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The re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in educationally-based organised sport

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In this study, we draw on findings from one year of participant observation and 12 in-depth interviews with men in a highly-ranked English university rugby team in order to nuance theoretical understandings concerning the re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in organised sport. We use ethnographic data to theorise the complex relationship between language, homosocial masculine relationships and organised sport. In examining the political, intentional and inadvertent effects of these men's discourses, we define and discuss the notion of *gay discourse* as a form of heteronormativity that is dissimilar to the traditional use of homophobic discourse. Highlighting that homosexually-themed discourse is best understood as a continuum, we stress the importance of context in interpreting the meaning and explicating the effects of this kind of discourse.

Keywords: homophobia; masculinity; university students; gay; sport

Introduction

Although there are various purposes and outcomes of sporting participation for men in Western cultures, a consistent finding is that organised, competitive team sports serve as a deeply ingrained social institution principally organised around the political project of defining acceptable forms of heteromascularity (Messner 1992; Nauright and Chandler 1996). In a culture that distributes gender and sexuality privilege unequally, boys and men are compelled to associate with hegemonic dominance by partaking in sporting endeavours that construct their identities to align with dominant perspectives of heteromascularity embodiment and expression (Pronger 1990).

Multiple studies show that boys and men who most strictly adhere to orthodox understandings of heteromascularity maintain high levels of what Anderson (2005a) has called *masculine capital*. Similar to Becker's human capital, where a person is socially esteemed because of skills or education, Anderson describes masculine capital as the degree of masculinity one maintains in any given setting. Given the centrality of sport to Anglo-American conceptions of masculinity (Messner 1992; Pronger 1990), organised, competitive sport is a particularly effective setting in which to achieve high masculine capital – particularly rugby.

Throughout its history, the linking of violence and masculinity has been central to the sport of rugby (Chandler and Nauright 1996). In the UK, rugby is positioned alongside

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soccer as a leading definer of masculinity (Nauright and Chandler 1996) and many scholars have documented that men's rugby esteems and encourages bravado, risk taking and violence. For example, Dunning and Sheard (1979) examine how the early 'barbarians' of rugby believed that violence was an essential part of the game, a way of proving masculinity and courage. Furthermore, Collins (2009) describes how until the 1990s punching and kicking were regular occurrences in rugby.

As well as esteeming violence and aggression, rugby has been theorised to privilege heterosexuality and help reproduce patriarchy (Burton Nelson 1994; Collins 2009). Accordingly, as part of their masculinity-making process, rugby players often discursively stigmatise gay and/or feminine men (Dunning 1986; Muir and Seitz 2004), also consolidating their masculinity at the expense of women (Schacht 1996). Rugby has therefore actively constructed men to exhibit, value and reproduce traditional, orthodox (misogynistic and homophobic) notions of heteromascularity (Anderson and McGuire 2010; Nauright and Chandler 1996). Accordingly, the performance and mobilisation of heteromascularity rugby discourses is an important vessel for heterosexualising its players and elevating players over gay men and women.

Discourse and the power of homophobic language in sport

Although a multitude of social forces construct and regulate hierarchies of gender and sexuality, language is central in their re/production (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Kiesling 2007). Foucault (1979) argued that discourse literally creates the rules and identities by which we live, suggesting that people inhabit the real world, but that their experience, thoughts and desires can only be understood through the discursive tools available to them. The use of language therefore has a direct and material effect on peoples' subjectivities.

Butler (1990) has been the most prominent theorist for understanding the affect of discourse on sexualities in sport studies. She employs a neo-Foucauldian understanding in order to theorise how hierarchies of sexuality and gender are culturally inscribed via discourse. Highlighting the interdependency of sexuality and gender, Butler uses psychoanalytic theory to conceptualise what she argues is an inherently homophobic construction of gendered identities. She accomplishes this by conceptualising a 'constitutive outside' where gendered behaviours deemed socially unacceptable and/or undesirable are situated. For Butler, this necessarily includes same-sex desire. Her concept of performativity suggests that by violently and repeatedly repudiating these desires, one 'proves' that they maintain an acceptable (heterosexual) gender – heteromascularity.

Other scholars employ social constructionist frameworks to explicate the deleterious effects of homophobic discourse on homosexuality and the construction of heteromascularity (Anderson 2002; Pronger 1990). They examine how discourse works in the regulation of masculinities (Plummer 1999), and how homophobic discourse reflects and reproduces homophobia among its users (Burn 2000).

Interviewing 32 openly gay athletes, Anderson (2002) found that homophobic language is present in all types of men's sports. He theorises that because gay athletes do not fit dominant notions of masculinity, intolerance is exacted in both explicit and covert ways. Here, homophobic discourse acts as a resistance toward the intrusion of gay subculture, serving to maintain orthodox masculinity and patriarchy of sport (Griffin 1998; Messner 1992).

Highlighting the operational aspects of homophobic discourse in discrimination, a number of scholars show that the primary way to subordinate a young man is to call him a 'fag' or accuse him of being gay – even if one does not believe he is (Davis 1990; Pascoe 2007).

Accusing someone of homosexuality demonstrates one's heteromascularity at the expense of another.

Pascoe (2007) provides a more nuanced perspective with her concept of 'fag discourse'. Here, the label fag is volleyed between boys jockeying for masculine position. Although gay boys are most at risk, she argues all boys fear the 'spectre of the fag' (p. 71). This is because fag is used indiscriminately, even when there exists no 'suspicion' of homosexuality. Fag discourse is deployed when the intention is to create a marginalised 'other' by which one's own heteromascularity is consolidated (Butler 1990).

Pascoe (2007), however, maintains that many of those who use fag discourse do not intellectualise homophobia. Accordingly, Pascoe's work is somewhat different from other frameworks of homophobic discourse. She demonstrates that the fag discourse has lost its sexualised meaning, although the consequences of a fag discourse without homophobic sentiment remains relatively unexamined (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; Rasmussen 2004). Accordingly, in this ethnographic study, we seek to develop a theory to consider the variability of homosexual discourse as it relates to intent, sexual content and effect.¹ We highlight that, as power and definitions shift, prejudice becomes covert, implicit and complex (Nylund 2007). However, as the acceptability of cultural homophobia decreases, we suggest that it is homophobia and not homosexuality that is increasingly stigmatised (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010; Weeks 2007). This means that the effect of homophobic discourse must also change and new forms of homosexually-themed discourse are emerging.

Decreasing homophobia in organised sport

Despite decades of overt homophobia in sport, there is strong evidence that sporting homophobia, as determined through attitudinal positioning, has decreased in recent years, even if homophobic language remains rife in sport (Anderson 2008; Clayton and Harris 2008; Harris and Clayton 2007; Southall et al. 2009). In 2005, Anderson used in-depth interviews with 68 gay athletes to document how men are increasingly emerging from their athletic closets. He shows that once athletes come out, they positively influence their sporting environments. More important, he shows that athletes are coming out because they assess gay-positive attitudes among their athletic peers.

We also highlight that, in December 2009, the Welsh rugby union player, Gareth Thomas, publicly declared his homosexuality, making him the first openly gay professional rugby player actively playing in Britain. Although this prompted much discussion about levels of homophobia in sport, the reaction to Thomas was overwhelmingly supportive. Indeed, in British newspaper *The Times*, Thomas commented that two of his teammates, '... patted me on the back and said, "We don't care. Why didn't you tell us before?"' (Walsh 2009, 32).

Of course a positive change in attitudes about sexuality may not be unilateral in sport (Anderson 2005b). Even if increasingly progressive sexual and gender attitudes are found to predominate in many settings, this does not mean they predominate in all. However, research documenting high levels of homophobia is also contextually specific. Indeed, given the changing attitudes toward sexuality in youth cultures (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Savin Williams 2005), it is no longer possible to speak abstractly of the level of homophobia in sport – it varies within institutions, and across teams (Anderson 2005b).

It is not known, however, what happens to the discursive practices of men who have traditionally maintained high degrees of homophobia in settings where homophobia is no

longer acceptable. Accordingly, in this research we seek to investigate the types of sexually-based language that emerge, the frequency with which they are used and what the intent and function of this language is in re-producing and/or challenging homophobia in the sporting context.

Methods

Positing that the most productive method toward understanding the structure of power and gender relations in a masculine culture comes from a multi-method approach (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), we used both participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observations provide naturalistic observations of behaviour and language use, while in-depth interviews provide rich data about participants' attitudes (Brewer 2002). This permits us to capture the complexities of the 32 men who participate as members of this university's elite rugby team.

The team, a fairly homogenous group of men aged 18–22 years, come from England, Scotland and Wales. All are students and most come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds. All but one are white and all identify as heterosexual. While these demographics limit generalisations, our purpose is not to create generalisable findings about homosexually-themed language. Instead, we desire to interrogate the complexity of language as it relates to gender and sexuality. It is our desire to explicate a framework for understanding the diversity of homosexually-themed discourse in sport settings, not to show that this language is being used in all settings.

Data collection for this ethnographic research came by training one of the team's players in data collection methods. He collected ten months of data during rugby training, socialisation and competition, partaking in all of the team's functions, practices and competitions. While his teammates signed consent forms, he did not take notes in their presence. Instead, all notes were left to immediate recall (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). We believe that this method helped team members forget one of their teammates was conducting research, minimising researcher effect in the process.

We approached this research from both a constructivist and an interpretive perspective, suggesting that the participants co-created a reality through their shared experiences. We tried to capture the core meanings and contradictions of rugby players' experiences by examining their actions alongside and against their language (Katz 2004). Thus, after completion of the observations, we used 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews to corroborate and challenge the observational data.

Interviews also enabled interviewee's agency to point the research into new directions, as observations only reveal the 'what', while interviews reveal the 'why' (Brewer 2002). Care was taken to interview men from throughout the stratification of abilities, as well as participants with varying degrees of core team membership (Ridgeway 1983). An attempt was also made to interview the coaches. However, one refused, citing that he was not interested in a study about masculinity. The other missed repeat appointments. After the fourth attempt, we ceased trying.

We transcribed and coded interviews using a constant comparative method, where emerging themes were organised into conceptual and thematic categories and cross-checked by each researcher (Goetz and LeCompte 1981). We coded and compared a portion of the field notes and interview transcripts, until our coding of what categorical behaviours represented what codes concurred (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Finally, all ethical measures have been followed to assure anonymity.

Researcher reflexivity

A body of methodological literature highlights the impact that a researcher can have on the research process (see Davies 1999). In attempt to ameliorate this researcher effect, reflexivity has become a central concern in qualitative research. As Willis (1978) argues, reflexivity provides the researcher with the conceptual tools to 'analyse the intersection of his own social paradigms with those of the people he wishes to understand' (p. 197). Accordingly, we explicitly examined our personal, emotional and theoretical influences that are implicated in any analysis of data and it is through interrogating our own (various) attitudes to rugby, masculinity, homosexually-themed language and youth culture that we maintain reflexive rigour in this project. By allocating specific times and places to reflect on the data collection process, by maintaining reflexive and critical positions throughout the analysis of data and by both authors independently coding the data, our analysis recognises and accounts for (as far as this is possible) the perspectives through which we view the social and sporting world, in order to minimise the effects of our differing views on our analysis.

Homophobic discourse and pro-gay perspectives

Grundlingh (1994, p. 197) describes rugby as the 'ultimate man-maker', inculcating characteristics of courage, self-control and stamina, alongside a deeply engrained culture of homophobia. However, we found no overt or intellectualised homophobia whatsoever among the athletes of this team, although we did find ostensible homophobia among the coaches who used homophobic discourse in a manner consistent with older research on sport (Messner 1992). Observations found the coaches used the terms 'poof' and 'queer' with regular frequency and mal-intent.

'Don't be a fucking poof', Jonathan, a coach aged 42, screams, after Graham, aged 18, fails to properly complete a play. And when John, aged 19, tells his coach he should not practice because of an injury, the coach yells, 'For God's sake, what are you, gay?' Here, homophobia is used maliciously to stigmatise and subordinate Graham.

The athletes, however, despise their coaches' approach to masculinity building. Graham ardently complains about his coach:

He calls players poofs when they are injured all the time, and he frequently says, 'You're fucking gay', just to put a player down. I don't like it ... I hate my coaches.

Tom, aged 21, agrees, 'It's their old-school way of doing it. It's not right, and I don't like it'. Ben, aged 18, sees his coaches' language as archaic, 'That's their generation, but it doesn't work ... It doesn't make me think, "Oh, no. I'm not a real man. I need to play harder"'. It just makes me think he's a fucking idiot'. Seth, aged 20, is also offended by his coach's homophobia. 'It's nasty. He should be fired. Period'.

Unlike the coaches, none of the players intellectualise homophobia. Highlighting the positive association they have with homosexuality, when asked if he would mind having an openly gay player on the team, Graham says, 'Maybe my coach would, but I wouldn't.' John agrees, 'I wouldn't give a shit. Not in the slightest'. Tim adds, 'Seriously, what kind of people do you think we are?'

These answers reflect the myriad of pro-gay responses to questions designed to probe for homophobia. When asked if he thought homosexuality is wrong, Alex, aged 19, says, 'No man. Of course not. I have gay friends'. Ian, also aged 19, says, 'I'm for gay rights. I think most people are nowadays'. Observations also support these statements. For example, Seth has a gay roommate, Charlie, aged 20, who occasionally attends nights out with the

team. Charlie is always welcome and players dance with him, even grinding their crotches against him while dancing. Several players have gone to a gay pub with Charlie, too.

Flirting with gayness

Although these rugby players intellectually distance themselves from homophobia, they nonetheless manage to ironically proclaim their heterosexuality through acting gay. We call this *ironic heterosexual recuperation* (McCormack and Anderson 2010). Here, heterosexual men joke about maintaining sexual desire for each other by parodying stereotypes of gay men and acting out mock homosexual behaviours. For example, several of the players frequently greet each other with, 'Hey, gay boy'.

Interviews with the players show that these greetings are, without exception, interpreted as a sign of endearment. For example, when Graham is greeted accordingly, he smiles and points suggestively to his butt, playing-up to the suggestion that he is gay. Similarly, Mike, aged 20, greets Colin, aged 22, with 'hey homo' and Colin replies, 'Yeah, sister. Good weekend?' By proclaiming homosexuality, these players ironically assert their own heterosexuality. Similar to Pascoe's fag discourse, use of the word 'gay' does not here automatically connote gay identity. However, unlike fag discourse, this discursive production of heterosexuality is not used aggressively, or with intent to stigmatise someone (gay or straight). The participants perceive their greeting as innocuous, maintaining that there is no homophobic intent.

When asked about the 'gay' content of this banter, participants say it is decidedly not homophobic. They argue their pro-gay attitudes prevent gay banter from being interpreted as homophobic. Mike says, 'It's simply banter. We don't mean anything by it'. Colin adds:

We do it as a laugh. I don't mean anything nasty. I say 'You're gay' all the time to my friends, but I don't mean it that way. Anyway, I normally give them a hug or something so they *know* I love them.

Alex clarifies that this type of gay banter is understood as indicative of close friendship. When asked if he would banter with someone on the team he disliked, he responds, 'No. Of course not! You only banter with those you like'. Accordingly, participants' assert that gay banter is used only among friends, a finding supported through multiple interviews and observations.

This does not absolve this type of language/behaviour of promoting a framework of homosexual stigma. However, the perniciousness of intent is absent – something that cannot be said with fag discourse and homophobic discourse.

We note that there are similarities between these players usage of ironic heterosexual recuperation and gay men's usage for reclamation (Bell and Healey 1992; Brontsema 2004). Gay men often use homophobic words with irony within their communities. This is designed to expunge the stigma attached to once hurtful words. In doing this, gay men attempt to reclaim the words, reducing their capacity to wound. While these heterosexual players may not belong to gay culture, the lack of stigmatising intent is noteworthy.

However, this use of language is also part of a larger project of masculine bantering. It serves as a form of homosocial bonding between friends, it is not used as an expression of displeasure. However, the nature of power, its invisibility and its re/production, means that the issue of whether there is an element of homophobia in the text remains important. Accordingly, we now interrogate the negative effects of using homosexually-themed language.

‘That just doesn’t make sense’: the contested meanings of ‘gay’

Although players intellectualise support for gay rights, they nonetheless use homosexually-themed discourse alongside ironic heterosexual recuperation. The most frequent use comes with the phrase, ‘that’s so gay’. For example, Graham fails a technical manoeuvre in practice and, out of frustration, shouts, ‘That’s so gay!’

The phrase is heard, on average, twice a day. And while still a regular occurrence, we highlight its declining frequency compared to the dozens of times it was heard daily in Anderson’s (2005a) research. In our research, plays are frequently missed, but gay discourse is only *occasionally* used. Players are more prone to swear ‘fuck’ or ‘shit’ to vent their displeasure, than to use homosexually-themed language.

In interview, all players argue they do not intend to be homophobic when saying, ‘that’s so gay’. Dan says, ‘It doesn’t mean gay in that sense. That would be wrong’. Colin agrees, ‘I don’t think of sexuality when I say it. Look, when I miss a shot, I don’t think my aim is actually gay. That just doesn’t make sense’.

When asked about how they think gay people interpret their use of ‘that’s so gay’ participants express mixed response. Some restrict it in front of gay friends for fear of being misunderstood, others say they nonetheless use it. Those, like Jack, aged 20, who do, suggest, ‘I don’t mean anything by it. So I don’t see why anyone would be offended’. Seth defends his usage, arguing that both he and his gay roommate use it to describe things displeasing. ‘Hey, if gay guys use it, you can’t tell me that it’s bad’. These differing perspectives highlight participants’ attempts to mediate the complex terrain of sexual and gender discourse.

Apart from ‘that’s so gay’, ‘don’t be gay’ is also used (although less frequently). This phrase, heard once a week, is normally expressed between friends as a way of debating the merits of a standpoint. For example, Mike tries to persuade Colin about the quality of a television show. Colin responds, ‘Don’t be gay, man. That programme’s shit’. But when interviewed, Colin insists he does not mean this to insult about sexuality, but about Mike’s standpoint instead. He does not desire to stigmatise gay men in the process. ‘I was just expressing my dislike of the programme. It has nothing to do with sexuality at all.’

It is not surprising that, in a culture where homophobia is stigmatised, people will argue their own discourse is not homophobic. Still, calling these expressions ‘homophobic’ is to mischaracterise their intent *and* effect. While these expressions still privilege heterosexuality and while some may undoubtedly be offended, there is nonetheless a clear difference between this discourse and the homophobic discourse traditionally described academic literature (Burn 2000).

Failed gay discourse as homophobic discourse

In addition to using homophobic language against players, the coaches try to relate to their team by using gay banter. Their attempts, however, fail. Graham explains, ‘Occasionally he uses it in what he thinks is good humour, to try to be one of the boys and banter with us about being gay. But it is just bad most of the time’. Alex agrees, ‘No. They don’t banter like we do. It’s like they try to use our way of relating to each other, but then they twist it to insult’. He adds, ‘It’s really derogatory. It’s more bullying than bantering’.

The players reject their coaches ‘banter’ for several reasons. Foremost, they perceive that their coaches’ intend to stigmatise gay men by using this banter – making it a form of homophobic discourse instead. Seth says, ‘Yeah, like I’ll say to a mate, “you’re gay”, which will bring us closer. But he does it differently. He says, “That guy’s gay”, and it’s totally different’. Graham adds, ‘I hate it how they use homophobia to insult people’.

Alex agrees, 'He [the Head Coach] talks about gay people in ugly and disparaging ways. You can't say you hate gay people and then say, "don't be gay" and have us accept it as joking'.

Highlighting their homophobia, when discussing the fact that Seth has a gay roommate, the coach remarks how 'fucking gross' it must be for Seth to see his roommate bring a guy home. While the players fail to confront their coach, they complain about him. John says, 'What an idiot'. Seth agrees, 'Who cares who he [the gay roommate] brings back.' Thus, from the players' perspective, the coaches' homophobia poisons their attempt at banter. Graham says:

Look, if you're cool with gays, people know you like gays, and you make that clear, then you have some freedom to joke around about who's gay, or to joke with gay friends. But if you're not cool with it, then you really should just shut the fuck up.

Graham's argument is that one can only banter about homosexuality if one espouses pro-gay attitudes. Thus, from the players' perspective, gay banter is a way of expressing comfort with homosexuality and distancing oneself from homophobia, something also found by Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007). They argue, 'the new use of *gay* functions as an in-group marker, when talking to peers or when "having fun", as opposed to being used when talking to adults, parents or non-familiar acquaintances' (p. 164).

Reproducing frameworks of heterosexual privilege through gay discourse

As traditionally conceived, homophobic discourse maintains deleterious effects to both heterosexual and gay sporting men (Anderson 2002; Messner 1992). However, not all homosexually-themed language is equally damaging. To conceptualise the broad range of effects that discourse has, we categorise *gay discourse* as homosexually-themed language without intent to stigmatise. In this section, we argue the phrases 'that's so gay' and 'don't be gay' are *less* damaging (and more complex) than homophobic discourse. We explicate a continuum of homosexually-themed discourse to help understand the broad range of discourse.

There are several important points to consider when theorising the use of gay discourse. First, we are primarily concerned with theoretically mapping the terrain of language, its intent, meaning and purpose. Accordingly, it is important to recognise that using gay as an expression of displeasure is well documented in youth settings (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2010; Rasmussen 2004). However, we also argue these men are unaware of the complexity of discourse and its effects. They fail to recognise the heteronormativity of 'that's so gay'. From their perspective, it 'simply' serves as a cathartic expression of dissatisfaction.

We add to this literature by viewing this phenomenon through Ogburn's (1950) lens of cultural lag. This occurs when two interlinked social variables become dissociated because their meanings change at different rates. In this case, youth employ homosexually-themed discourse without knowledge or consideration of what it once conveyed. That is, their use of homosexually-themed language lags behind their attitudinal positioning on homosexuality.

For these young men, the word 'gay' is a placeholder for their negative emotions – but it is not intended to express homophobia. We therefore argue it is unjustifiable to hold 'that's so gay' as part of homophobic discourse. It continues to privilege heterosexuality – something we analyse later – but it does not have the pernicious, deleterious effect that homophobic discourse maintains (Plummer 1999).

Without immersion in the data, it might be difficult for progressive academics to interpret this discourse accordingly. Indeed, much scholarship has used the analogy of racial discourse to analyse gay discourse, concluding that it is pernicious and homophobic (Parker 2001; Sanders 2008). This position articulates that because the phrase ‘that’s so black’ would be considered racist if used, it would therefore be equally homophobic to say, ‘that’s so gay’. Our problem with this analogy is that it is a circular argument that assumes what it seeks to prove. This argument assumes that a given phrase is necessarily damaging (be it racist or homophobic) because it does not pay attention to the wider social context. For example, we agree that if ‘that’s so black’ is used with the intent of stigmatising people of colour, the phrase would be racist and reprehensible. However, given the multiple meanings of the word ‘black’, it is possible for the phrase to be used without being intended or interpreted as racist (an almost banal example of this would be if the phrase was used descriptively about a black car). Similarly, ‘that’s so gay’ can only be understood through the social context of its use and, here, there is growing evidence that ‘gay’ does not refer to sexuality when used in this way. Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007), McCormack (2010) and Rasmussen (2004) all document that gay has multiple meanings, including referring to a sexual identity and being *passé*/rubbish, and that young people (with progressive attitudes toward homosexuality) are particularly skilled at differentiating these meanings.

We argue, however, that the contemporary usage of the phrase ‘that’s so gay’ does continue to privilege heterosexuality. Cultural lag theory contributes to our understanding of the use of this type of language because it is overly-simplistic to conceive of the broad range of homosexually-themed discourse as all, equally, homophobic. This is evidenced by the phrase ‘you suck’, which meant different things to each author aged 16. To the older author it invoked a framework of sexual stigma. This is because he recalls the original insult (from the 1980s) in full: ‘You suck dick’. Yet the other author (17 years younger), found it a genderless and sexually-neutral insult. Thus, this phrase invoked different emotions in each of us when we were 16 and appears to have lost its sexual meaning entirely for youth today.

In order to explicate the affect of cultural lag on discourse, we call homosexually-themed discourse where there is no intent to wound, *gay discourse*. It is our central thesis that because the effects of homosexually-themed discourse vary in their intensity and damage, it is necessary to distinguish them. To help explicate our categorisation, Figure 1 details how we classify language into homophobic and gay discourse. Note, however, that all of this language contributes to heteronormativity.

Inductively theorising gay discourse

The multiple and varied use of the homosexually-themed language used by this rugby team is too complex and heterogeneous for it all to be classified under the rubric of homophobic discourse. Building on this data, and our experience researching homophobia in multiple sport and educational settings (Anderson 2002, 2005a, 2008, 2009;

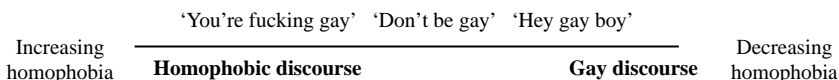


Figure 1. Homosexually-themed language.

McCormack 2010; McCormack and Anderson 2010), we have inductively formulated a typology for the usage of homosexually-themed language.

We conceptualise two broad forms of homosexually-themed (socio-negative) language: *homophobic discourse* and *gay discourse*, as explicated in Figure 1. Homophobic discourse is the form of homosexually-themed language that is well-established in the literature (Plummer 1999), the kind the coaches on this team use and the type the second author heard in his socialisation into sport (Anderson 2000). We theorise that this type of discourse will dominate in cultures of high homophobia. Gay discourse, however, conceptualises homosexually-themed language where there is no intent to subordinate another person, an effect brought about by a culture of decreased homophobia.

While we present two discrete categories of language, we highlight that the complexity and contextual specificity of discourse means that rather than being distinct classes, this language use is a continuum. Homosexually-themed language is far more complex than 'being homophobic' or not (cf. Clayton and Harris 2008). When determining how to categorise a particular phrase, it is necessary to consider *how* it is said as well as what one says. That is, the social context and the relationship between speaker and listener are important, too. Accordingly, there is much slipperiness in how discourse is used and the intent with which it is spoken.

In our classification, intent is the determining factor in which type of discourse is employed. That is, we identify language as part of homophobic discourse if *intended to wound*, regardless of whether it stigmatises sexuality (Burn 2000) or gender (Pascoe 2007) or whether it is meant to 'make the man' (Plummer 1999) or just improve performance (Anderson 2005a), what counts is that there is a desire to subordinate another person with its usage.

This intent to wound is important, because it affects both the manner in which discourse is used and how it is received. However, we recognise that the perception of prejudice in interaction is as important as the intent of the speaker and that discourse can still have negative impact even if this is unintended. As Brontsema (2004) writes, 'intent alone cannot control the fate of a word' (11). However, since scholars document that harmful intent exacerbates the negative effect of pernicious discourse (Plummer 1999), it is logical to argue that the intent to wound is a determining factor in the effect of discourse.

There is a further reason for a more nuanced perspective of homosexually-themed discourse. Consider, for example, the espousal of pro-gay attitudes. It would be erroneous to suggest that a proclamation of gay support is convincing evidence of equality for homosexuality, because the claim alone does not substantiate annulment from re/producing homophobic discourses in all temporal and spatial capacities. Yet to argue that all homosexually-themed discourse is homophobic would be equally unconvincing; such an argument diminishes the progress that has been achieved concerning attitudes toward homosexuality. Instead, it needs to be recognised that, in a culture that stigmatises overt homophobia, the reception of homosexually-themed discourse will be different.

It is fundamental to distinguish homophobic discourse from the use of gay epithets when there is no intention to stigmatise any individual or group. It is for this reason that we call this use of language *gay discourse*, highlighting that it is widely used to express displeasure, not homophobia (Laler and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2010; Savin Williams 2005). We are not alone in examining homosexually-themed language from a more complex standpoint. Rasmussen (2004) comments: '... it does not *always* have to be read as homophobic. It can also be ironic, self-referential, habitual, or even deployed without a "knowing" relation to gayness as a sexual signifier' (304).

The importance of context

While scholarship on homophobic discourse captures its deleterious effect in the homophobic *Zeitgeist* of the time it was written, cultural discourses concerning homosexuality are rapidly changing (Anderson 2009; Savin Williams 2005; Weeks 2007). Accordingly, we argue that rigid theorising of homophobic discourse no longer maintains utility in understanding the social dynamics of this setting – it does not accurately describe what is occurring on this particular rugby team because it does not fully provide for contextualisation.

Our argument is that the recent diminishment of cultural homophobia requires a fundamental reconsideration of the power and effect of gay discourse. Particularly important, the word ‘gay’ cites markedly different cultural norms in settings where homophobic discourse is absent or stigmatised (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010). We acknowledge that for those socialised into hearing homophobia, it is easy to read homophobia in today’s gay discourse. Yet these discourses do not invoke images of gay subordination and homophobia for younger men (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007). It is poor sociology to apply an intellectual framework without hearing the voices, meanings and narratives of participants. Accordingly, we argue that scholars need to give central consideration to context when discussing the impact and effects of discourses of sexuality and gender.

Our argument places stronger onus on researchers to investigate the intricacies of language as it is understood by the participants (see Groes-Green 2009). It recognises that intent and social context are vital for understanding the meanings and effects of discourse, requiring researcher reflexivity. We believe that this is crucial to properly understand how contemporary discourses structure relations and hierarchies within and between sexualities. Learning to view matters through participants’ eyes is simply good sociology.

The argument for the contextualisation of language is not new. Davies (1999) writes, ‘It is simply recognised that ethnographic knowledge is in part a product of the social situation of ethnographers and that this must be acknowledged and its significance addressed during analysis’ (179). Unfortunately, this framework does not always extend to how scholars conceptualise the effect of homosexual discourse. Our experience of presenting this data at conferences, and of receiving previous rejections on this article, highlights that too many scholars assume *just one* valid interpretation of the effect of discourse. This is not consistent with interpretive sociology. As Brontsema (2004) states, ‘One usage does not disallow others; one group’s pejorative use of a word does not prevent another group from using it in new contexts and with differing intentions’ (7).

We do not deny that gay discourse might continue to reference homophobic norms for some people, in certain settings, and we certainly argue that this discourse continues to privilege heterosexuality. But to say these discourses are *necessarily* homophobic seems to us peculiarly structuralist and unhelpful in documenting male youth culture. This is why we argue for the centrality of contextualisation: it examines the beliefs and attitudes of those who partake in gay discourse, accounting for the social context of the location. Thus, this framework does not position our participants *solely* as naïve actors who ignorantly re-inscribe homophobic norms.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined how members of a highly ranked English university rugby team reconstruct discourses of sexuality and their associated meanings through social interaction. Traditionally, rugby is an overtly masculinised sport, where homophobia and

homophobic discourse predominate (Muir and Seitz 2004). Yet members of this team do not use homophobic pejoratives and they intellectually verbalise their support for gay men. Indeed, men on this team consciously and critically disengage from the homophobic attitudes historically associated with the sport of rugby. We therefore explicate the complicated ways in which language reproduces, as well as challenges, these once-dominant understandings of masculinity and homosexuality. By categorising the use of homosexually-themed discourse according to intent, we nuance the theory that underpins how sexual language in social settings is understood.

We also document that these men bond through ironically proclaiming their homosexuality – something we call ironic heterosexual recuperation. Here, the intention is to ironically draw heterosexualising attention by demonstrating comfort with homosexuality, while also maintaining one's heterosexual identity. In this setting, homosocial bonding has appropriated homosexually-themed greetings and mock gestures of homosexuality as a way of demonstrating friendship and proving heterosexuality, without overt homophobia (cf. McCormack 2010).

However, this local meaning is likely to derive its codes through the exceptional degree of heterosexuality and heteromale capital accorded to these men because of their team sport affiliation (Anderson 2005a). Indeed, the masculine capital accorded to rugby players means that it is possible for them to conditionally transgress some of these heteromale norms in ways that might not be permissible for non-athletes (Harris and Clayton 2007). The heterosexualisation of rugby players that was developed through generations of homophobia and femphobia means today's participants have their masculine capital raised simply by being associated with rugby (Nauright and Chandler 1996). In more recent years, however, the cultural lag of homosexually-themed discourse has spread to men who are outside of the heteromale institutional affiliation of sport. For example, in a separate study, the first author documents that gay and straight English high school boys (who are not athletes) also now bond together through this form of homosexually-themed banter (McCormack 2010).

This research argues that in examining the use of gay banter, it is important to recognise that the intent and meaning of homosexually-themed discourse will be partially determined by the culture in which it is used. Given that Nauright and Chandler (1996) highlight rugby culture varies according to national and ethnic contexts, it is important to consider how these contextual issues interact with the social meanings of language use. Another issue is the contextual difference in levels of homophobia of coaches and players. While we recognise that attitudes toward homosexuality are never homogenous (it is possible to find pro-gay coaches, for example), we emphasise that there was clear and substantive differences between players' language and banter and its interpretation compared with that of their coaches.

The use of gay discourse and banter is, however, still problematic. First, there are often no openly gay teammates who can judge the effect of this language. Accordingly, there is no way that these men can know that their discourse is not causing damage to their (potentially closeted) friends. Second, whatever the ostensible purpose of this banter, it also reproduces heteronormative assumptions about sexuality.

However, because gay discourse does not serve as a traditional, pernicious form of heterosexual weaponry that intentionally inscribes a subjugated framework around gay identities, it should be considered differently from the old form of homophobic discourse. It is for these reasons that we postulate the need for a continuum of homosexually-themed language, a notion that recognises the historical situatedness of the subject and audience. Taking cultural lag into consideration, we highlight that the same phrase can be interpreted

differently by men of two generations. Thus, intent, cultural context and affect are all important in judging the relationship between homosexually themed language and affect. With this purpose, we hope to open new ways of thinking about discourse – ways that do not render all gay discourse necessarily homophobic nor its user's passive re-inscribers of homophobic norms.

Note

1. The focus in this paper is the use of gay discourse among men. The use of homosexually-themed language may be different between women (cf. Griffin 1998).

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Résumé

Dans cette étude, nous exploitons les résultats d'une observation participante d'une durée d'un an, et de douze entretiens en profondeur avec des hommes faisant partie d'une équipe de rugby universitaire de haut rang en Angleterre, afin de nuancer les théories sur la reproduction du discours sur l'homosexualité dans le sport fédéré. Nous employons des données ethnographiques pour théoriser le rapport complexe entre le langage, les relations homosociales masculines, et le sport fédéré. En examinant les effets politiques, intentionnels et accidentels des discours de ces hommes, nous définissons et nous discutons la notion de *discours gay* en tant que forme d'hétéronormativité, qui se distingue du discours homophobe traditionnel. En soulignant que le discours sur l'homosexualité est mieux compris en tant qu'élément d'un continuum, nous mettons l'accent sur l'importance du contexte, quand il s'agit d'interpréter la signification des effets de ce type de discours, et de les expliquer.

Resumen

En este artículo nos basamos en los resultados de un estudio de un año de duración en el que se llevaron a cabo una observación de los participantes y 12 entrevistas exhaustivas con hombres de un

equipo de rugby de una universidad británica de primer nivel. El objetivo de este estudio era hacer un análisis exhaustivo de la comprensión teórica en cuanto a la reproducción del discurso sobre la homosexualidad en deportes organizados. Utilizamos datos etnográficos para teorizar la compleja relación entre el lenguaje, las relaciones masculinas homosociales y el deporte organizado. Al examinar los efectos políticos, intencionales e involuntarios de los discursos de estos hombres, definimos y abordamos la noción del discurso homosexual como un tipo de heteronormatividad que es diferente al uso tradicional del discurso homofóbico. Al destacar que el discurso sobre el tema de la homosexualidad se comprende mejor como una secuencia, hacemos hincapié en la importancia del contexto a la hora de interpretar el significado y explicar los efectos de este tipo de discurso.