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## ***Academics v. Activists: making sense of homophobia in male team sport***

**Andy Harvey**

### **Introduction**

Is male team sport, and particularly association football, homophobic?<sup>1</sup> The answer to that question is more in the balance in the spring of 2016 as I write this chapter than at any time in the past. For many years it seemed that homophobia persisted in many sports even as it was diminishing in society more generally (Weeks, 2007). It is, perhaps, this tension between the past and the present that has given rise to one of sport's lesser known rivalries. In one corner stand a number of academic sociologists, notably Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, who have alerted the world to rapidly improving attitudes in regards to sexuality in university, college and school sport settings. Prowling in the opposite corner is an array of activist groups, led by the UK's leading LGB&T charity, Stonewall, but also including specialist LGB&T sports groups such as the Gay Football Supporters Network (GFSN). In a short summary of the debate that I develop in more detail below, the 'Anderson school' of sociologists is announcing a brave new world of 'inclusive masculinities' (Anderson, 2009), proclaiming the end of overt homophobia as we know it in the process. Meanwhile, the campaign groups continue to find and report endemic levels of homophobia in British society in general, but especially in sport.

This chapter sets out to try to explain the apparently contradictory research findings by focussing on the historical, sociological and theoretical contexts in which the debate is located. To that extent it is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to understand complex problems from disparate angles. I have undertaken no new empirical research, relying only on published books, articles and reports that are in the public domain. However, I have had the opportunity to speak to a number of the main figures in the debate, and I thank Professor Anderson for his time, insights and forthright opinions. Likewise I am grateful to James Taylor, former Head of Campaigns at Stonewall, for providing details of Stonewall's research methodologies and for clarifying some of Stonewall's positioning. Standing in the crossfire of the debate, I am thankful to Chris Gibbons, former Inclusion Officer at the Football Association, for his critical understanding of the salient issues. Their insights have helped me to sharpen my own thoughts on the key issues and it goes without saying that all errors are solely my own.

### **Historical context**

The debate as it is carried out today can only be fully understood if contextualised by the complex history of sport, masculinity and sexuality. In the absence of any sociological data or a traditional historical archive, I turn to literature to help explain how sport and male sexuality became tightly and problematically entwined. The seeds of the 'problem' can be traced to one of the best known texts from the mid nineteenth century – Thomas Hughes'

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'homophobia' throughout the text even though it was not coined until the early 1970s. While this runs the risk of failing to historicise the chapter sufficiently, there are no adequate alternative words that encompass the sets of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that have become known as 'homophobic'.

ode to the English public school, *Tom Browns Schooldays* (1857) (Harvey, 2012a). Claudia Nelson (1989) argues that since the novel is set in the 1830s it is necessarily infused with ideas of an androgynous masculinity that prevailed at the time. She maintains that for the mid-Victorians 'androgyny (if not outright feminisation) could appear necessary to human purification' (p.529-30), and pertained to men as much as to women. Writing in 1871, Hughes offers support to Nelson's understanding of 'manliness', which he claims resides in the qualities of 'truthfulness, self-control, simplicity, obedience, - these are the great corner-stones, to be welded and bound together by the cement of patience' (p.245). For Hughes, masculinity consisted of a 'blend of compassion and courage, gentleness and strength, self-control and native purity [...] thoroughly androgynous and thoroughly asexual' (Nelson, 1989, p.530). In fact he was quite distraught at the nature of the 'athletic turn' in schools and society that his novel had unwittingly, though unsurprisingly, helped to usher in (Mangan, 1981; Erdozain, 2010). Contrary to his intentions, Hughes' vision of a moral and gentle masculinity, imbued with ambiguities of gender and sexuality, was later interpreted so as to disavow, though never fully expel, those dangerous uncertainties. Later readers alighted on the rugged physicality of the football field as a way of ignoring the 'suspect' masculinity that lay within the text. However, such a move overlooked the irony that the environment of team sports produced the close same-sex bonding that it was supposed to prevent (Gathorne-Hardy, 1979; Sinfield, 1994; Upchurch, 2009). Such interpretations were not restricted to readings of the novel, but were, in large part, transferred to the lived reality of the public schools and into wider social life. *Tom Brown* the novel helped to initiate a discursive regime in which sport, masculinity and sexuality were inextricably entangled in a strained nexus of athleticism, same-sex passion and disavowal (Harvey, 2012a).

In the heady and sexually charged atmosphere at the end of the nineteenth century, the social and cultural dynamics of gender and sexuality pulled in multiple and opposite directions, producing, at the same time and *inter alia*, New Woman literature, the male Aesthetic Movement, 'social purity' and 'degeneration' (Showalter, 1990; Bristow, 1995; Harvey, 2015). The tensions between these incompatible ideas came to a symbolic head in the first trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895 that pitted the famous dandy against his athletic nemesis, the Marquess Queensberry, with consequences that would stretch throughout the twentieth century (Dellamora, 1990; Bristow, 1991; Sinfield, 1994). The contradictions of masculinity and sexuality that had been overlooked in *Tom Brown* were finally blown wide open. While the trial itself did not concern sport, the symbolic figures of the heterosexual athlete and the flamboyant homosexual became ingrained in the public imaginary as wholly incompatible 'types', thus inaugurating a split between sport and homosexuality that was founded on a deep cultural abhorrence of same sex desire. The irony, that never seemed to be recognised, was that male team sport, as carried on in the public schools, continued to be thought of as the charm that warded off unruly sexual desires. As Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy colourfully suggests, 'since games had become a way to prove you were manly, and manly meant overcoming sin, and the worst sin was sex – ergo, games overcame sex [...] and the whole equation was clear and explicit to all Victorian and Edwardian schoolmasters' (1979, p.169).

As scandalously exposed in Alec Waugh's novel of Edwardian public schooling, *The Loom of Youth* (1917), a robust sporting masculinity developed that violently disavowed homosexuality as a means by which its own heteronormative version was created and

maintained, while at the same time keeping same-sex passion as a close but dangerous relative that needed constant expulsion since its threat/promise was ever present. Nevertheless, the equation that read 'athleticism = heterosexuality' was readily seized upon with its inherent ambiguities and contradictions deliberately ignored. On the other hand, Oscar Wilde became an idol for many homosexual men in the first half of the twentieth century (and beyond) who, in the conscious creation of a homosexual cultural identity, could trace a lineage back to the flamboyant playwright (Miller, 1995; Houlbrook, 2005). Throughout most of the twentieth century, sexuality in Britain became the subject of a vast outpouring of, *inter alia*, legal, medical and psychological discourse in which, to use Michel Foucault's term, homosexuality was 'incited' at the same time as it was traduced as perverse or worse (Foucault, 1976). Most significantly, in a hugely influential text, the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud maintained that same-sex desire involved a gendered inversion resulting in the 'feminisation' of homosexual men (Freud, 1905). Such thinking had profound implications throughout the twentieth century as it figured gay men not only as 'not masculine' but also as 'not heterosexual', thus inaugurating a double exclusion from the realm of heteronormative masculinity that was often seen in its sharpest relief on the sports field.

There is a thin but important documentary record to sustain a thesis that sport and homosexuality were seen as incompatible bedfellows for much of the twentieth century. For example, some anecdotal support from the 1950s is provided by Grant, a homosexual man who lived in Brighton in the post-war period. He recalls that:

A normal middle-class family would be *horrified* to think that their son was found to be a homosexual [...] the father would object very strongly because he couldn't kick a ball about with his son on the football pitch (Dennis, Mannall and Pointing, 1992, p.24).

The language used here is instructive. The verb 'couldn't' suggests a rift so wide between football and homosexuality that it is impossible even to contemplate bridging it. Such a divide is also implicit in David Storey's semi-autobiographical tale of northern rugby league, *This Sporting Life* (1960), where working-class masculinity is represented most forcefully through the rugby team and the male preserve of the changing room, revealing, in the words of Richard Holt (1996), 'a more open expression of physical affection, one freed up by the deep unspoken security of homophobia' (p.116), which acts as a constitutive outside that allows homosocial bonding within the team to develop along avowedly strict heterosexual lines. Meanwhile, in association football, Arthur Hopcraft (1968) noted that, by the 1950s and 1960s, homophobic abuse was starting to be heard on the football terraces. It seems that sport had thoroughly expunged itself of any association with homosexuality, or so it was thought.

However, it is worth repeating that the desired distance between sport and same sex passion can never be fully achieved since the threat/promise of homosexuality remains ever present in the close confines of the locker room and on the field of play, thus capturing sport and homosexuality in a tragi-comic dance of 'push me pull you'. As the groundbreaking queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) observes:

... what goes on at football games [...] can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly 'homosexual' [...] for a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already crossed line from being 'interested in men' (p.89).

Sedgwick's typically astute observation of the sexual dynamics of the football field is supported by empirical findings of sociologists in the 1980s and 1990s who were some of the first to take sport seriously as an object of study (Sabo and Runfola, 1980; Pronger, 1990; Messner, 1992). Their research showed that male team sport appears as a practice that sustains and nourishes heteronormative hegemony while at the same time is replete with homosexual potentials and denials. Timothy Curry's (1991) study of an American college football team found that the sports environment produced a heterosexist masculinity that is constructed through denigration of the feminine/gay 'other'. Through an analysis of men's talk in the dressing room, he identified a proliferation of misogynist and homophobic language among 'big-time' college sportsmen, the purpose of which 'seems mainly to enhance the athletes' image of themselves to others as practising heterosexuals [...] Not only is being homosexual forbidden, but tolerance of homosexuality is theoretically off limits as well' (p.128-130). The key to this phenomenon is Michael Kimmel's insight that men perform their masculinity for the benefit of other men and are fearful of being perceived by them of falling short of the requisite quota of masculinity (Kimmel, 2001). Typifying the research of the 1990s, Andrew Parker's study of sporting masculinities found that 'playing football was a way of demonstrating masculinity to oneself and to others. At the same time, the accomplishment of masculinity often involved the 'othering' of boys who did not participate in sport through homophobic verbal abuse' (Parker, 1996, p.105). Crucially, Parker noted, but failed to theorise, the paradox of sport with its close physical relations of bath sharing, back rubbing and (pseudo/semi) erotic activities. It was a paradox that enabled closeted gay men to hide successfully in a locker room that was always presumed to be straight, thus adding a further ironic twist to the troubled relationship between sport and homosexuality (Pronger, 1990).

In order to resist the label of homosexuality that arises in these highly ambiguous circumstances, David Plummer suggests that members of high-status teams, usually one of the codes of football, police the norms of heterosexual behaviour while at the same time transgressing those norms themselves by engaging in 'homosexual' behaviour that is projected as hyper-masculine (Plummer, 2006). It is this ability to transgress the norms while still retaining full heterosexual credentials that is the mark of heteronormative hyper-masculinity (Fogel, 2011). Yet, it is clearly a status that is always under threat from the transgression itself: the more the boundary of sexuality is claimed through an attempt to own it by overstepping it, the more the line becomes blurred and impossible to define. As a consequence, the border needs constant demarking through denunciation of femininity/homosexuality and the deflection of the 'fag' (or 'gay') label through misogynist/homophobic language, jokes and behaviours, the unending persistence of which is indicative of a never-to-be-achieved full heterosexual status (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Pascoe, 2005).

Research conducted in the early years of the twenty-first century by Ben Clayton and Barbara Humberstone (2006) replicates the findings of earlier sociologists concerning the

use of misogynist/homophobic language in shoring up heteronormative sexuality along with its paradoxical physical proximity. Their study of a British university football team found that heterosexual men's friendships are built around a misogynist/homophobic homosocial bonding, and that 'central to this notion is the conflicting tensions over sexuality and questions about homosexuality, which are inevitably introduced when men demonstrate intimacy with other men' (p.298). Homosexuality may be constantly repudiated through use of what Pascoe calls the 'fag discourse' of men's joking relationships that deploy misogyny/homophobia as their primary tropes, but its possibilities are ever present on the field of play and in the close confines of the locker room (Pascoe, 2005).

### **The end of homophobia in sport is in sight: new academic studies**

However, the scene is shifting rapidly and studies in which the research was conducted more than a decade ago need to be treated with caution in 2016. In that time there has been a number of studies that have problematised the sporting masculinities script as summarised above. For example, a study of New Zealand male rugby players, found that 'although rugby provided an influential discursive space for the negotiation of masculinities, these negotiations did not result in the simple (re)production of dominating discourses of masculinity' (Pringle and Markula, 2005, p.472). Similarly, a study by Mark McCormack and Eric Anderson (2010) into manifestations of masculinity in a British secondary school found that sexist and homophobic language had been significantly eroded and replaced by more inclusive discourses of gender and sexuality. In his own extended ethnographic study into masculinity in three British high schools, McCormack (2012) found that 'homophobia is condemned and openly gay students have happy and productive school lives' (p.xxi). He argues that same-sex heterosexual intimacy, that under the older gender regime would have been overlaid with homophobic attitudes and meanings, is now interpreted in a radically different way as 'care and affection' (p.xxii) towards each other. However, McCormack stresses that boys still wish to be thought of as heterosexual, but, in contrast to earlier decades, they 'do not wish to project an image of homophobic heterosexuality' (p.xxviii).

Anderson's own research into male cultures in British and American universities has led him to conclude that a more 'inclusive masculinity' is emerging. He argues that, in a climate that is less culturally discriminatory, this newer form of masculinity is marked by significantly reduced levels of homophobia, which enable young men to enter into closer emotional relationships with each other. Subscribing to a more inclusive masculinity allows young men to engage in an array of behaviours once seen, and repudiated, as feminine or gay. Anderson argues that the emerging form of masculinity is so robust that it is no longer appropriate to talk of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) since inclusive masculinity does not define itself in opposition to homosexuality (Anderson, 2009). While he is not suggesting that what he now calls 'orthodox' masculinity has completely withered on the vine in some male team sports' cultures, he contends that the newer forms of masculinity are breaking through in that arena as well (Anderson, 2011a; Bush, Anderson and Carr, 2012).

In his study of sportsmen in the twenty-first century, Anderson's (2014) research found that 'their heterosexuality and masculinity are nothing like that of their fathers. Instead of representing Rambo, they prefer the feminised charms and homosocial tactility of the members of the boy band One Direction' (p.6). Extending McCormack's thesis, Anderson

argues that these boys are 'not afraid of being homosexualised by their behaviours' (p.6). It is a theme that was explored in the Channel 4 television drama, *Cucumber* (2015), where straight teenage boys were shown filming themselves kissing and fondling each other without a trace of homophobia. Announcing the emergence of a brave new sporting world, Anderson concludes that 'whereas old-school masculinity theorists once described team sport athletes as extremely homophobic and gender conservative, *this is not the case today*' (p.220, my emphasis).

Not content simply to report his findings, Anderson has also developed a bold narrative of the changing face of masculinities and sexualities. For Anderson, his latest research is the latest staging post on a masculinities journey that commenced with homophobia in the 1980s in the wake of the AIDS tragedy and the highly homophobic attitudes of the Thatcher government, symbolised most potently in the hated Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, a particularly obscene and gratuitous piece of homophobic legislation that denigrated and profoundly disrespected gay lives. Through their ongoing research, Anderson and his colleagues have charted the course of changing attitudes and practices, from homophobia, to acceptance under conditions of conformity and silence about sexual desire, and, finally, to open and accepted sexuality (Anderson, 2011a). One significant consequence of this development is the more public profile and open acceptance of significant numbers of male gay sportsmen, as detailed by the contributors to the *Outsports.com* website, a phenomenon that was not known in the earlier research (Anderson, 2002; Anderson, 2011b). It is this narrative of a sporting scene that is more inclusive of alternative masculinities and much less homophobic that is important here since it fundamentally challenges the studies from the 1980s and 1990s that had previously predominated the debate.

### **Homophobia in sport is rife: research from activist groups**

The narrative of a rapid and significant decline in homophobia in sport has been challenged by campaign groups such as Stonewall in the UK. In the sporting setting of the football terrace, in *Leagues Behind* (2010), Stonewall found evidence of homophobic language that was used on football terraces. Their research showed that 70% of fans had heard anti-gay language in the previous five years. The primary target of the anti-gay abuse was opposing team's players (71%) followed by the other team's fans (47%), the referee and assistant referees (36%), their own players (24%), stewards and police officers (18%), individual fans (11%) and their own fans (8%) (Dick, 2010). To obtain their results Stonewall use a respected polling agency to conduct its research using a bank of known LGB&T people to survey. To this extent, their anonymous participants are self selecting and may, therefore, show bias that a randomised sample might not.

While the football terrace and the changing rooms of Anderson's research cannot be directly compared, it is the wider narrative of whether there has been a decline in homophobia in sports' settings that I am more interested in for the purposes of this chapter. The *Leagues Behind* survey findings are instructive since they reveal some of the identity work associated with homophobic language. Abuse of opposing teams and fans can be explained in part by the desire of fans to reinforce their own notions of masculinity through the process of belittling, as non-masculine, the opposing team and its supporters. The most glaring example of this is the abuse that players and fans of Brighton and Hove Albion have often received,

due to the town's reputation as centre for a large LGBT community. A 2013 study by the Brighton & Hove Albion Supporters Club (BAHSC) and campaign group, the Gay Football Supporters Network (GFSN) showed how Brighton fans were the target of regular and persistent homophobic behaviours from opposition supporters. Based on contemporary notes taken at the time, the report showed that Brighton fans were subjected to homophobic abuse:

- By at least 72% of opponents they faced in the 2012/13 season;
- In at least 70% of away games; and
- In at least 57% of all their matches in the 2012/13 season (GFSN/BAHSC, 2013).

The Stonewall report provides more detail on the homophobia suffered by Brighton fans and gives some indication of its often visceral nature. Quoting 'C', a 'Football Industry Executive', who said, 'You think if the police let them out they'd rip the Brighton fans limb from limb [...] The fans didn't look at the game, just spent the whole time bending over at the Brighton crowd, pointing to their backside, really insulting, really abusive, real hatred' (Dick, 2010, p.8). It is not known to what extent the Brighton experience distorts the findings in Stonewall's report as there is no disaggregation of the data, but it is probable that it has a significant impact. Arguably, the homophobia aimed at Brighton fans is often given and taken as terrace geographical identity work with Brighton fans adept at returning the insults in one form or another. The prevalence of use of homophobic language at football grounds outside of the unique situation of Brighton is not known and should be the focus of further research. At the same time, there is anecdotal evidence that homophobic abuse at Brighton has diminished since fans became more aware of its unacceptable nature.

However, to give some indication of the scale (or lack of it) of the problem, football's inclusion organisation, Kick it Out, reports that in 2012/13 homophobic hate incidents amounted to a relatively small proportion of the total, with 16% of the total reported to it in the professional game. In the first half of the 2014 – 2015 season, there had been fifteen reported incidents on the grounds of sexual orientation. These figures suggest that the *Leagues Behind* report may have been overstating the problem, but levels of reporting do not necessarily coincide with actual incidents. In fact there is likely to be a significant under-reporting. Even so, while the numbers are relatively small, they are indicative of a residual culture of prejudice that still exists in football. Nevertheless, Stonewall continues to promote the narrative of a continuing problem, stating that, 'homophobia, biphobia and transphobia remains a big problem in sport' (Stonewall, 2015).

Returning to the game as it is played rather than watched, support for Stonewall's narrative comes in the form of an international study published in 2015 into perceptions of homophobia in sport by members of the Sydney Convicts Rugby Club. The research and resulting report, *Out on the Fields*, was partially overseen by a panel of international sport scholars, thus providing some degree of confidence in the findings. Their online survey on issues of sexuality covered six predominantly English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, USA and UK) with a total of 9494 participants including 2494 heterosexuals. While it is primarily a perceptions study only, the headline figures should make relatively uncomfortable reading for those who are announcing the demise of homophobia in sport.



With findings that were broadly similar across all countries, the researchers found that only 1% of all participants believe LGB people were 'completely accepted' in sporting culture while nearly half believed they were 'not at all accepted' or only 'accepted a little'. 78% believed an openly LGB person would not feel safe as a spectator and 62% (73% of gay men) believed homophobia to be more common in sport than in society in general. 80% of all participants claimed to have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport and 81% of gay men were completely or partially in the closet to teammates (pp. 12-13).

There is clearly a stark contrast in narrative between the research findings of Anderson and McCormack and those of the various campaign groups. Some of the contradictions can be explained by the different research settings and methodologies that have been employed. The academic studies use an array of research methods, including surveys, focus groups, interviews and participant observations. The studies conform to the highest standards of academic rigour with blind peer reviews as an essential part of the process. As such, their findings must be respected as being of the best quality available. The campaign group research does not have to conform to such rigorous academic standards. The *Out on the Fields* research was partially overseen by an expert group of scholars but it is not an academic study *per se*. Further, it is a perceptions study whereas the academic studies are concerned with 'lived reality'. Yet, perceptions matter: the prison of the closet is built precisely through the perception that 'coming out' will result in abuse or worse. Perceptions are real and the lesson to be drawn from the *Out on the Fields* report is that more must be done to overcome the negative view that many LGB people have of sport.

How might Anderson's studies of an inclusive sporting environment be reconciled with the perception of many gay men in particular that sport remains off limits and potentially dangerous? One possible answer is that the cultural shift to less homophobic societies in the west has been a relatively new phenomenon and one that has not fully saturated those societies. For example, research published in 2011 by sociologists Ellis Cashmore and Jamie Cleland found that over 80% of fans were relaxed about the presence of gay players and would welcome more honesty by players about their sexuality (2011). Their findings were replicated by a Populus survey for Kick it Out in 2013 which found that 87% of supporters found homophobic abuse unacceptable (FSF, 2013). While these findings show high levels of anti-homophobic sentiment, there remains a minority of fans who presumably do not want a gay player on their team or who think homophobic abuse is acceptable. The residual element of homophobia, when it is combined with its historic prevalence, may lead individuals to still fear homophobia even in societies where cultural homophobia has decreased. Simply stated, individual homophobic incidents may still occur even in the most liberal of cultural settings: they will still be experienced as homophobia.

Given the different research subjects and methodologies it is not possible from the discussion so far to show that Stonewall or any other activist group has dismantled in any way the specific studies by the academics. But this chapter is more concerned with the overarching narrative than the individual studies themselves, however important they are to helping to define those narratives. However, there is one area of contention where some direct comparisons might be made – language. The experience of homophobia is very often one of language which also happens to be a site of conflict between the academic researchers and the activist groups. In the final section of this chapter I will examine how the

same, or similar, words and phrases have been given radically different interpretations by the opposing groups.

### **Homophobic language or not?**

One of the sharpest divides in the debate is whether particular usages of language are homophobic or not. From at least the time of the late nineteenth-century Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, it has been recognised that language is random and lacks any final certainty. The consequence of an inherent uncertainty in language is that the meanings of words are subject to interpretation and can change over a period of time: language is subject to the forces of history. To paraphrase the feminist scholar, Judith Butler, language is subject over time to new interpretations and many adaptations (Butler, 1993). However, the process of interpretation and adaptation is a muddled process that shifts one way and the other from time to time and place to place (Harvey, 2012b). However, in their reports campaign groups tend to think of language as homogenous with meanings that are fixed. This may lead them to over-report the levels of homophobic language use. In contrast, McCormack, in particular, has developed a cultural and spatial model of change that charts how language is interpreted in different settings, leading him to conclude that language that was once regarded as homophobic is no longer construed as such in some settings (McCormack 2011).

To illustrate this point, let us take the epithet, 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay'. For Stonewall, these expressions are always homophobic. For example, in their 2014 *Teachers Report*, Stonewall interpreted the prevalence of these expressions as indicative of high levels of homophobia in British schools, reporting that 'the vast majority of teachers – nine in ten in secondary schools (89 per cent) and seven in ten in primary schools (70 per cent) – hear pupils use expressions like 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' (Guasp, p.1). James Taylor, Stonewall's former Head of Campaigns, justified this stance on the grounds that the phrases are used to belittle objects or other people as 'rubbish', maintaining that these were the meanings attached to the terms by the teachers who had heard them and which they associated with gay men. In other words, the association of 'gay' = 'rubbish' is reported by Stonewall as evidence of homophobia in its own right. They do not overly enquire into context, since that is relatively unimportant as it is the response to the words by the hearer that is the critical factor.

McCormack has a different understanding of the phrase 'that's so gay', arguing that it must be seen in light of both the intention in which it was spoken and the cultural context in which it was used. He develops a theory of homophobia in which there are two elements – 'pernicious intent and negative social effect' (2011, p.666). While he does not exclude the recipient of language (the hearer) from this model, it is left implied rather than explicit in contrast to Stonewall for whom the hearer is of paramount importance. McCormack acknowledges that the term 'that's so gay' *can* be used homophobically, but it is not necessarily always the case. He maintains that in some social situations, the phrase has been radically reinterpreted as gay affirmative, used in positively reinforcing ways by gay and straight boys alike. In other words, where Stonewall's teacher respondents hear homophobia, McCormack's young research participants in all likelihood do not. As a result, at least some of the contradictions in the debate may be explained by wholly different

interpretations of similar data (McCormack, 2014). While McCormack's respondents may have interpreted the term 'that's so gay' in non-homophobic ways that does not mean it has lost its homophobic content to the (older) by-standing teacher. That teacher may have misinterpreted how the words were used inside the group, but may still regard them as homophobic herself if she considers the association between 'gay' and 'rubbish' as one of belittlement of gay men. In a field that is so charged with a vitriolic and abusive (recent) history it should not be necessary to have to tread a linguistic tightrope of deciding from time to time and place to place how the phrase is being used. As Chris Gibbons, the FA's former Inclusion Officer maintains, the answer is simple – just don't use the phrase - that way any potential for offence will be avoided without resort to interpretative linguistic contortions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to understand a highly topical and contemporary debate by contextualising it historically and sociologically in order to underscore my argument that the 'problem' of sport and homosexuality entails highly complex and often contradictory notions and expressions of sexuality, which are subject to perpetual flux over time. The idea that history runs up to and through the present is seen in sharp relief by the rapidly changing attitudes towards homosexuality that are being witnessed in many Western countries, but which still retain traces of homophobia that has its origins in an earlier period. The current debate over homophobia in sport between academics and activists can be seen as these historical forces being played out in public. I have argued that the contradictory findings that are being reported in respect of sport and homophobia may be explained in part by different interpretations of the meaning of words and the way language changes culturally, spatially and, especially, historically.

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