

Safe Spaces: The upside of the image problem for same sex attracted young women
playing Australian Rules football

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Lynne Hillier

Senior Research Fellow

Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society

La Trobe University

Level 1, 215 Franklin St

Melbourne, 3000

Australia

Abstract

In an article on women's soccer in the UK entitled *The image problem in women's football*, John Harris (2005) explores the negative impact on heterosexual players of their involvement in a sport which has a strong perceived association with lesbianism. In contrast, in this paper it is argued that the stigma of women's football (in this case Australian Rules Football) and its association with lesbianism may have an upside by providing a safe space for young women to test gender and sexuality boundaries in relative safety. This is important because same sex attracted young women face many difficult issues in their adolescence including discrimination, homophobic abuse, neglect, loss of social relationships and their associated negative health outcomes. These include higher rates of sexually transmissible infections, homelessness, substance misuse, depression and suicide. Despite this, most same sex attracted young women feel strong and proud of their sexuality, in part, because they are able find and subvert particular spaces in which trusting, supportive relationships can be established and where they are safe to practise sex and gender in their own ways. The data reported in this paper were generated through an ethnographic study of an Australian Rules women's football team in Melbourne, Australia. The paper explores young women's reflections on playing football and the opportunities this space offers for performing sexual difference.

Key Words: same sex attraction; lesbians and sport; safe spaces; discourse and resistance

Introduction

Recent Australian surveys of young men and women reveal that 11% of students in small towns (Hillier, Warr & Haste, 1996) and 7-9% of senior secondary students nationally (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997; Smith, Agius, Dyson, Mitchell & Pitts, 2003) are not exclusively attracted to the opposite sex. In national research with 750 same sex attracted young people in 1998 (Hillier, Harrison & Dempsey, 1999) and 1749 in 2004 (Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005), young people aged 14 – 21 years revealed a culture in which their sexuality was negated through silence and neglect by the significant institutions and people in their lives. Homophobic abuse was experienced by over half the sample in both studies and has been linked to drug abuse, self-harm, depression and suicide in this group (Hillier et al., 1999; Hillier et al., 2005; Nicholas & Howard, 2001). Same sex attracted young women, in particular, have been found to use drugs at a higher rate than their heterosexual peers (Hillier et al., 2003; Hillier et al., 2005). Moreover they face special issues in having a less visible lesbian community and fewer opportunities than same sex attracted young men to act out their sexual desire (Dempsey, Hillier & Harrison, 2001; Hillier, 2001).

Despite research findings about hostility and neglect in their communities, most same sex attracted young women do not abuse drugs, nor do they succumb to depression and suicide. Rather, most develop a strong positive sense of self and go on to live happy fulfilled lives. In the 1998 national research (Hillier et al., 1999) 60% of the young women reported feeling ‘great’ or ‘pretty good’ about their sexuality, due primarily to their ability to resist, reframe and find fault with discourses that provide for them only negative subject positions (Hillier & Harrison, 2004). One way the skills of reframing may be learned is through access to safe spaces where positive ways of

thinking about sexual difference are allowed to develop unhindered by homophobia and heterosexism.

The notion of safe spaces is one that has been investigated at length by sociologists in relation to other minority groups (for example, Evans & Boyte, 1986; Scott, 1990). Scott, in particular, argued that resistance to discrimination and marginalisation may be impossible without access to safe unregulated spaces. Safe spaces often refer to a geographical location but this is not necessarily so. Fine and Bertram describe safe spaces in the following way:

They are not just a set of geographical-spatial arrangements, but theoretical, analytical and spatial displacements - a crack or a fissure in an organisation...where young men and women find unsuspected places within their geographic locations, their public institutions and their spiritual lives to sculpt real and imaginary spaces for peace, solace, communion, personal and collective identity work ... Individual dreams, collective work and critical works are stolen, smuggled in and re-imagined... These are spaces where trite social stereotypes are precariously contested. Young women and men, in the constant confrontation with harsh humiliating public representations of their ... gender and sexuality, use these spaces to break down public images for scrutiny and invent new ones (1999:158).

For instance, several studies of women in various sporting arenas have shown that some sporting contexts provide a potential safe space for young gay women (for example, Cahn 1998; Griffin 1998).

Sport has been a traditionally male-only space and over the years women have been dissuaded from playing through a range of discourses, including that sport would: compromise women's health and reproductive capabilities; reduce their femininity; unleash rampant (hetero)sexuality; and later, that sport would encourage lesbianism (Griffin 1998).

In this first decade of the 21st century, the 'lesbians in sport' discourse remains a strong deterrent to women playing certain sports (particularly full-contact sports) and playing any sport 'too well' (Cahn, 1998; Dworkin, 2001). The contested boundary is now one of 'acceptable sexuality' and, according to Blinde and Taub, lesbianism represents the boundary line of the unacceptable - 'homophobia controls behaviour through contempt for purported norm violators' (1992: 152).

One explanation for such strong resistance to women playing sport is the important function it plays in young men's socialisation and its 'strong association with an idealised hegemonic masculinity' (Harris, 2005: 184). According to Theberge: 'For men, sport has historically been a setting for the development and display of traits and abilities that signify masculine power and authority' (1993: 301). Men learn to be competitive and tough on the sports field. Sport reinforces male privilege and female inferiority: 'the denial to women of the experience in sport of force and power and sense of physical accomplishment is an important aspect of the control of women's bodies under patriarchy' (Theberge, 1993: 301). Women's participation in sport thus brings into question the naturalness of men's aggression, toughness, competitiveness and muscularity. Women playing full-contact sports like Australian Rules football blurs these distinctions between 'the masculine' and 'the feminine'. In doing so a space is created in which non-traditional forms of femininity and female sexuality can be explored.

Project Design and Method

The data for this paper come from a qualitative study exploring Australian Rules football as a safe space for young women who play the game. The aim of the

research was to describe the preconditions for the 'safe space,' in particular to establish:

- a) How some young women find their way to playing football despite the cultural taboos;
- b) What football offers these young women and what resistance they have experienced; and
- c) What it is about the game and the team that make it a safe space for these young women.

Lakeside, the pseudonym for the team that took part in this study, is part of the Victorian Women's Football League (VWFL), which was established in 1981 with four teams competing in an open competition for young women from 14 years of age. In 2004, there were 16 Victorian clubs, many with three teams or divisions (VWFL, 2004).

The team was approached after two young women, in a focus group for a different project about the internet, commented that they did not need the internet because they had their football team. Overall, the team members of *Lakeside* were pleased to be part of the research and they welcomed the opportunity to talk about their experiences in the team and the reactions of those outside the team to their involvement in women's football.

During the 2002 season, many games, practice matches, social events and coaching sessions were observed. In-depth interviews were held with 12 women from the team, including the coach and some of the executive. Interviewees were from the first and second divisions of the club and ranged in age from 16 to 39 years, though all but the coach and one player were under 25. The women included those who

identified as heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian, women who were married, partnered and single and women who had children.

The interviews were semi-structured and included questions about entry into football, football careers, highlights of football, the body and football, football as a social avenue, football and gender, football and sexuality and football as a safe space.

Discourse analysis was used to interpret the data for this article. According to Burr, each discourse within the discursive field is: 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together make up a particular version of event' (1995: 48). Accordingly, each discourse provides a framework through which people interpret their lives. However, some are better known and more widely used than others, in part because they have institutional support. Dominant or globalizing discourses are a set of statements that have some institutionalised force, are widely circulated and regarded as truth by many in the population (Mills, 1997). Globalising discourses around gender and sexuality, which are supported by the church and the state, sanction heterosexuality and certain types of masculinity and femininity, while constituting non-heterosexuality and other ways of performing gender as unacceptable and transgressive. This does not mean, however, that other discourses do not exist, nor that young people are powerless victims, for they have the opportunity to engage in discourse and play an active role in constituting themselves:

the categories and narratives which discourse constructs for subjects are not simply imposed, but are subject to negotiation by those subjects. It is the process of engaging with discursive structures that constitutes us as particular types of subjects (Mills, 1997: 96)

An analysis of the discourse used by the women to construct meaning around their football playing, their gender and sexuality was used to interpret the data. Each discourse can provide positive, neutral and/or negative ways of understanding a subject. Women who play Australian Rules football are often subjects who are positioned negatively. The analysis searched for examples of the ways that the players were positioned and how they resisted negative positioning by the use of discourse that presented them in a more positive light. Of particular interest was the use of discourse that reframed and challenged the negative stereotypes of women who play Australian Rules football and explained what these young women gained from playing the game. Observational notes and interview transcripts were read many times. Common themes were identified and exceptions noted.

Results and Discussion

In the following discussion, the team and its members are given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The section is arranged to include the main findings of the data beginning with young women's entry into football and moving on to what football offers. The sections include: paths to playing football; interruptions to football; a celebration of strength and an avenue to fitness; invading a male domain; a place to belong, a space for sexual experimentation and finally, the instability and vulnerability of the space.

Paths to playing football

From the interview data it was clear that the key to understanding how these young women broke through the wall of resistance to women playing football was childhood experience. The path to football for all but one of the young women (she

played for the first time in late adolescence) was as children with the support of (male) family and friends. They remembered their fathers, uncles, brothers and male childhood friends teaching them in backyards and parks where they were welcomed as part of an informal game. It was not uncommon for them to be the one girl amongst a number of boys and initially gender distinctions did not seem to be made. They were able to experience the joys and learn the skills of football as youngsters in a comfortable and accepting environment and soon realised what it could offer. The following accounts were typical of the women in the team:

Oh, I'd played a couple of school games and stuff, and yeah I was forever, always kicking a football, with ... my brother at home, and at like my Dad's football club, like running around with all the boys and stuff, so I played quite well (Lee, 22 years).

Yeah I've always loved, I just love footy ... My best friend growing up was a boy. We were always there kicking the footy or riding our bikes and things (Rose, 20 yrs).

Interruptions to football

Though they learned to play when young and remembered thoroughly enjoying the game, not one of the women played football into puberty. This was not because they lost interest but because discourses about women (as opposed to girls) playing football provided only negative positions for them and football was no longer deemed an appropriate game for them to play. In some cases the school intervened, in other cases a sporting club. In all cases, they were positioned as 'emerging young ladies' who were no longer suitable football-playing subjects. For the young women this sudden interruption to their football careers was described variously as a 'cut off

point' beyond which they could not play and something 'girls could no longer do' or 'were not allowed' to do. For example, at high school Sal tried to keep playing football at lunch-time, however whenever she played the teachers came out and stopped her:

The only thing was that I didn't actually start playing football [again] until I was 29, because, going through school, I always went out and had a kick with my brothers and things, but ... I wasn't allowed to play at school. Even if I went out at lunch-time to have a kick with the boys, the teachers would come and tell me I couldn't do it (Sal, 32 years).

Similarly, Fiona stopped playing football in high school because she was told not to by teachers, on the basis that the boys were getting too big and she could be hurt. Though she half agreed, she still felt angry about it:

I didn't push it because I knew if I had the choice I probably wouldn't have played, which I'm annoyed at, I would have loved to ... I didn't play for ... about 7 or 8 years when I sort of went through high school Then I ... found out about this team through my partner, when I was about 17, and went down with her. And ... haven't looked back since (Fiona 20 years).

The priest at Lisa's primary school also forbade her from playing football at school. What the other teachers told her later fitted in with traditional discourse that positioned women who play football as unfeminine:

I wanted to play school football when I was in grade five and the grade six boys told the priest....and he was very much against the idea....he said 'nup you're not playing' and so whereas the boys my age would have been happy for me to play it was the older boys who told the priest and that was the end of it I was

pretty disappointed I wasn't allowed to play football They [the teachers] just said it was not ladylike sort of thing, I don't know too rough. Oh we used to play kick-to-kick but we just weren't allowed to play games and stuff (Lisa, 21 years).

Some of the women also reported negative responses from some, although not all, of their male peers, like Chris, who used to play in a local Australian Rules football team when she was primary school age:

It used to be funny ... the guys I played with were pretty good but the opposition used to be funny if you played better than some boy - the whole team would go 'you got beaten by a girl' (Chris, 18 years).

Though all of the young women (except the one who did not play as a child) experienced a sudden interruption to their football-playing careers at puberty, childhood memories and the knowledge of what football offered left them open to any opportunity to play later on.

The hiatus between the women's football experiences as children and adults is supported by other research showing that girls and women's Australian Rules football competitions in the same geographical location often have different origins and members, as well as different sources and levels of support and resistance (Wedgwood this issue).

Football offers a celebration of strength and an avenue to fitness

Because it is a traditionally masculine sport, Australian Rules football offers women who play the game a chance to challenge gender boundaries. For instance, as Australian Rules football players it is necessary for women to tackle and push each

other and roll around on the ground together, acts which do not normally fit within notions of acceptable behaviour for young women. It is common also to have short nails, short hair and to sport a bruise during the week. In football young women can find a positive position for themselves as strong, fit, well-muscled athletes who are appreciated by their peers for what their bodies can do rather than how they look.

Mel talked about the way her strong body had been used against her at school in the form of sexist and homophobic taunts. Later sport, and particularly Australian Rules football, provided a context in which her strength and fitness were actually admired:

the people there really appreciated me for who I was and my abilities. People respected me for what I could do, not what they thought I was and they gave me a chance to display my abilities and there was always a lot of respect there...I could be myself (Mel, 23 years).

This concurs with Palzkill's findings that women who play male dominated sports can experience 'appreciation for accomplishments achieved through strength, power, energy, activity and a functional use of the body' (1990: 224).

Because it is an all-round sport that really tests players physically, Australian Rules football also provides an avenue for developing a strong, fit body for women who lack fitness:

and the good thing about footy is that it's the only sport I know where you use every part of your body. There's no other sport that I know of, where you use your feet, your hands, your head, your stamina ...and that's why women like playing it, because there's no other sport that will test you physically like football (Cath the coach, 39 years).

All of the women in the study were proud of the level of fitness that they had achieved and the many physical skills they had developed on the field. Ria, one of the players commented 'football is more physical and I enjoy it more' (18 years).

Invading a male domain

Some women, for example Anna, commented on the satisfaction of resisting gender norms by moving into a hallowed male domain:

I mean I have enjoyed playing other sports but ... I guess there's ... an extra appeal 'cause it's something that ... you're excluded from 'cause it's sort of a male domain ... and because it's such an important sport in our culture as well, like it's basically the number one sport that people follow (Anna 19 years).

All of these women, regardless of their sexual orientation, were resisting entrenched discourses about what women are and how they should behave. Simply by playing a full-contact sport, they were challenging 'one of the most fundamental sources of male power ... and the rightful place of women in relation to this' (Wright & Clark, 1999: 230).

Football offers a place to belong

There was the sense for many of these young women that the world was a fairly hostile place for those who pushed gender and sexuality boundaries. Football not only gave them the opportunity to be strong and feel powerful, it also gave them a place in which they belonged and felt comfortable. For Rose, football meant meeting other women like herself:

I would have to say that [meeting other women] was part of it because I had some friends who played down there and soon you start to meet more people that are like you ... It gives you somewhere you can go where you can relax, you can be yourself you're not paranoid the whole time because, because people will look at you strangely or whatever (Rose, 20 years).

Though this may not be the case for all women's football clubs, the executive of *Lakeside* worked hard at maintaining the 'safety for everyone' aspect of the club, regardless of the sexuality of the members. This was particularly true for social activities. Mel, one of the executive, was enthusiastic about making sure that social occasions suited everyone and did not cater more for one sexual preference more than another:

We make sure it's safe for everyone to be there ... and it's accepting for everyone. Where we used to go to the [name of straight club] - a lot of people didn't like it because it was too rowdy. There was lots of bird-jumping-guys [men who made passes at women] there and a lot of people didn't appreciate that so we moved venues. So I guess just generally as people voice what they want we move and that's a good thing because everyone generally will go 'yeah well people aren't happy, ok some people aren't happy, we'll make sure everyone's happy'. And there's not this whole need for 'oh do you want to go to [name of lesbian club] altogether with us one night?' and it works really well like that (Mel, 23 years).

The coach stressed that women of different abilities as well as sexualities were catered for:

This club offers everyone ... of varying standards, a game of football cause we're in first division and second division. It also offers a wide variety of social activities that are not specifically aimed for one sexuality or another. It's very

much open and people are relaxed around each other, and ... sexuality's not an issue, which is good (Cath, 39 years).

Because the club was a safe space and playing football was enjoyable and exhilarating, many women focussed their social activities around the other women in the team.

What would I do if I didn't play football? Like I really miss the football girls over summer.... after a month or so we start to go 'we're really missing each other' ...a few of us will all catch up and we just need that. You know it's a real family, which is good (Rose, 20 years).

Football offers a space for sexual experimentation

Though the club was primarily about playing football, one player stressed that the club was about many other things for the players. For some this included opportunities for them to test sexuality boundaries safely.

For women, for anything, for their gender for their sexual orientation, for their political beliefs. To trial things sexually, physically, emotionally ... a really good space for women, which is why I think I love it so much. So our philosophy is to give women ... opportunities and that's what the league's philosophy is about. So the creation of the second division I think is really important in terms of spaces for women to play ... football (Mel, 23 years).

Players were aware that the club had philosophical underpinnings that guided many of the decisions that were made. The coach commented that the club had an accepting culture towards all sexualities:

I remember their first season when they started they were known as ... the team of straight girls, and it wasn't until some time later, that people in the rest of the

league sort of started to find out that perhaps they all weren't ... it's not an issue in this club, and everybody's made to feel that their sexuality, regardless of what it is, is not an issue and is supported. And even, like there's so many young people coming through, and some of them are even unsure of their sexuality, but they're never pushed one way or another. They're supported and they're given the opportunity of identifying their sexuality... There's a kid that's started up this year, ... she just turned 19, ... I think she's from the country, and she's down here staying with her grandmother, ... and she goes, 'Well, I know that a lot of you are lesbians, and I don't know if I am, or I'm not, but I just really appreciate the fact that everybody just leaves me alone to find out.' And, and that was like, probably two months into her being a part of this club. And, you know, she's continuing to explore her different options, and um, she's having a good time doing it (Cath, 39 years).

From the quote above we learn that among the women players there was an accepted conversation space to think about and discuss the sexuality of other players in an interested and positive way regardless of their orientation.

Though the women seemed to enjoy these discussions it was clear that they were also aware of the 'bad press' that women's football endured in regard to the sexuality of its players. For instance, a recently-married member of the team found that she was constantly defending her (hetero)sexuality to people outside the team who consistently expressed surprise at her marriage to a man. This 'image problem' may be the reason why some of the players were quick to point out that football was the main game:

you know we all hear equally about everyone's I guess everyone's exploits but sex is not like ... there's not an emphasis on sex. I'm playing good football and having good friendships. That's what the emphasis is on there (Lou 17 years).

Instability and vulnerability of the space

Though the women experienced football as a safe space, many were also aware that the space was vulnerable and unstable, lacking in community support and sponsorship. For example, one of the players described an incident in which she felt the game and the women were trivialised. A member of the team was invited to appear on a weekly television show about men's Australian Rules football, ostensibly to promote women's football. However her appearance was not taken seriously, with the interviewer asking questions about 'nut crunchers' and 'nipple crushers' rather than the women's football prowess. She said she felt that women's football was trivialised by the experience. Others have written about the trivialising of women's sport by the media (Wright & Clarke, 1999).

Another player (one of the executive) had considered suggesting the team play in the Gay Games but was concerned that the price they might have to pay in loss of sponsorship would be too high:

You know it would be really good to try and get a women's exhibition game at the gay games ...that would be fantastic but I don't know whether the league would support that because it might be a way of aligning ourselves with the gay community and we have very little sponsorship at the moment as it is, so we're worried about that anyway. We're just starting to make headway with the sponsorship so it might be difficult if we get publicity that way (Mel, 23 years).

In terms of resources, the VWFL teams are grossly under-funded and the members of *Lakeside* were constantly fighting for better conditions for playing the game. At the time of the research, they had training sessions at night on an oval with only one floodlight and they were always struggling for better infrastructure. The

small amount of sponsorship they had was tenuous and the comparisons with resources of equivalent men's football clubs were stark.

Conclusions

One could argue that the existence of lesbians in Australian Rules football merely validates the negative stereotypes that abound in Australian culture about women who play. However, another interpretation is that the stereotypes in fact produce a 'safe space' in which women can challenge gender and sexuality boundaries. Though much effort is invested in preventing women from playing football, once they break through the wall of resistance, that same wall acts to shield them from further surveillance. While they inhabit that 'football' space they are written off as unworthy heterosexual and female subjects. The assumption that all members of the team were lesbians left young women free to explore their sexuality without being fearful because in many ways they had already been punished for the 'crime'.

There was also the sense among the interviewees in which the wall of resistance to women playing football seemed to act as a filter of women, leaving the teams overrepresented with women who reject conventional gender and sexuality discourses, preferring to see themselves as strong powerful women athletes who can act on the world rather being acted upon. With the old discourses banished and new positive discourses the norm, a climate of acceptance and support could emerge in which the women could all safely explore new ways of being women.

While a sport such as football is 'written off' as a transgressive space, the potential for safety appears to be maximised, however the safety of the space was unstable and easily disrupted. Events or behaviours that attracted attention and raised

the profile of the sport and brought it under surveillance seemed to bring with them discursive technologies which recreated negative subject positions for the women.

The 'catch 22' of Australian Rules women's football seems to be, therefore, to either play behind the wall of resistance and safely explore diverse gender and sexuality positions while enduring poor conditions and minimal financial backing for the game (for example, see Wedgwood 2005) or to present the team as feminine and (hetero)sexual in order to gain more players and sponsorship for the club.

A final possibility, obviously preferable for the game and the women, seems very unlikely as this stage - opening the game up to surveillance, rejecting traditional discourses of femininity and presenting the women as strong, all round elite athletes who play the game well and who may or may not be heterosexual. Palzkill sums up the problem well: 'The question arises as to whether women actually have a chance of developing resistance to their prescribed feminine role in the 'macho world of sport', and if so, how these forms of resistance could be realised' (1992: 221).

In relation to the second possibility, the question that needs to be asked is whether football would remain a safe space for same sex attracted women if it became accepted as a suitable sport for women in the same way that netball is. If resistance to women's football ceased and all young women played football rather than the small percentage who play now, would football continue to be a safe space for same sex attracted young women? The answer is uncertain but while we live in a culture that regards same sex sexuality as unacceptable and link it to strength and power in women, the likely conclusion is no.

Team sports that encourage young women to be active and sports that reward them for fit healthy bodies are clearly desirable. This is especially important in the light of current concerns about obesity in children and adolescents and the tendency

for young women to be valued for how their bodies look rather than for what they can do. All sports, however, do not provide a safe and comfortable space for same sex attracted young women to spend their time. In the case of Australian Rules football, this study has demonstrated the enormous potential that the game has in terms of how women themselves can shape and construct complex interactions of sexuality, gender and sport. Further research, and other case studies, may reveal greater insights into when, how and why alternate models for sporting communities may emerge.

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