

English (Men's) Football, Masculinity and Homophobia: From Hegemonic to Inclusive

Masculinity

Jay Willson

Solent University, Southampton, UK

Rory Magrath

Solent University, Southampton, UK

Abstract

English men's football has traditionally been a hostile environment for sexual minorities. Gay male footballers – or even those suspected of being gay – have been excluded, marginalised and subordinated from the game by men attempting to (re)prove and (re)establish their heteromasculine identities. Over the past two decades, however, attitudes towards homosexuality have seen a remarkable improvement across much of the Western world. Despite claims that sport – and football, in particular – is slower to adopt broader social change, and that homophobia remains an endemic social problem affecting the game, a significant body of research has documented how football is becoming increasingly acceptant and inclusive of homosexuality. In this chapter, we explore how this scholarly work has departed from previous, outdated attempts at theorising masculinities – notably Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity; and has, instead, employed Eric Anderson's theoretical lens, inclusive masculinity. We discuss how inclusive masculinity has evolved into the most dominant paradigm for theorising contemporary masculinities.

Introduction

English (men's) football has traditionally been a hostile environment for sexual minorities (e.g., Clayton & Humberstone, 2006). Gay male athletes – or even those suspected of being gay – have, historically, been shunned, excluded, and marginalized by the 'toxic jock' (Miller, 2009, p. 72); that is, ostensibly heterosexual men attempting to (re)prove, (re)establish, and consolidate their own heteromasculine identities—thus distancing themselves from homosexuality (Connell, 1987). Rich (1980), therefore, argues that, in sport, particularly combative team sports like football, any form of non-heterosexuality is perceived on "a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent."

Since the turn of the millennium, however, attitudes toward sexual minorities in the Western world have improved considerably (Kranjac & Wagmiller, 2021; Watt & Elliot, 2019). Moreover, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people now enjoy greater social and legal freedoms than ever before. Football has also undergone a significant transformation with respect to equity, diversity, and inclusion. As we outline in greater detail throughout this chapter, a plethora of scholarly research – both in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) – has countered outdated assumptions about sport's (lack of) acceptance of sexual minority athletes (Anderson, Magrath & Bullingham, 2016).

In this chapter, we provide an outline of English football's evolution from hostility to inclusivity, with a specific focus on the theoretical implications. We do so by first providing the historical context of the game's masculine foundations, which were largely established against the backdrop of a fast-changing society. Next, we outline how attitudes toward sexual minorities have improved, and how – as above – research investigating sporting terrain has also acknowledged these improvements. Finally, we outline how the dominant theoretical apparatus underpinning these findings has evolved over the past decade, away from Connell's

(1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (HMT) and toward Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory.

The Foundations of Football, Masculinity, and Homophobia

While the invention of machinery and transportation necessary for industrialization began in the early-1700s, the antecedents of today's sporting culture can largely be traced to the second Industrial Revolution—the mid-1800s through to the early 1900s. It was around this time that farmers exchanged their time-honoured professions for salaried work, and families replaced their farm's rent for life in the city. The allure of industry, and the better life it promised, influenced a significant wave of migration. Cancian (1987), for example, shows that the percentage of people living in cities increased 50% – from 25% to 75% – in around a century. It was also around this time that the organisation, regulation, and codification of most dominant sports – including football – occurred. Men's teamsports, in particular, were considered to replicate qualities that were valuable to factory employers. Indeed, factory workers were expected and required to show sacrifice and dedication which, in turn, was also taught to boys (Anderson, 2009).

As men became sole 'breadwinners', working long hours, many of them spent little time raising their children, which became the role of their mother. During this time, gender-segregated sport played a vital role, instilling masculinity in a way that a mother supposedly could not (Anderson, 2015). Indeed, by participating in sport in the company of a dominant male figure – the coach – boys were able to "align their gendered behaviors with idealized and narrow definitions of masculinity" (McCormack & Anderson, 2014, p. 114). Thus, by suppressing pain, concealing same-sex desire and behaviours, and committing acts of violence against oneself and others, boys were able to avoid the supposed 'risk' of homosexuality—whilst also simultaneously preparing them for labour-intensive work and

participation in the military (Raphael, 1988). The male sporting body, then, is appropriately described by Polley (1998, p. 109) as an “idealised, orthodox, heterosexual sign.” Moreover, by making women unwelcome in the sporting arena, men’s sporting prowess was uncontested proof of their superiority in masculine domains.

Football, among other contact team sports, gained mass popularity throughout this period, providing a medium through which an orthodox form of masculinity could be embodied and embraced (Dunning, 1999). While this was primarily among boys and men, the women’s game also began to gain a significant amount of traction in the early part of the 20th century. However, deemed both a threat to the men’s game, and as an “unsuitable” game for women (Williams, 2021), the women’s game was banned (from FA-affiliated facilities) in 1921, for a period of 50 years. The banning of women’s football during this time further ensured that it was framed as a sport only for men—a “male preserve” (Dunning, 1986, p. 86).

In *The Rites of Men*, Varda Burstyn (1999) argues that it was mostly through sport that boys and men could exhibit “hypermasculinity”—so much so that masculinity essentially became synonymous with homophobia (Kimmel, 1994). Men who played sport were, therefore, not thought likely, or even possible, to be gay. Thus, sport has served to privilege not all men, but specifically heterosexual men (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). Given the hypermasculine environment evident throughout English football’s history, any alternative sexuality has been emphatically and explicitly rejected.

A (further) Shift Towards Hostility

Almost a century after the antecedents of industrialization in the West, sport once again took on renewed cultural significance for boys and men; another opportunity to emphasise orthodox notions of masculinity in what Anderson (2009) describes as a culture of

homophobia (a concept which refers to the fear of being homosexualised). Indeed, the increased visibility of (male) homosexuality in the 1980s had significant consequences for the gay community. The conservative socio-political response to the HIV/AIDS crisis – which became intimately associated with the gay community – increased cultural stigma (Goh, 2008). This was also influenced by the then UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s views that homosexuality was a threat to traditional family values. This was perhaps best evidenced by the introduction of Section 28; legislation introduced by Thatcher’s government in the UK which effectively banned the promotion of homosexuality in British schools—making teachers fearful of combating homophobia (Nixon & Givens, 2007). In the US, while similar legislation did not exist, similar homophobic perspectives were also evident with Ronald Reagan’s Republican administration.

These deleterious attitudes are best evidenced by the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS). At the start of the decade, 62% of the UK population believed that same-sex sex between consenting adults was ‘always wrong’ or ‘mostly wrong’; by 1987, this figure had increased to 75% (Clements & Field, 2014). Similar trends were also evident in the US (e.g., Loftus, 2001) and across Western Europe (e.g., Gerhards, 2010). This led Anderson (2009, p. 89) to conclude that “1987 or 1988 seems to be the apex of homophobia in both countries [the UK and the US].” Desperate to avoid homosexual stigma, men went to extraordinary lengths, including excessive steroid use (Halkitis, Green & Wilson, 2004), to align their image with dominant notions of masculinity. Kellner (1991) refers to this as the “Rocky-Rambo Syndrome” of the Reagan era.

Sports research at this time, and bleeding into the following decade, reflects the broader societal hostility. In the US, Messner (1992, p. 34) describes the levels of homophobia in men’s sport at this time as “staggering” and argued that “to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not

acceptable.” Similarly, Curry (1991, p. 130) found that, “Not only is being homosexual forbidden, but tolerance of homosexuality is theoretically off limits as well.” In Canada, Pronger (1990, p. 26) wrote that the gay men he interviewed were “uncomfortable with team sports.” In Europe and the UK, comparable research is lacking—although, in the Netherlands, Hekma (1998, p. 2) wrote that, “Gay men are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise.” Research on men’s football at this time is also lacking entirely.

The toxic environment of the game, however – notably at the elite level – was evident when Justin Fashanu came out in 1990. Having learned that details of his private life were about to be revealed in a national newspaper, Fashanu agreed to an exclusive with British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. Under the now-infamous headline, “£1m Football Star: I AM GAY,” the wheels were set in motion for an explicit wave of homophobia (Gaston, Magrath & Anderson, 2018). Indeed, while he initially claimed that he had been accepted by his teammates, Fashanu suffered severe backlash from the football community, and although the admission of his sexuality did not end his career outright, he never signed a professional contract again (Mitchell, 2012) – and eventually retired from the game in 1997. The following year, after being accused of assaulting a 17-year-old boy in the US, Fashanu took his own life. Fashanu has become what Magrath (2017a) has previously described as a “trendsetter” for football’s fractious relationship with homosexuality—breathing life into football’s homophobic (and racist) subculture.

A Shift Towards Inclusivity

Since 2000, cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in Western cultures have improved significantly. Evidencing this, Watt and Elliot’s (2019) analysis of the BSAS found that only 16% of those sampled believed in same-sex sex to be ‘always wrong’ or ‘mostly wrong’

(down almost two-thirds from three decades earlier). Again, similar trends have also been apparent elsewhere, with two-thirds of American adults who now believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2016). In addition to general attitudes, the legalization of same-sex marriage in multiple nations is also testament to the changing social and legal rights of LGB people. Indeed, since the Netherlands became the first country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage, in 2001, it is now legal in over 30 countries. While these are mostly in the West – many countries outside of the West continue to hold more conservative attitudes toward homosexuality (e.g., Masci & Desilver, 2019) – these continue to grow at a rate of knots.

While sport – and football, in particular – is frequently criticised for being slower to accommodate social change than broader society, a plethora of academic evidence now shows that this is not the case (Anderson, Magrath & Bullingham, 2016). This has been identified not only among players, but also fans and the media, too. Magrath (2017a) carried out semi-structured interviews with 60 academy-level English footballers, investigated the construction of male friendships, coming out, team relationships and gay-friendliness. Excluding a small number of individuals who were influenced by religion (see Magrath, 2017b), Magrath's findings identified overwhelming support of homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and (hypothetically) 'out' gay teammates. One participant, for example, stated that, "I'm very open about what I believe, and I've got no issues at all. It's just basic human rights" (Magrath, 2017a, p. 15). Other recent research with footballers has found similarly positive attitudes (Magrath, 2021a; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015; Cleland & Magrath, 2020). These positive attitudes have also been mostly evident upon the coming out of gay male footballers across differing levels across the world, including Anton Hysén (Cleland, 2014), Thomas Hitzlsperger (Cleland, Magrath & Kian, 2018), and, most recently, Josh Cavallo (Zeigler, 2021).

This shift in attitudes has also been documented among football fans. Perhaps most notably, Cashmore and Cleland's (2012, p. 377-8) research documented a "new and surprising image" regarding football's growing acceptance of homosexuality. Specifically, their research showed that 93% of 3500 fans in their sample had no objection to an 'out' gay player being contracted to the team they support. These fans resented being held accountable for the lack of gay male footballers, and almost half believed that clubs, agents, and governing bodies were truly responsibly for this trend. When this research was replicated almost a decade later, Cleland, Cashmore, Dixon and MacDonald (2021) found that the overall figure of acceptance had increased to 95% (among 2663 survey respondents). Despite these inclusive findings, however, Pearson's (2012) ethnography of English football fans identified the prevalence of terms such as 'gay' and 'queer', with such language likely to have "made it very uncomfortable for an openly gay fan to join a trip with the carnival fans" (p. 168).

While some organisations, such as Stonewall – the UK's most influential LGBT+ advocacy charity – suggest that sexual minority fans' experiences are overwhelmingly negative (see Stonewall, 2016), the academic research has increasingly shown that the opposite is true. Indeed, Magrath's (2021b) research, one of the first scholarly projects examining the experiences of LGBT fans, confirms the positive shift in attitudes toward homosexuality. In his analysis of gay male football fans, for example, 26 of the 35 participants said they felt 'safe' attending matches, as opposed to previous feelings of anxiety and intimidation. Recent research on the experiences of bisexual football fans found similar levels of safety (Magrath, 2022). Letts and Magrath (2022) also show that despite these changes, gay male football fans felt that the Rainbow Laces campaign was largely tokenistic, and they would like to see more proactive work from the game's governing body to ensure that English football was an increasingly inclusive space for sexual minorities.

Theorising Football, Masculinities and Sexualities

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

The most dominant theoretical paradigm for understanding men and masculinity has been (Raewyn) Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (HMT). It has become the most influential theory for understanding the unequal distribution of male privilege and articulates two social processes: (1) how all men benefit from the existence of patriarchy—the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 1995, p. 26); and (2) that multiple masculinities exist in an intra-masculine hierarchy, with one archetype of masculinity “culturally exalted above all others” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Based on a lack of empirical evidence on the first of these contentions (e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2018), we focus here only on the second; that of an intra-masculine hierarchy.

Hegemony refers to the maintenance of power in social groups, in which any challenge to these hierarchies can be viewed as “weak, soft, unathletic and feminine” (Lucyk, 2011, p. 67). Patterns of masculinity hold the dominant position, usually associated with strong, successful, capable and reliable men (Kimmel, 1994). Such a multitude of attributes can be earned (displaying homophobia or competitiveness) while others are permanent (heterosexuality or Whiteness) (Howson, 2006). However, possessing and maintaining hegemony requires the reproduction of regulatory behaviours, such as sexism, misogyny, homophobia and violence. Connell (1995) argued that material domination and discursive marginalization are key processes to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity; so much so that inferior men deem those who hold power to be deserving of rule without challenge from oneself. Furthermore, Connell (1995) refers to three forms of masculinity that derive from the process of hegemony: complicit, marginalized and subordinate.

Complicit masculinities make up the majority of men; those with little association to hegemonic masculinity, but who still benefit from male privilege. While there may be behaviours and attributes that meet the definition of hegemony, the difference lies in, as Connell (2005, p. 79) states, they “respect their wives and mother, are never violent toward women, do their accustomed share of the housework, [and] bring home the family wage”. Marginalized masculinity describes men who are marginalized by their class or race, while subordinate masculinity, whom Connell (1995, p. 79) describes “the most conspicuous,” refers to gay and/or effeminate men.

Although the intra-masculine hierarchy has been a model of great value, it has received significant critique in recent years. Moller (2007), for example, argues that the wide endorsement of HMT has led to scholars interpreting patterns of hegemonic masculinity too easily, overlooking potentially more complex patterns of masculinity. Indeed, Moller (2007) writes:

The concepts of hegemonic and hierarchical masculinities do little to help researchers understand diversity and complexity...they *reduce* our capacity to understand the ways in which the performance of masculinity may be productive of new socio-cultural practices, meanings, alliances and feelings (p. 275).

Alongside this, Howson (2006) has critiqued the central components of the intra-masculine hierarchy, which have been only loosely explained in Connell’s work. Anecdotally, this definitional uncertainty is evident each time the second author of this chapter asks his students to consider how we might conceptualize professional footballers according to Connell’s hierarchy, especially given the complexity of athlete identities which are often impacted by class, race, sexuality, and so on. In Magrath’s (2017a) analysis of HMT, in the context of football, he writes:

There is perhaps little argument that a footballer represents a hegemonic form of masculinity. But how might one theorize the position of a football hooligan? Both are dominant, albeit relatively separate, notions of masculinity in their own right. How

might one also theorize the class elements affecting English professional footballers, most of whom hail from the working classes.

But perhaps the most significant critique relevant to this chapter has been that, while HMT made sense and was accurate at the time it was devised – in the 1980s – cultural homophobia has since declined, and sexual minorities no longer face extreme marginalization in the West (Anderson & McCormack, 2018). Consequently, Connell's intra-masculine hierarchy fails to account for the varying masculinities that researchers have found flourishing without hierarchy or hegemonic in numerous contexts.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory

As an alternative to HMT, Anderson's (2009) theory of Inclusive Masculinity (IMT) has become a more accurate means of theorizing contemporary masculinity. While Anderson drew on Connell's scholarship in his early work (e.g., Anderson, 2002), antecedents of IMT emerged in Anderson's (2005) men's cheerleading research in the US, in which he found "two contrasting and competing forms of normative masculinity...orthodox [and] inclusive" (p. 337). However, as he found Connell's work to be increasingly incapable of explaining the reduction of homophobia, increased inclusivity of sexual minorities, and the reduction of homophobic discourse, IMT was formally published in his seminal text, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*.

Central to Anderson's theorizing is the concept of *homohysteria*, which seeks to explain the power dynamics of heterosexual masculinities within a historical frame. It is best defined as a "homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates" (Anderson, 2011b, p. 83). Anderson further argues that, in order for a culture of homohysteria to exist, three social factors must coincide: (1) mass cultural awareness of homosexuality, (2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval toward homosexuality, (3) cultural

disapproval of men's femininity, as displaying these behaviors becomes closely associated with homosexuality.

In a Feminist Forum debate in the *Sex Roles* journal, McCormack and Anderson (2014) discuss three conditions through which a culture historically moves: (1) *homoerasure*—describing a severely homophobic culture, but one which fails to recognize the existence of homosexuality as a static part of their population, (2) *homohysteria*—a combination of the acceptance of, and antipathy toward, homosexuality, such as Western cultures in the 1980s (e.g. Watt & Elliot, 2019), and (3) *inclusivity*—a culture in which homosexual stigma is minimal, and men are not required to alter their expression of masculinity (Anderson & McCormack, 2015).

Evidencing these softer versions of masculinity, a considerable body of work has documented how heterosexual boys and men are no longer bound by the rigid practices of previous generations (e.g., Anderson, 2014; Anderson, Ripley & McCormack, 2019; Magrath & Scoats, 2019). Anderson and McCormack (2015, p. 223), for example, document how young men are able to engage in “prolonged acts of homosocial tactility—namely cuddling and spooning” without the threat of homophobic policing. Aside from a show of celebration among sporting men, such displays were seen as simply demonstrations of love and affection for one's close friends. An extension of gendered male behaviors is also notable through the development of emotionally open and intimate friendships—labelled by Robinson, Anderson and White (2019) as the “bromance.” Interestingly, men in this research even prioritized their bromantic relationships over their romantic ones. This was because these were deemed to have fewer boundaries and be more judgement free, thus allowing men to “push the margins of traditional masculinity” (Robinson, Anderson & White, 2019, p. 864). While most research on the bromance has been restricted to university friendships, Magrath and Scoats (2019) show that these friendship bonds frequently continue years after graduation.

Although IMT initially emerged in relatively restricted populations – such as middle-class, university-educated men – it has also increasingly incorporated the behaviours of working-class men, such as those involved in sport (e.g., Magrath, 2017a). Moreover, Roberts' (2013) research on young working-class men in the retail sector also documents the emergence of a softer version of masculinity. Interestingly, he also writes that “positioning working-class masculinity in opposition to middle-class masculinity...is entirely problematic and a simplistic misrepresentation” (p. 683). Softer forms of masculinity have also been evident among young, working-class men in education; such as those in Blanchard, McCormack and Peterson's (2017) analysis of a sixth form in Northeast England.

Since its publication over a decade ago, IMT – and its associated concept, homophobia – has been prolific in its theorizing of contemporary masculinities. It has been used in hundreds of separate academic studies, some of which we outline earlier in this chapter. Although IMT has mostly been applied to sporting locales, it has also been applied to research in education (McCormack, 2012), the media (Kian, Anderson & Shipka, 2015), and the workplace (Magrath, 2020; Roberts, 2018). It has, therefore, emerged as a more adaptable heuristic tool in explaining the contemporary stratification of Western men. It has, therefore emerged into a more adaptable heuristic tool in explaining the contemporary stratification of Western men. With this flexibility, it has helped to move standpoints from a vertical one (in Connell's model of masculinity) to a horizontal one (in Anderson's theory), as homophobia continues to decline. It has been so widely employed that Borkowska (2020) has argued that the most recent phase of masculinities research – the “third phase” – should be described as “Andersonian” because this work has “moved away from the hierarchical order of social relations where men attempt to distance themselves from femininity or position themselves within the orthodox ideologies of manhood” (p. 411).

Interestingly, perhaps owing to the sport's popularity, and subsequent range of publications, it is, perhaps, in football, that IMT has been applied most. Indeed, as evidenced in the earlier sections of this chapter, declining homophobia in the game has been documented in research on fans (e.g., Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, Magrath & Kian, 2018; Magrath, 2018, 2021b), players (Anderson, 2011a; Magrath, 2017a, 2017b, 2021a; Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015), and the media (Cleland, 2014, 2018). Softer, more inclusive forms of masculinity have also been detected among young, elite footballers, too – such as the physical tactility and emotional intimacy discussed earlier in this section. Interestingly, though, this is less pronounced than in other research, something that Roberts, Anderson and Magrath (2017) attribute to the competitive environment of professional football. In other words, where young elite footballers effectively compete with one another to maintain their professional status, this restricts the closeness of their friendships with teammates.

While IMT has previously been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the effect that changing masculinities has on women (e.g., O'Neill, 2015), this has, recently, been included in football-based research. Indeed, Pope, Williams and Cleland's (2022) analysis of nearly 2000 male football fans extended IMT by presenting a new model to incorporate attitudes towards women—and women's sport. This included what they referred to as 'progressive masculinities', 'overtly misogynistic masculinities', and 'covertly misogynistic masculinities'.

Other critiques of IMT have included De Boise's claims that "a combination of underdeveloped theoretical arguments, inadequate consideration to research design and a selective use of examples means that a theory of inclusivity is difficult to accept" (p. 333). This included suggestions that homophobia has not shown decline, that continued presence of heterosexism is just as severe as homophobia, and attitudes are still as traditional in other

parts of the world. However, Anderson and McCormack (2018) recently addressed these critiques in the *Journal of Gender Studies*, and drew on a range of international studies to show that declining homophobia is sustained and profound across most Western nations. There still remains some claims that declining homophobia in sport – and football in particular – has not followed these trends (e.g., Allison & Knoester, 2021); however, by drawing on a broad range of the scholarly research, such as that in previous sections of this chapter, there is no evidence that football is inherently more homophobic than broader society. Naturally, though, more research is still required.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has provided an outline of how English (men's) football has shifted from a culture of hostility, to one that is characterized by greater levels of inclusion than ever before. Where homophobia in the game was once endemic, as perhaps best evidenced by the experiences of Justin Fashanu after he came out, a plethora of scholarly literature has documented positive attitudes (e.g., Cashmore & Cleland, 2012), improved experiences (e.g., Magrath, 2021b) and a greater commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion than in previous generations (Letts & Magrath, 2022). While there do, of course, remain significant issues – the prevalence of homophobia on social media is likely the best example of this (Hansen *et al.*, 2022) – Eric Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory has become a more dominant theory to underpin the changing nature of the game. As homophobia continues to decline in Western society, and research continues to document positive attitudes in English football, this is, perhaps, IMT's dominant position is likely to remain.

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