Fans, homophobia and masculinities in association football: evidence of a more inclusive environment

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Abstract

This article draws on 3,500 responses from fans and professionals involved in association football (soccer) to an anonymous online survey posted from June 2010 to October 2010 regarding their views towards gay footballers. The overall findings are that, contrary to assumptions of homophobia, there is evidence of rapidly decreasing homophobia within the culture of football fandom. The results advance inclusive masculinity theory with 93 per cent of fans of all ages stating that there is no place for homophobia within football. Fans blame agents and clubs for the lack of openness and challenge football's governing organizations to oppose the culture of secrecy surrounding gay players and to provide a more inclusive environment to support players who want to come out.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity; inclusive masculinity; homophobia; football; fans

Introduction

Throughout its contemporary history, sport has often been described as a cultural institution that compelled men to adhere to socially acceptable notions of masculinity (Hargreaves 1994; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). One particular contact team sport, association football (or soccer), was based on and maintained traditional notions of masculinity during the nineteenth and twentieth century. This required the demonstration of physical strength and power, heterosexuality and hostility towards homosexuals and women (Dunning 1999; Nauright and Chandler 1996).

Research in the 1990s suggested that the environment for a gay athlete to declare his or her sexual preferences was intimidating and hostile (Griffin

1998; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). This led Connell (1987) to advance hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight a hierarchical structure of masculinity, which subordinated gay men. But, increasing evidence has been presented that indicates attitudes across sport and wider society may be changing (Adams 2011; Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Swain 2006). This has subsequently led Anderson (2009) to offer inclusive masculinity theory to highlight how multiple masculinities can co-exist without any hierarchical arrangement, meaning various forms of masculinity retain near equal cultural value.

Although there are now openly gay players in sport (both men and women), most gay professional athletes choose to disguise their sexuality throughout their playing career. Whilst recent research has found progressive attitudes towards homosexuality by athletes (Anderson 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011), limited research has been conducted with fans and their perception of homosexuality in contact team sports (Bush, Anderson and Carr forthcoming; Campbell et al. 2011; Kian et al. 2011).

In February 2010 the English Football Association (FA) dropped a campaign which aimed to tackle homophobia, stating that football was not ready for such a campaign to take place. The Professional Footballers' Association (the professional players' trade union) Chief Executive Gordon Taylor was quoted as saying: 'The Premier League didn't think it was a big enough issue . . . we believe the time would be more appropriate when crowds are a bit more civilised'.[1] In December 2009 it was also reported how the British public relations (PR) advisor Max Clifford had advised two high profile Premier League footballers to remain in the closet as football 'remains in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia'.[2] This provided our research with its focus: is there as much homophobia among football fans as, for example, the Professional Footballers' Association presumes? Or perhaps there is even more resentment to homosexuality than imagined? Thus, the aim of the proposed research was to investigate the attitudes, opinions and viewpoints of football fans and those professionally associated with the game towards homosexuality.

In this article we seek to present what is, to our knowledge, unprecedentedly detailed empirical data to suggest the existence of a more permissive and liberal culture of association football fandom towards homosexuality and masculinity than the existing literature indicates. Here, we seek to move the debate away from concepts like hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 1987, 1995) to more pluralized and inclusive versions of masculinity (Anderson 2005, 2009, 2011). In doing so, we move away from focusing on mainly local cultures (such as those mainly used by Adams 2011; Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011; Anderson and McGuire 2010; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Swain 2006) to empirically highlight how inclusive masculinity theory can also be applied to the broader culture of football fandom. At present, most of the research supporting inclusive

masculinity theory has been on young people (aged 16–24) but our research focuses on fans of all ages and thus presents an opportunity to expand inclusive masculinity theory even further.

From hegemonic to inclusive masculinity

The history of football is heavily linked with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century (Dunning 1999). As football and an industrial working life became reflective of each other, the growing image of masculinity presented through industry and sport forced boys and men to accept a narrow definition of masculinity (Birley 1993). As the popularity of the game increased, the masculine values regarding the reliance on power, physical size and strength became important in the lives of male sports fans and these began to be passed down through the generations. Thus, if they could not play professional football many men turned to being spectators and began to establish an enduring affiliation towards a particular club.

From the 1980s an increasing range of academic attention was paid to the relationship between masculinity and sport, with a particular focus on the importance of homophobia. A number of scholars (Connell 1990, 1995, 2000; Messner 1992; Plummer 1999) observed that traditional contact team sports such as football taught boys and men to construct, express and value masculine notions of identity and embodiment. Anderson (2009) refers to the 1980s as a period of homohysteria (the fear of being thought to be homosexual), created initially by the AIDS virus. This, he argued, caused boys and men to demonstrate their heteromasculinity and raise their masculine capital in very overt ways, such as through violence, sexism and homophobia. Indeed, this period of time and the reaction to homosexuality caused some scholars, including Messner (1992: 34) to state: 'The extent of homophobia in the sport world is staggering. Boys (in sport) 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'.

To try to conceptualize the environment at the time, Connell (1987) devised hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight the structure and maintenance of masculinity. In particular she stated how hegemonic masculinity was the ideal form of moral character which connected 'masculinity to toughness and competitiveness' (Connell 1990: 83). Using Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony which explained how a ruling class legitimizes its position and secures acceptance of it from the lower classes, Connell provided a similar theoretical explanation to understand the stratification of masculinities. Within this theoretical framework, Demetriou (2001) outlined how two broad processes existed: (1) the benefits to men of patriarchy and (2) the creation and maintenance of an intramasculine hierarchy. In this intramasculine hierarchical structure, Connell argued that boys and men aspire to one hegemonic

archetype of masculinity and those that do are rewarded with the most social capital. To maintain or improve their position within the social stratification boys and men must sustain variables including homophobia, sexism, athletic ability and the presentation of a masculine identity. Heterosexual men who did not conform to these variables of masculinity were marginalized with gay men viewed as being at the bottom of this intramasculine hierarchy (Anderson 2011).

Thus, for Connell, a team sport such as football provides many examples where players (and fans) can reproduce and define hegemonic notions of masculinity, with the players representing for themselves (and for the fans) what it means to be a man. Football fandom was violent during the 1970s and 1980s with considerable crowd disorder and this led to the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister 1979–1990), branding all football fans as 'hooligans'. It was during this time that the first openly gay footballer came out in the British game – Justin Fashanu, who came out via the media in 1990. Thus, despite Anderson (2009) suggesting that by the early 1990s the homohysteric phase was decreasing across many cultures, it seemed this was not the case in football as Fashanu faced a hostile reception from players, the fans, the media and even within his own family (his brother John also played professional football). Facing a charge of an alleged sexual assault on a teenage boy in the USA Fashanu committed suicide in 1998.

Due to the fact that, at the time of writing, only one openly gay footballer is currently playing some form of professional football anywhere in the world (Anton Hysén, a lower league player currently playing semi-professionally in Sweden), it is clear that there is a perception that football is an environment that is hostile to homosexuality. However, gradually research has begun to look into many environments within sport and has started to show that these environments are not as homophobic as they are perceived to be; in fact many of them are what Anderson (2009) refers to as 'inclusive'. It was from his growing body of ethnographic research on open and closeted gay athletes as well as straight men that Anderson started to notice differences in his findings from his previous research where he claimed that sport is 'a bastion of hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism and homophobia' (2002: 862).

These findings led Anderson (2009) to challenge hegemonic masculinity theory on the basis that it did not adequately explain masculinity in cultures of decreasing homophobia. In his numerous ethnographic studies since 2002, Anderson found that the hierarchy of masculinity or hegemony was no longer at play; instead, rather than having one form of masculinity at the top, there were an increasing number of environments where multiple masculinities coexisted harmoniously and had equal cultural appeal (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011). For Anderson, the hegemonic form of conservative masculinity has lost its dominance (as a social process) and led him to develop inclusive masculinity theory in 2009. The central focus of this theory was the existence of

multiple masculinities, as well as the rejection of homophobia, compulsory heterosexism, stoicism and sexism. Anderson refers to those boys and men who continue to ascribe to traditional views of masculinity as orthodox and although retaining a presence in society, he states it is no longer hegemonic.

Anderson found that masculinities are becoming more fluid and inclusive with many gender roles at play. Boys and men who now engage in behaviours which once led to homosexual suspicion do not face any threat to their heterosexual identity and Anderson is not alone in researching these changes across many Western cultures in and out of sport (see also Adams 2011; Clayton and Harris 2009; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Swain 2006). For example, McCormack (2011b), in his ethnographic research on British school settings, also found that without any form of homophobia present to enforce the hegemonic norm, multiple masculinities can exist with equal value. Although a hierarchy existed it was not due to hegemonic domination; rather it was due to popularity through the possession of charismatic, authentic, emotional and socially fluid variables. Unlike hegemonic masculinity theory, boys were not marginalized for being unpopular. Similar findings were also raised by Anderson (2008b) where he studied heterosexual high school boys who had to alter their construction of heterosexuality and masculinity after leaving the American football team to join college cheerleading. The findings led Anderson to split his participants into two groups based on the level of masculinity they portrayed: one orthodox and one inclusive and he concluded that they can operate together within the same environment with equal cultural value. Indeed, even Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 829), now recognize the challenges facing hegemonic masculinity through the existence of multiple masculinities and how 'subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms'.

Providing further evidence to decreasing levels of cultural homophobia occurring throughout society, Clayton and Harris (2009) refer to the emergence of a new kind of sporting identity: the metrosexual man (a straight man who displays behaviour and styles that are stereotypically associated with homosexuality). The examples of the footballer David Beckham and rugby player Gavin Henson have provided a resistance towards the traditional values of male team sports and instead have placed themselves at the heart of male sport consumption through their emphasis on the 'look' and appearance.

Metro sexuality has been challenged as a media-invented concept by Edwards (2006), others including Clayton and Harris (2009) and Adams, Anderson and McCormack (2010) have argued that the historic focus by the media on male hegemonic values evident in team sports are changing. Whereas media coverage used to showcase masculine traits and avoid homosexual discussion (Griffin 1998), some media outlets are now engaging in more inclusive discussions with their readers/listeners (Kian and

Anderson 2009; Nylund 2004, 2007). The Internet has also helped these discussions despite recent research finding that hegemonic masculinity remained on particular websites (Kian et al. 2011).

Despite this, there have been difficulties for footballers who are not seen to conform to traditional male values and do not maintain the popularity of Beckham. One particular incident occurred in 1999 between Graeme Le Saux and Robbie Fowler. During the Chelsea-Liverpool match at Stamford Bridge, Fowler (playing for Liverpool) made a gesture towards Le Saux (playing for Chelsea), suggesting that Le Saux was gay. At the time Le Saux was thought to be homosexual by his team mates and opponents because of the way he dressed (Le Saux 2008). Highlighting this particular incident as a shift in the concept of masculinity, Boyle and Haynes (2009: 136–7) stated how Le Saux conformed with the marketing industry's middle-class 'new man', whilst Fowler's actions fell into the 'media-constructed "new laddism"' and thus displayed the homosexual fears of traditional male working-class culture. Here, 'the complex relations between gender, sexuality and class were revealed to exemplify how masculinity is perceived differently by socio-economic groups'. Similarly, Roderick (2006) highlighted how the treatment of Le Saux was evidence of working-class concerns surrounding masculinity, something he claimed remains deeply associated within British football. More recently in 2008, Sol Campbell was subjected to a torrent of homophobic abuse in a match between Portsmouth and Tottenham Hotspur.

Therefore, if, as Anderson suggests, that inclusive masculinity theory can be examined in broader cultures, then the recently homohysteric culture of football supporters' provides an interesting area of investigation. Football, even up until very recently with the treatment of Justin Fashanu, Graeme Le Saux and Sol Campbell has demonstrated significant tenets of hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps the appeal and metrosexual nature of footballers (most notably David Beckham), however, and the increasingly fluid social structures in which fans operate in has aided a change towards inclusive masculinity that many scholars seem to be suggesting is taking place across many different cultures of society.

Method

There are three primary methods traditionally used in surveying football supporters:

1. Using data held by a club on its supporters (a method adopted by some national sporting organizations like the Premier League);
2. Surveying those who attend matches in person;
3. Internet surveys.

Increasingly Internet surveys are being used to collect large amounts of social research data and this was the approach taken in this study (Millward 2008). The underlying assumption was that views on such a sensitive subject as homophobia in football can be aired with more frankness and honesty (and thus avoid social desirability) with the anonymity provided by the Internet. Whilst there are obvious limitations to online social research (such as the faceless process of engagement), we felt the topic area warranted such an approach.

The research began with a preliminary engagement in two national fans' forums to analyse the debate surrounding homosexuality in football. Once the pilot had reached 250 responses we decided to set up an online resource (**www.topfan.co.uk**) and began to engage in club fans' forums across the UK and invite fans to take part in our anonymous online survey.[3] A large number of forum editors were formally contacted by email and in those forums where permission was granted (totalling over 40), a paragraph about the research and a link directing fans to complete the survey was included. To provide one example of the interest from fans in this research, in one prominent London-based club forum, within 24 hours of our original post to attract supporters to complete the survey, over 5,000 people had read it, with the thread of debate reaching 15 pages.[4] Due to the anonymous nature of the research, for those fans that completed the survey, a message was included at the end which stated that by clicking submit they were giving consent for their views to be used in this research.

The first phase consisted of mainly open-ended questions, some of which focused on the negative characterization of fans by the Professional Footballers' Association Chief Executive Gordon Taylor and the PR advisor Max Clifford referred to earlier and provided us with large amounts of qualitative data. 1,115 participants completed phase one of the research before the research moved into phase two, focusing on the responses from phase one and consisting of more closed questions; the intention was to get more of a statistical summary of the data collected. Concluded over a longer period, 2,385 participants completed phase two which left us with a total of 3,500 responses over a four-month research period from June 2010 to October 2010.

Eighty-three per cent of our respondents were male with 17 per cent female (this is in line with research on the actual demographics of gender at a football match).[5] Furthermore, whilst Adams (2011), Anderson (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011), Anderson and McGuire (2010), McCormack (2010, 2011a, 2011b), and McCormack and Anderson (2010) focus mainly on men aged between 16–24 to test inclusive masculinity theory, the demographics of those who completed our survey show that 2 per cent were aged under 16, 52 per cent were aged 17–30, 37 per cent were aged 31–50 and 9 per cent were aged 51+. Therefore, we had a much broader base on which to test inclusive masculinity theory.

Although the sample has an in-built bias as only those who have access to the Internet can complete the survey we felt that in 2010 when access to the Internet is available at most public places, this was an acceptable bias. In fact, most supporters now purchase their tickets through the Internet for a match (Boyle and Haynes 2009). We were also aware of other limitations to the research, such as the opportunity for pro-gay fans to complete the survey (perhaps more than once) but we offered no financial incentive to do so. To limit the bias where only those engaged in fans' forums had the opportunity to complete the survey, during each stage, the results were distributed to the local, national and international media through press releases to try and advertise the website to as wide an audience of football supporters as possible. Indeed, this gave the project impetus at valuable times.[6] For example, although the majority of participants were from the UK, we had responses from 35 countries across the world. Although a majority of these followed British teams (85 per cent), a number of participants stated support for teams in Asia (2 per cent), Europe (6 per cent), North America (5 per cent) and South America (2 per cent). This helped to demonstrate the global interest on a topic like homosexuality and masculinity within football.

Across both phases, a mixed method of analysis took place. Firstly, a quantitative analysis was carried out to obtain a statistical summary of the responses received with the frequency of responses in each category recorded and converted to percentages. Secondly, the open-ended responses were inductively analysed through a manual form of content analysis. Here, the potential disadvantage of subjectivity arises and to minimize this and begin verifying the key themes, both authors went through the data separately before any categorization took place. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984: 9), once all of the data had been themed into categories, the analysis began to develop master themes and identify 'patterns and processes, commonalities and differences' across the responses. Overall, there were four main recurring themes across both phases:

1. The permissive and liberal nature of football supporters towards homosexual footballers;
2. The comparisons with racism in the 1970s and 1980s and how it was collectively removed from the game;
3. The need for greater transparency from football's governing organizations towards homosexuality;
4. The decisive role of clubs and agents in creating and maintaining a culture of secrecy.

Results

As the first piece of research to empirically examine the culture of association football fandom towards homosexuality, the results portrayed a new and

surprising image: the exact opposite to one which has been characterized by the British-based PR advisor, Max Clifford, as stuck in the dark ages and 'steeped in homophobia'. Indeed, despite research presenting a more inclusive environment occurring across wider society (Adams 2011; Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011; Bush, Anderson and Carr forthcoming; Campbell et al. 2011; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010), football's governing authorities and a number of scholars still presume that the sporting environment (of which fans play a significant role) is homophobic and not welcoming of gay players. Plummer (2006: 122), for example, in his paper titled 'sportophobia', makes the claim that 'homophobia is deeply implicated in the gender order and its influence on contemporary masculinities and male identity is comprehensive'. However, our results strongly concur with the work of Anderson and, in fact, widen inclusive masculinity theory away from locally-based youth. For example, 93 per cent of our participants insist only a player's performance on the field is relevant. In illustrating the permissive and more liberal culture of football supporters the following response by a Nottingham Forest fan captured the mood of most fans:

> In my experience football fans have become more liberal as society has. There are still bigots who still cling to ill-conceived personal judgments of people based on their colour or sexuality, but these numbers are few. Football is getting out of the bigoted days, we're not there yet but we will be eventually.

What matters to an overwhelming number of football supporters is how the players they support perform on the field of play: their private lives are irrelevant. These views were typified by an Arsenal fan:

> If [Cristiano] Ronaldo, [Didier] Drogba or [Wayne] Rooney said they were gay, would the football fans of the 'dark ages' resist in supporting their performances? I think not. Would clubs resist buying them for fortunes and paying them fortunes? I think not. Would these players still win trophies at the top clubs even though they may be gay? Definitely so, because it is the performance on the field for which they will most likely be judged.

Similar views were also raised by a Newcastle United fan:

> I want to watch a good team. I could not give a hoot if a player is gay. If he plays OK what's the problem, the same way when I get my car serviced I want a good mechanic, I don't go to the garage and ask about sexuality, I just want someone to do their job well.

In a similar study to the one presented here, Wertheim (2005) stated that of 979 people interviewed on an American-based poll regarding homosexuality in sport, 86 per cent would support gay male athletes. Wertheim concludes by suggesting a change in views regarding male homosexuality in sport with 79

per cent illustrating how Americans are more accepting of homosexuality in sport than they would have been twenty years ago.

In examining whether the environment had changed from 2000 to 2010, Anderson (2011) interviewed 26 openly gay male athletes and compared the results to his 2002 findings. Similar to the results presented by Wertheim above, one of his major findings was that the environment was less homophobic than it had been previously and suggested that the increasing acceptance of homosexuals in American society has helped the experiences of gay men in sport. He concluded by suggesting that the environment is a lot more inclusive for gay men than it was previously. This was also found with Probyn's (2000) research on the openly gay Australian rugby league player, Ian Roberts, who due to his position as a forward was seen to have maintained his masculinity. A similar scenario has occurred more recently in rugby league in the UK with Gareth Thomas coming out in 2009 whilst still playing the game.

However, despite these and our own results supporting a more permissive culture within football fandom, a small minority (7 per cent) maintained orthodox views towards the acceptance of a gay player: 'Football is traditional. Not in the Dark Ages. There is no place for homosexuality, same sex relationships in our society' said a fan of Rotherham United, whilst a Sunderland fan argued that 'football is no place for queers. They should come out and be pushed out of the game'.

As it stands British football does not have anyone to compare the case of Gareth Thomas to, but for a number of fans definitions of masculinity are changing (Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b). As one Coventry City fan pointed out:

> [The homophobes] don't seem to be able to cope with someone whose sexuality doesn't fit the caricature footballer – i.e. chest thumping, beer swilling, over physical man of lowish intelligence who likes to shag as many different women as possible as frequently as he is able to get away with it.

Indeed, changes within masculinity were also raised by this Manchester United fan:

> Footballers are global, metrosexual people, it is impossible that some of them aren't gay . . . it's an all-male trade played in front of crowds of thousands with all its exponents held up to this lofty ideal, but now misplaced, concept of masculinity.

However, these views were not completely universal with a minority of fans unrepentant in their thoughts towards traditional notions of masculinity (Dunning 1999; Messner 1992; Messner and Sabo 1990). A Hibernian fan, for example, stated how masculinity still played a significant role in his support of football: 'It's a macho sport isn't it? Full of macho heterosexual men and supporters'. Moreover, a Chelsea fan added approvingly:

The fact of the matter is that sport is not mainstream society, but a rarefied, narrow segment of society where masculinity is highly prized and stereotypes about homosexuality are at their most acute. If a footballer who had played ten years of hard-tackling Premier League football came out I think he would be roundly dismissed as a 'girly man', in complete disregard of the ten years he played at the top level, simply because of the voracity of the feminine stereotype attached to gay men.

A large number of participants also compared the present condition with the racist environment British football faced in the 1980s. Over 80 per cent of the participants felt that the homophobic element, though small, will influence others unless gay players are emboldened to reveal themselves. A Liverpool fan captured the mood of most participants when he explained:

In the 1980s John Barnes changed many perceptions of racist views as he was so good. I heard comments from fans to racist fans that Barnes was 'red not black'. This is an odd way to put it, but this is the way fans thought processes work. Thus, if the player is good, they could pave the way and be a pioneer in the acceptance of gay players within the game.

Similarly, a Newcastle United fan contrived to make the same point:

It is exactly the same as the problems in the 1970s and 80s with racism. You get good black or gay players in your side the piss taking stops simple as. Ask Les Ferdinand or Andy Cole what a so-called 'hotbed of racism' the north east is. Les is called 'Sir' in Newcastle and he was only with us briefly. The same would happen with gay players.

Other explanations indicated a strong desire to influence and change the football environment, typified by an Aston Villa fan who commented:

I cannot see how a campaign against homophobia would be different from a campaign against racism. [I] appreciate how an involved player may be targeted by terrace chants, but what if a big profile player like Beckham kicked off the campaign and firmly established that straight players can support the campaign and it doesn't mean they are gay.

Fans suspect the homophobia that has surfaced recently towards certain players (like Sol Campbell) is the result of a small minority, though, like racism, in the 1980s, it has the capacity to spread. There is limited confidence that equal and inclusive campaigns set up by groups such as 'Kick it Out' can prevail; much more convincing for fans would be a demonstration from football's main organizations that the environment is inclusive enough to support a player if he wants to reveal his homosexuality. As witnessed with the Rugby Football League fining Castleford Tigers £40,000 for the homophobic behaviour of its supporters towards Gareth Thomas in 2010, eliminating

homophobia is seen by many football fans as crucial in making football fit for the twenty-first century. These views were typified by the following comments from a Chesterfield fan: 'There should be an environment where any player should be able to come forward without fear'. Other fans went further in demanding action from the football authorities. A Newcastle United fan, for example, argued that:

> The FA and clubs need to take a firmer stand on the matter. If you look back into the 80s and 90s there was racism in the Football League. The FA stood up and said that it had to change, banning orders were brought in and players backed the campaign to stamp out racism. The same can be done for homophobia too, but until then nothing will happen. The FA also needs to get FIFA on board for this too, as this will help teams who play in Europe, but until someone decides that it's wrong we are stuck in the past.

A Chelsea fan added:

> Avoiding a campaign is what's keeping football in the dark ages and attitudes will not change if people don't talk about it. Treating homosexuality like a taboo is not helping anyone, and acceptance needs to start somewhere. [The] FA stance is actually disgusting, and football fans will never changes their views if an authority doesn't support it.

This was a point raised by Anderson (2005, 2009) when he referred to how heterosexual men in sports organizations continue to demonstrate hegemonic notions of masculinity, in what he called 'a cult of masculinity'.

Despite this being the prevailing view, however, not every fan felt a campaign was needed and thus supported the current stance adopted by the English football authorities. A Manchester United fan, for example, commented:

> I believe that racism, homophobia, sexism etc. can be created where there wasn't any before by endless campaigning and forcing opinions on people. To beat homophobia is to let time take its course and the bigots will lose their voice. I for one don't like continuous glorification of homosexuals because campaigners think that to glorify something is to eradicate the bigotry against it.

Similar sentiment was also raised by a Colchester United fan:

> I'm not sure a 'campaign' would be the way forward. I feel these put people in boxes and I must say, as a heterosexual, they would offend me, in the same way as the 'get racism out of football' campaign has. I am not racist, or homophobic – let's all just get on with it or target and deal with (educate) those who are displaying such offensive behaviour towards any player.

Rather than placing the blame for homophobia on fans, 84 per cent of participants maintain that, even in 2010, there is pressure on gay players to stay in the closet from other parties involved in football. Of these, 46 per cent think clubs seek to maintain a culture of secrecy whilst 45 per cent blame agents. Fans think that football clubs and agents do not wish to risk any negative reaction from having an overtly gay player on their books. Again, a large amount of speculation exists which argues that the daily challenges and stresses a potential gay sportsperson has to deal with can affect their performances, future career contracts and earnings; each of which force them to remain secret (see, Griffin 1998). As one Manchester City fan explained: 'Players are more concerned with image rights and merchandizing contracts than they are with succeeding as professional footballers on the field'. Conversely, other fans felt that the first gay footballer to reveal himself would not lose out financially (some even thought he would benefit), as illustrated by this Middlesbrough fan:

> It wouldn't have any effect on their careers as footballers. Managers and chairmen sign the best players they can for the team they have. It might tarnish their 'image rights' I suppose. They might appear in newspapers in a negative light. Having said that, we've seen footballers who are thugs, rapists etc. recently and I don't think being gay is anywhere near as damaging to image rights as any of those, and some of those players haven't damaged their careers.

As well as the role of clubs and agents, many of the participants suggested that the media are the ones who gay players fear the most. When asked their view on the role of the media, 94 per cent said the media have no right to out a player even if they know he is gay. On this point, it has been indicated how important and influential the media are in expressing cultural values to wider society on topics like gender (Buysse and Emsber-Herbert 2004). More specifically, Shakib and Dunbar (2002: 355) suggested that hegemonic representations of masculinity are 'reproduced through messages embedded in sport media' and as such presents a dilemma for those players who want to come out. However, Kian and Anderson (2009) and Nylund (2004, 2007) have found that the print and broadcasting media are a lot more inclusive in their discussions of homosexuality than they were in the past. Indeed, there was a mixed reaction amongst the participants on how the media would react if a player did come out with some fans placing the blame of a lack of openness on the potential reaction of sections of the media. As one Stoke City fan stated:

> PR consultants such as Clifford and the red top papers fuel the sensationalized reporting of celebrity life. They are responsible for footballers having to remain the dark ages. Unfortunately, the current trend of the population's hunger for intrusion into the lives of celebrities ensures this will only get worse.

A Reading fan shared these thoughts:

> The media would be the ones to whip the moron fringe into a frenzy. Look at the character assassinations that have taken place through the media of a number of sportsmen – not just footballers. The media must change but they pander to the lowest common denominator.

However, other fans felt that it was not just the culture of fans that has changed over the last few decades but also the way the media report on events in society. 'Society has changed a lot over the last 10 to 15 years . . . there may be a bit of noise from the tabloids but it would die down and soon be yesterday's news' said one Coventry City fan whilst a Newcastle United fan felt that:

> Most people would acknowledge that football has come a long way since the 1970s and 80s and in the case of Justin Fashanu, I think it's clear the world wasn't ready for a gay footballer at the time. Would *The Sun* be producing headlines of Justin Fashan-ooh nowadays? I don't think even they would stoop to that level now so does that show some progress? I believe it does.

Discussion

This article has provided an insight into association football fans' attitudes towards masculinity and homosexuality. Too often in the academic literature and wider public debate surrounding the sport environment, fans are stigmatized as homophobic when in fact an overwhelming number are very liberal and permissive in their views. Like the recent work of Anderson (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011), Anderson and McGuire (2010), Bush, Anderson and Carr (forthcoming); Campbell et al. (2011), McCormack (2010, 2011a, 2011b) and McCormack and Anderson (2010) we provide empirical findings which highlight a decrease in cultural homophobia and a shifting away from hegemonic masculinity towards inclusive masculinities. Traditional conceptions of masculinity remain in football culture, though they are in decline. Rather, there is evidence of multiple masculinities of equal cultural value in existence. The views expressed in this article may not accurately reflect homogeneity among fan cultures, though they do suggest a movement towards inclusivity and an acceptance of multiple masculinities.

This changing culture of fandom can be seen with the challenge to an environment where the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been regularly applied (Connell 1987, 1990, 1995). As the argument presented here has suggested, a significantly large number of fans have provided views that challenge this concept and accept that there are homosexual players already within the game. When Justin Fashanu came out in 1990, football and wider society

(including the media) was in a very homohysteric phase (Anderson 2009), but the results presented here show that this has now dissipated. What matters for a large number of fans is that the players they support perform on the field of play; the players' personal lives have little significance on them as fans. This particular finding has strong resonance with Anderson's research on cheer-leaders (2008b), where a prominent feature of the article focuses on the way gay men act, rather than caring who someone sleeps with. Thus, and building on the work of Anderson, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is becoming increasingly ineffective. Here, it fails to account for football fandom in the twenty-first century; rather, Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory is a more progressive way of conceptualizing fan culture and subsequent defini-tions of masculinity.

Due to the wide ranging demography of fans who completed this study, we can also challenge the conclusions drawn from Kian et al. (2011) who sug-gested that whilst there is evidence of decreasing cultural homophobia across American football supporters who use fan message boards, it is an uneven process and has varying implications for different demographics. Even Ander-son (2009) has suggested that hegemonic notions of masculinity can be passed down from generation to generation, often unwittingly. Whilst Anderson is reluctant to suggest that middle-aged men are adopting inclusive practices towards masculinity, we have provided evidence that gay players would meet with approval from fans of all ages and backgrounds – tempered of course by rival fans – but not a deep homophobia that many suspect or predict. A significant number of participants were aged over 25, and were thus older than the subjects used by many scholars currently using inclusive masculinity theory (Adams 2011; Anderson 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011; Anderson and McGuire 2010; Bush, Anderson and Carr forthcoming; McCormack 2010, 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Swain 2006). Rather, our results concur with Berila and Choudhuri (2005) who suggested some middle-class tolerance towards homosexuality as heterosexual men are becoming less obsessed by historic definitions of masculinity.

Fans suspect they are stigmatized as homophobes because it suits the interests of clubs and agents. Their view is that clubs and agents protect their own interests and dissuade gay players from coming out, while accusing fans as being the main inhibitors (Campbell et al. 2011). The results illustrated here outline how fans are challenging football's authorities to oppose the culture of secrecy which is clearly in existence. As we have seen with men and women in other sports across the world, if the environment is supportive then gay competitors are emboldened to reveal themselves. Indeed, the media was seen as one of the main contributors in promoting a culture of homohysteria in the 1980s, in particular surrounding Justin Fashanu. However, Kian and Anderson (2009) and Nylund (2004, 2007) have provided evidence of how the media (both print and broadcasting) are now creating a

more supportive environment for gay athletes and this is also helping make the sporting environment more inclusive. According to Kian and Anderson (2009: 810), the changing environment towards gay athletes 'not only reflects the novelty of the gay experiences in sport, but it highlights that men who come out and contest hegemonic masculinity in sport are increasingly met with admiration'. The main football organizations and clubs have presented football as a family game, now they need to make it a more inclusive environment for gay players who want to be open about their homosexuality. The difficulty seems to be making *them* more inclusive, rather than the fans.

(Date accepted: February 2012)

Notes

1. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/8513284.stm, accessed February 13, 2010.

2. See http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/two-top-gay-footballers-stay-in-closet-1845787.html, accessed December 20, 2009.

3. In designing a survey to test the research question, the ethical process of the British Sociological Association was adhered to – see http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm#_anon, (Last accessed May 20, 2010.

4. A thread usually lasts for 25 separate posts before it starts a new page.

5. See the Premier League 2007/08 survey: http://www.premierleague.com/page/Publications/0,,12306,7,00.html

6. See, for example, Mehaffey (2010a, 2010b), Doward (2010), Tobin (2010) and Black (2010).

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