Gaston and Dixon (2019) examine a recently-formed grassroots gay rugby team in the UK, the Liverpool Tritons. In contrast to the experience of the Steelers, the Tritons were accepted and openly welcomed by the straight rugby clubs they played against. This latest

study helps us conceive that there organizations may have morphed from gay men establishing gay teams as safe havens to avoid symbolic and actualized violence on the part of heterosexuals (Symons 2009), to establishing and using them for other purposes.

Significantly, they claim that while the barriers between heterosexual and homosexual men had diminished, a greater issue existed within the gay community and the alternative space the teams afford gay men who do not wish to engage in traditionally gay spaces. Although this research starts to explore the dynamics of a gay rugby club in contemporary British society, the focus on one specific club lends support for this additional research across a broader population in order to develop the validity of the findings. In addition to the increased acceptance identified by Gaston & Dixon (2019), it is important to note that the research dynamic in this field includes an additional level of complexity with the movement of heterosexual men from mainstream clubs to inclusive clubs, which has been witnessed in recent years (Jarvis, 2015); this evidently refutes the ‘escape’ from homophobia found as a reason for the clubs’ growth in previous work.

It is in light of these single-team studies that we set out to investigate multiple gay rugby clubs. Our goal was to examine the purpose and functioning of these clubs. To seek answers as to how those purposes may have changed in response to decreased cultural homophobia, and to investigate the relationship between gay rugby teams and their members social life more broadly.

Methods

Design

A multiple methods qualitative analysis, utilizing Grounded Theory, examined five gay rugby clubs in England (with a total team membership of approximately sixty players per club) during a two-month period. Semi-structured interviews, alongside participant observation and

written responses to an open-ended short answer questionnaire provided insight as to why these men sought to become members of these clubs.

Participants & Setting

In line with Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), purposeful sampling was employed to select appropriate clubs which fit the remit of the research aims, whilst communicating with members of the gay teams was based on a convenience sample of the five clubs located in the English Midlands and Southern England. The lead author of this study (a former high-level rugby referee) also participated in a number of training sessions with the players and it was during these sessions, and informal gatherings after training, that discussions and observations were undertaken. Five focus group meetings were also held, and it was at these meetings that several members asked for a list of the structured questions to answer in their own time; these are included in the total of fifty players and administrators surveyed and interviewed.

Participants were overwhelmingly white (98 percent), middle class, and only a few (4 percent) held professional (lawyers, doctors, etc.) positions. Because we were focusing more on gay men, we only interviewed gay men, but bisexual men did exist. We did not take a poll of our total participants, but on one team we were told that there were five bisexual members of their club. There were also heterosexual members to these clubs. And while it would have been valuable to interview them for purposes of showing a shift away from orthodox elements of masculinity, we again failed to do this, as we instead focused on gay males. We did not poll the players to know just how many were heterosexual, but we know that we only made contact with five: all of which were administrators (managers/coaches).

Administrators for the five clubs included here each reported that paid membership for their clubs was sixty members. At each training session attended by the lead researcher, participation ranged from twenty to twenty-five players while the number of players dropped to between three and thirteen participants on the seven match days the lead researcher attended.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations and a number of self-completed qualitative questionnaires. Given the lead researcher's involvement with the sport, the context was largely informal and aided the disclosure of information due to their 'insider' status. Discussions with participants included a focus on their rationale for joining the club, what membership of the club meant to their development as athletes, the socialization process of joining a collision sport late in their playing careers and, the social aspects of being a member of a gay rugby club. In line with Grounded Theory methods, particularly Charmaz' (2006) constructivist approach, these themes developed from early data collection and helped inform the direction of discussions in subsequent data collection. Three members of one club were out only to their teammates, but not to their families or wider community; each of these players separately requested the opportunity to answer the questionnaire via email for increased privacy.

Data Analysis

Findings were initially coded by the first author into thematic categories; using Charmaz's (2006) notions of Grounded Theory allowed the data to lead the analysis, without preconceptions of the applicability of certain theories, which lends itself to a more objective

interpretation of the collected data. The lead researcher also benefited from the contextual knowledge of the rugby clubs due to their direct involvement in the training sessions and social events. The multiple methods allowed for triangulation of the data gleaned from observations, interviews, focus groups and surveys to ensure consistency across all data inputs. After initial coding by the primary author, a randomly selected ten percent of the transcripts were co-verified by another author on this paper; codes and themes were then discussed to form the final themes.

Ethics

This research has ethics approval and, in following the principles of the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice in conducting human subject research, every effort is made here to protect the identity of the participants. This includes, but is not limited to, the changing the participants' names, hometown or city where their club is located (if specifically mentioned), paraphrasing quotes to omit identifying information about individuals, and including only the barest of geographical identification. In addition to the BSA guidelines, the Appalachian State University's Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval of human subject research for this project is available by contacting the lead author.

Findings

Findings from this research are broadly aligned with Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity theory and recent research on the positive reception of gay men in sports (White, Magrath & Morales, 2020), in that few participants cited homophobia as a reason for their desire to join a gay men's rugby club. That finding alone makes this research novel as it contrasts the

experience of gay men in gay rugby clubs outlined in previous work (Price & Parker, 2003) and supports Gaston and Dixon's (2019) recent research.

Our thematic coding also found three new areas of interest to the literature on this topic: social capital, a "safe playing environment" from the inherent dangers of the sport, and interaction with other gay men. Although separated for deeper discussion, the themes are evidently intertwined, and it is seen that some responses straddle two categories, which serves to corroborate the nuanced and complex nature of this exploration in a constantly evolving environment.

Social Capital among Gay Men

Michael and David sat at a high-top table at their club's local pub. David scanned the crowd and said that he recognized most of the people in the room; "They're not all regulars", he noted, "Most come for the pub night and karaoke". By regulars, he added that many of the Hampshire players rarely, if ever, come to the twice-weekly training sessions or the home matches. The team administrators, he said, were often hard-pressed to find enough players for away matches during the league season. In other words, Michael and David were saying that most of the 'players' at the gay rugby club, never play rugby.

Asked how the league administration dealt with this, both shrugged and said it did not matter with the level of rugby their team played or how many played. David said, "I'm just in it for the craic," which, commonly used in Ireland, means fun or entertainment. "Fucking Irish," Michael laughed and shook his head.

The reason why gay men join gay rugby, even without desire of playing, is that the team's colours of blue and gold are readily recognizable within their own gay cultural spaces. Belonging to a gay rugby team adds a sense of belonging to the gay community.

One non-player, wearing the Hampshire blue and gold colours, explained that when he wore his jersey on non-rugby days, while walking or traveling around town, other townspeople "probably knew" he was gay. Adopting the attire of the gay rugby team socially signals his sexuality through codes of membership. It is, in essence, similar to wearing a gay pride shirt – but one that marks them out as a masculine gay man.

For the most part, these peripheral members are welcomed. James of the Brexit Exeters said, "[there are] the non-players who like the idea of telling people they play rugby, buy all the kit, wear it ad infinitum yet actually have no interest in playing contact and improving themselves at training". His teammate, David, agreed, saying, "Sure … there are those, but I don't mind. They give money [and] more recognition to the club".

This extends the concept of inclusivity from a sporting location that is inclusive of gay players, to one that is inclusive of gay players and observers. Still, occasionally, some of those observers may end up changing their minds and playing. Daniel, of the Mayfield Rhinos, said that he originally joined his club to find new friends and belong to the rugby community as an observer, but still be recognized as a team member. "Then I played some and immediately fell in love with it," he said. "And," he said, smiling, "I did find love unexpectedly".

As Coleman (1990, p.302) notes, "Social capital … is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common." He suggests that they all consist of some aspect of a social structure and that they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. We argue that the concept of social capital (Nichols, Tacon & Muir, 2013)

was evidenced here, not only by the expression of in-group belonging, but by the fact that many of the non-players who gladly paid around £80GBP ($110) per year for team membership privileges. Purchasing team regalia such as jackets, game-day jerseys, T-shirts, and hats could cost an additional £80 to £100. Essentially, many of the men on gay rugby teams are purchasing social capital; and they are considered part of the team simply for doing such. As one regular on-field player said, “They’re part of the team and [are] seen that way”.

A Physically Safe Playing Environment

In this section we focus on those who have chosen gay rugby clubs not only for the social capital but who actively participated in playing rugby. Some of these men came to rugby later in life because they feared joining rugby teams prior to the formation of gay rugby clubs – they saw these clubs to be safer places to learn and play the sport. The others had previously played rugby but had stopped playing over fears for their physical safety. The aspect of what type of safety we are talking about here is what is interesting and important. Whereas safety concerns used to be related to shelter from homophobia (Price & Parker 2002), we document a shift away from this concept of safety to one of protection from the inherent violence of the game.

One player stated that before the advent of the first openly all-gay men’s team, the London Steelers in the mid-1990s and then the San Francisco Fog in 2001, gay men were not seen as masculine enough (Anderson, 2005b) to play rugby after secondary school and into their university years. This meant gay men feared for their safety in light of entrenched homophobia. This sense of de facto discrimination against gay male athletes has been well documented in previous generations (Price & Parker, 2002). This separation of straight and gay players effectively creates a division of active rugby participation between the groups, with our data

suggesting that this happens from ten to twelve years until well after university age. Interviews with the gay team players indicated that most did not re-emerge on the rugby scene until their late twenties to early thirties. These men now do not ascribe heterosexual rugby teams as being homophobic. Therefore, while gay rugby clubs once afforded a space that was safe from homophobic discourse and abuse (McCormack & Anderson, 2010), it is now not safety from homophobia that these men seek, it is instead safety from injury that rugby is known for.

One senior administrator, who also played when his team needed more players, said he had not picked up a rugby ball in nearly twenty years. "Quit in secondary [school]," he said. "I just turned 38 [years old], came out when I was 35, and have been club administrator ever since". He added that he would have to have been "mental" to think that he could play with the city's "normal" club, due to the aggressive and physical nature of the team. "They'd murder me. I wouldn't be able to keep up". He then pointed to the "scared" twenty-something newcomer observing the training session from the side-lines and said that's why "he's safe here". This talk of safety is not regarding homophobia, but inherent rugby violence.

Dean explained this journey: "Playing rugby is fun for us. Most would go hang out with the straight guys [during secondary school] and they knew [we were gay]. Then they would start dating girls and we were left behind. Rugby was our connection until that point". Asked why he and his gay teammates did not continue playing rugby with their straight friends, he paused as he looked across at another field where approximately fifty men aged seventeen to approximately thirty-five were training while his gay team's group of twenty players worked out on another field, and said, "It just was done that way". One player added that most of the gay players he knew in primary school felt uncomfortable in the "hyper-masculine" setting of rugby in the early 1990s when he moved away from playing. Going through puberty and discovering his sexual

orientation, he added, was a difficult period for himself and he and other gay primary school athletes were worried about how they would be treated if they came out to their straight teammates. "Homophobia was much more pervasive then," added his teammate.

The notion of homophobia - perceived or otherwise - rarely emerged in discussions with the gay team players. Rather, the exclusion many felt from the sport was created as their straight counterparts continued acquiring the requisite rugby skills to put them on more competitive teams as they grew older; this appears to manifest itself in the inclusive nature and emerging structure of the gay teams.

Gay men, seeking to find a team for which they could play, would often, many players said, approach a "normal" team, but when asked about their previous rugby experience, would have to reply that he had not played for about a decade. The player's skill set and ability to play the game at this new level was different because of that layoff of, in some cases, up to twenty years, one gay player said. Another added, "We had to learn to play again". Attention was directed to a new player who was participating in his first training session with the gay team (the player appeared to be in his early twenties). "He's scared right now, but…" the team captain said, "he knows he's safe" adding, "Everyone comes in thinking they're unique and have a different story". The group of four men smiled and nodded. "We get it …" the captain said as the four walked back to their training session.

Rugby as a Hobby

Combining the previous themes relating to an emphasis on the social aspects of club membership and the associated reduction in the importance of sporting capital, the final theme demonstrates the resultant perception of rugby as a hobby for those on inclusive teams.

The nearly fifty players of the Williamsburg Highlander Rugby Club stood in groups and waited to hear their names called. The coaching staff studied clipboards with sheets of paper with highlighted notes on them and alternately called a name and sent that player to one or the other side of the field. The coaches said they were looking at what they referred to as “possibles” versus “probables”. The latter had the best chance to represent the Williamsburg Highlander Rugby Club’s first fifteen side; the “possibles” would be relegated to substitution status for the First Fifteen and would play for the Second Fifteen side the following week as league play began.

A group of ten members of the area’s gay men’s rugby team, the Ruffians, were watching this unfold. One player explained the importance; success on the First Fifteen in a city of 50,000 people could lead to an invitation to play higher levels and perhaps even a chance at being recruited for the English national rugby team. This was a high-stakes moment for these players and the tension was palpable in the small stadium. The gay men’s team played at Level Eight while the First Fifteen was hoping to break through and move up to Level Four.

“This is what makes us different”, one gay team member said, pointing at the field. “You mean from the obvious?” another said, laughing. “Yeah,” the first responded. “It’s a livelihood to them. For us, it’s a hobby”.

“Not knowing too much about the sport I, too, took it up as a hobby and a way to meet other gay men,” Dean, age 35, wrote in a follow-up email after this initial meeting. “I was not a sporty person and I felt that we were all starting out at the same basic point. It was also nice that the guys aren’t all that serious about the actual game and are more about the friendships”.

Several of the players involved in this unstructured interview group asked if they could submit written comments. When asked if they were uncomfortable with the questions, most of

the players stated they wanted more time to think about their responses. In addition, another player gestured to the field, after he noticed many of his teammates not listening to the conversations, and said "We're missing the game".

A sample of responses, below, using aliases and no team affiliation, suggest that these players' decisions to join a gay men's rugby team often went beyond the discussions held in focus group interviews. The common theme, however, was that of joining a community of like-minded players and participants without having to explain their sexual orientation. The fact that these men knew that their opponents, families, friends, fans and spectators supported them was enough for nearly all of the men interviewed not to be worried about being judged because of their sexual orientation. Brian, age 35, said:

> Rugby is an inclusive sport and it is important that we not be ghettoized by only playing other International Gay Rugby [Board] teams at their tournaments. We are ambassadors for the gay community [and] have broken down stereotypes such that we are no longer 'distant' but seen as ordinary human beings, just like them.

Whilst, according to Adam, age 30 from the midlands of England, "It was my dream come true – a rugby club that catered to me as a gay man and, as a total beginner to the sport". Carl, age 27 and a member of the same team as Adam's added, "I originally joined an inclusive team to see whether gay men could actually do sports and since I have become single, I have become more involved in it as a way of meeting people and potential boyfriends".

Discussion

Rugby has traditionally existed as a leading definer of masculinity in British culture. In the twentieth century, this masculinity included overt displays of homophobia and sexism. Earlier research established this homophobic culture to be one of the reasons that openly gay rugby players had traditionally chosen to compete for gay rugby clubs. However, cultural attitudes toward homosexuality have improved rapidly in the twenty-first century. This research therefore sought to examine the function and purpose of gay rugby teams in this contemporary setting.

Gay men's participation in sport has been the object of researchers' interest for years (Anderson, 2002, 2011; Besnier & Brownell, 2012). What is unique, however, is the growing number of gay men's sports teams which were, ostensibly, begun to promote the sport of rugby among an overlooked and underrepresented population. This research not only contributes to that body of literature, but it helps inform the social disposition of sport in relation to gay men's broader perception. The primary reason gay men joined these teams was not to escape homophobia, as previous research found, instead, it was to gain social capital within, and beyond the gay team.

The research also found that gay rugby clubs have transitioned from places designed to protect gay athletes from homophobic assault, to places that protect the physical safety of gay men from being less-prepared to play the routine, structured, violent game that is rugby. These clubs provided gay men the opportunity to learn the sport, slowly, and methodically, in order to prevent the types of injuries that might occur if they were to play against highly skilled players on ostensibly heterosexual teams.

The gay rugby clubs studied also serve as a meeting place for the development of gay social networks and culture. This will, of course, be similar to the intent of the establishment of

these clubs in the first place. The variance between the original intent and that found here is key; older research on gay teams (Symons, 2009) suggested that it was to escape the stigma of mainstream sports, whereas the men in this research suggest that stigma against playing rugby as gay men comes not from straight male rugby players, but from other gay men – something we explore in a separate paper.

Finally, the need for gay rugby clubs may take on new significance in a technological age; Renniger (2018) shows that physical gay spaces have shifted over the last few decades from bars and clubs, to internet technologies. This leaves less room for face-to-face human interaction and the development of social networks, including romantic relationships, while the incidences of isolation and associated mental health issues within non-heterosexual individuals has been well documented (Johnson & Amella, 2014). It is perhaps for this reason that more players pay membership fees than play rugby - a lot more; the rugby club is one of the few places where gay men can meet like-minded individuals face-to-face to develop these networks.

The combination of factors found within this research contest assertions made in earlier work exploring sexual orientation within the domain of British rugby and provide encouraging findings for the continued development of attitudes in this regard, in line with societal views more widely. Themes encountered in this work lend support to more recent explorations of the field (see Gaston & Dixon, 2019) and corroborate the identified trend of acceptance associated with Anderson's theory of Inclusive Masculinity. In addition, Gaston & Dixon's (2019) research also recognised the importance of these clubs in providing a social space for gay men outside of the traditional environments of bars/clubs and the changing nature of this area.

We suggest that the shift highlighted in the purpose and culture of gay rugby teams is a direct result of decreasing cultural homohysteria; a concept outlined by Anderson (2009), which

goes beyond homophobia, to explain men's fear of being perceived as gay and the subsequent behavioural impact. Common behaviours in homohysteric settings include explicit displays of antipathy towards homosexuals (i.e. homophobic behaviour) in order to reduce suspicion of oneself; however, in examining findings on heterosexual men in other studies (Anderson 2014), it is homophobia that was stigmatized, not homosexuality. This is typical of an environment demonstrating reduced homohysteria and increasingly accepting attitudes, in line with previous findings relating to inclusive masculinities in other sporting domains.

Our research therefore adds to the canon of Inclusive Masculinity Research by examining a social location that had not previously been examined, homosocial gay rugby teams. Our research also contributes to the scholarship on sport and changing social norms, because we suggest that our findings indicate that, as Anderson (2011) argued, sport reflects the broader culture from which it emerges. Although we cannot generalize beyond this data, it is for this reason that we suggest other researchers examining other gay sport teams, are likely to find similar shifts in their purpose and culture.

What we can, definitively, say from this study of five English teams, is that these gay rugby teams no longer exist for the purpose in which they were formed, that being a safe haven from homophobia, and this changing nature is likely to continue evolving in line with wider societal developments. That the research was conducted in mid-to-South England could compromise the transferability of these findings, but, in conjunction with the work of Gaston & Dixon (2019) in Northern England, it lends support to a nationwide trend.

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