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## **Sexual Abuse and Masculine Cultures: Reflections on the British Football Scandal of 2016**

**Kevin Dixon.**

Drawing on the assumption that it is possible to learn a great deal about cultures by analysing circumstances where routine thoughts and conceptions of 'normal' practice are radically disturbed, this chapter investigates the views of a self-selecting sample of male amateur and semi-professional football players (current and former) towards the child sexual abuse scandal that rocked British football in 2016. By exploring how agents make sense of what has been uncovered, this chapter raises polarising views that are indicative of a culture in the process of transition. Focusing on the social environment that surrounds men's football, it illustrates how historically embedded hyper-masculine cultures can encourage the reproduction of the 'archetypical' strong, silent male; a situation that is thought to discourage the public disclosure of sexual abuse. In contrast, this chapter also draws attention to the process of cultural change. Contemporary football cultures are thought by some to provide an inclusive, supportive environment that welcomes multiple masculinities and encourages all players to share personal problems.

### **The Week that Rocked Football**

In November 2016, former Bury and Sheffield United professional football player, Andy Woodward, waived his right to anonymity to reveal that when he was a youth player at Crewe Alexandra (aged 11-15 years) he was sexually abused by convicted paedophile and former coach, Barry Bennell. Others too came forward to report that Bennell had abused them when they were youth players. As more former professionals found the courage to speak out about their own experiences within football, it was soon clear that there were many other alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse within the 'beautiful' game. Recognising the potential scale of historical abuse in football and the need for victims to seek professional help, the National Society for

the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPPC) set up a specific helpline that football players could call to receive support, advice and counselling. Within the first two hours of opening on November 23, 2016 the line had received 50 calls and within the first three days helpline staff made over 60 referrals to the police or social services. By the close of its first week over 860 calls had been taken and 83 potential suspects had been identified in connection with historical sexual abuse in football, impacting 98 football clubs and forcing 21 police forces across the country to launch investigations into historical sexual abuse claims in football.

The sense of shock and scandal that was portrayed through the media in relation to the sexual abuse revelations in football is symptomatic of attitudes towards sexual abuse more generally. For instance, when men are discussed in relation to sexual abuse they are largely cast in the role of perpetrator, but rarely the victim (Alaggia & Millington, 2008; Fasting, Brakenridge & Walseth, 2002; Hunter, 1990; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). This has also been true of academic discourse, where investigations into sexual abuse in masculine cultures is marginalized (Dorahy & Clearwater, 2012). In a growing field of exploration, scholars are keen to point out that boys and men are, and always have been victims of sexual abuse, though they concede that males do tend to disclose details at significantly lower rates than females throughout the life course (O'Leary, Easton and Gould, 2017). This is often attributed to gendered socialisation, which leads men to experience the world from a different self and world-view to that of women (Spiegel, 2003; Sepler, 1990).

Given the circumstances described above, this chapter argues in line with Mike Hartill (2009) that it seems reasonable, if not urgent, to extend the scope of research into sexual abuse in order to consider the social environment that surrounds male sports. In what follows, I draw on the results of a qualitative survey that was conducted in January 2017 to gather reactions from current and former male amateur / semi-professional football players (some of whom are now parents to child football players) to the publicised scandal. One hundred and fifty male participants responded to the survey, which was publicised through a university press release, local print and online media, and was further endorsed by ITV News in North East England, featuring a short-televised interview with the author on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 2017. The survey aimed

to explore how agents (those with direct experience of men's football cultures) make sense of what has been uncovered and to canvass their considered thoughts on the future of football cultures. For context, all participants gave brief details of their previous experience in the game. In what follows direct quotes from participants are presented to add credibility to those themes presented below.

### **Tough to Digest**

"It's tough to digest" said a twenty-year-old amateur football player, "how can people do this to young kids and taint the sport that I love?" Disbelief was one of the responses to the scandal that dominated football in early 2017, though it was not the most common reaction. In fact, 75 percent of participants were unsurprised to hear that child sexual abuse occurs within the confines of football culture. Child sexual abuse was thought by most to be an uncommon practice, though all conceded that it was possible for perpetrators to use football as a vehicle to commit sexual abuse crimes without raising suspicion. After all, "an interest in football coaching is perfectly normal for men" writes a football coach in his forties, "that's why some men with sinister intentions can slip through the net." A manager of a men's football team in his late twenties added:

I believe sport echoes society. Abuse is evident in society and we should expect to see it in football as sickening as it is. Football is generally about social good, but paedophiles use this to do what they want.

In the 2000 book *The Dome of Silence: Sexual Harassment in Sport*, Sandra Kirby and colleagues make a similar argument to that raised above. When discussing the endemic nature of child sexual abuse as a feature of society, the authors imply that abuse is supported by its presence within the practice of sport, which enables perpetrators to hide behind a veneer of moral goodness. But, just like the participant above, others too were aware that football (and other sports for that matter) was not the only institution that has been infiltrated by perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Care homes (Corby, 2000), schools, scouts and hospitals (Etherington, 2000) and the Catholic Church (Loseke, 2003) have all been implicated, and participants drew on this knowledge to make sense of abuse in football. "If it can happen at church, it can happen anywhere", reported a fifty-three year old former semi-professional player. Another football player in his early twenties reported, "you will find paedophile's

wherever children spend their leisure time”, a sentiment that was reflected further by an amateur player in his late twenties who wrote:

Sexual predators are exactly that. They'll find a way to work with kids whatever it takes. Football is just one avenue. It won't be the only sport effected. It's just a matter of time before other sports are implicated. So, no surprise but disgusted all the same.

When considered holistically, the sexual abuse of boys within society is, in a statistical sense, less prevalent than the sexual abuse of girls. However, on closer examination scholars such as Matthew Mendel (1995), Elisa Romano and Rayleen De Luca (2001) and Anthony Baker and Sylvia Duncan (1985) have revealed that sport heightens the relative risk of abuse for boys when compared to girls. This, they assert, is not only because boys enter the field in larger number, but also because boys are more likely than girls to be abused outside of the home setting. Moreover, abusers of boys are twice as likely to repeat the offence, report David Finkelhor and colleagues, writing in 1986. The authors point out, “offenders against boys tend to start their offending earlier, to be more exclusively paedophilic in their sexual interests, and to have more of an ideological commitment to their lifestyle” (p.134).

Indeed within the 2018 book *Damaged*, former professional football player and England international Paul Stewart provides his account of how youth coach and football scout, Frank Roper, abused him over a period of five years. Stewart recalls how Roper would groom family members, especially his mother, by providing free kit for her boys; providing extra tuition for Paul; befriending Paul's bothers (though never acting inappropriately towards them), and organising football tours in order to take Paul away from the safety of his family home. Roper's commitment to the abuser lifestyle was total.

Similarly, National Hockey League (NHL) Ice Hockey star, Sheldon Kennedy reported a similar set of circumstances in his 2006 book, *Why I Didn't Say Anything*. In Kennedy words, his abuser, 1989 Hockey News 'man of the year' Graham James, “rarely spoke to the fathers...he wanted to find boys who needed a father figure, boys who were confused and unsure of their masculinity and need a man that they could confide in” (p.79). Of course, the sexual abuse of athletes is not exclusive to young

males. Sport also provides an arena for the sexual abuse of girls and women as demonstrated in the recent USA Gymnastics abuse scandal where team doctor, Larry Nassar was convicted in 2018 of the abuse of more than 140 female athletes during the course of his career (Graham, 2018).

Wherever child sexual abuse occurs, it does so because of an abuse of power between an adult (often in a position of authority within an insulated microcosm) and a child. Whilst there are some obvious similarities across sports, survey participants were keen to point out that the strict, masculine, hierarchical systems within youth football could be conducive to sustain an environment in which perpetrators continue to exist. A forty-three year old participant explains: “in too many instances, too much power is afforded to leaders of youth sport. They’re untouchable and often unaccountable when it comes to how football clubs are ran.”

Many participants touched on the same issue, but they did so from different angles. For example, a thirty-two year old amateur player and children’s football coach said “The issue is with the parents.” He continued, “Parents are desperate for their kids to succeed and it’s this that potentially exposes kids as potential victims.” For others it was the unintentional consequences of what one participant referred to as “unusual cultural dynamics” between adults and children within football spaces that makes it possible for abuse to take place. The point he makes is this. “Adult cultures are imposed too soon on young people through sport.” This was mentioned by multiple participants and can be typified using the following quotation from a thirty-eight year old male who reflected on his experience in football:

No abuse took place within my youth football team but when I look back, I can see that the culture was wrong...On a football tour to Germany when I was twelve, the adults in charge of our trip (good people and well meaning, overall) allowed us all to watch porn for a few minutes (it belonged to the long distance bus driver) on the coach. It was only a few minutes but I can remember feeling uncomfortable then. Most of the team lapped it up, making crude comments etc... I think perspective goes out of the window for some adults... We (kids at the time) knew the adults really well and thought of them as mates. I think they thought the same and would talk to us like we were men. Swearing, talking about women and watching porn at 12!

The participant above is certain that no abuse took place, but let's take a closer look. According to the NSPPC website, accessed in 2018, the definition of child sexual abuse stretches beyond physical touching of the abused by the abuser. Non-contact abuse is also recognised. This covers acts of grooming or exploitation, including children being encouraged to watch or hear sexual acts or not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to the sexual activities of others.

On such grounds, and whilst the situation took place nearly thirty years ago, the circumstances that the participant above describes share characteristics with the widely used definition of child sexual abuse in 2018. The key issue to focus attention on here is the cultural relationship that exists between men and boys in youth sport. The categories of boys and men are blurred because boys socialise, train, compete and sometimes play with men (Brackenridge, 2001). They become mini adults in many respects, vying to impress managers, trainers, scouts, and other men in various roles at the club. To paraphrase Varda Burstyn in the 1999 book *The Rites of Men*, organised male sport is and always has been about 'making men'. Historically speaking, male sport follows a recipe that extenuates an intensified caricature of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), a position that I will return to shortly.

### **A Game of Two Halves**

When asked to consider what impact, if any, that dressing room cultures could have on players coming forward to reveal details of child sexual abuse, the sample was divided. Forty-eight percent were of the opinion that players would be unlikely to reveal details of abuse whilst still registered as active players, whilst 52 percent reversed this argument to emphasise modern football spaces as supportive environments that will help victims to feel comfortable enough to disclose personal issues into the future. Both viewpoints, in turn, are explored below.

### ***Strong and Silent***

Those arguing for the former position agree with scholars Sylvie Parent and Joelle Brannon (2012) who state that in the context of sport there is a high risk that victims will suffer and cope in silence with memories of child sexual abuse. When attempting to explain why this trend appears to be enduring within football cultures, participants emphasised expected “norms of behaviour”, highlighting them as factors that are likely to contribute to a prohibitive environment for the disclosure of abuse.

One football player, aged twenty-five, argued that “football produces the strong silent type...a type of man that can manage his own affairs, fight his own battles, doesn’t need help.” Responses like this were typical amongst the 48 percent who thought players would be unlikely to reveal details of abuse whilst still registered as active players. Furthermore, the thoughts of those participants are similar to research produced by Matthew Mendel over twenty years ago. In his 1995 book *The Male Survivor*, Mendel argues that in archetypal masculine based cultures (male sport, being a prime example) demand characteristics such as being powerful, active and competent are expected of men. Mendel’s work echoes the findings of sport historians who remind us that football provides a historical example of masculinity that is demonstrated by physicality, strength and power (Dunning, 1986).

Participants recognised similar qualities, but perhaps more significantly they also recognise characteristics that ‘football men’ ought not to possess. “Footballers need to be tough, there’s no room for weakness” said one participant in his forties. Another agreed, saying “any acknowledgement of abuse is ammunition for rival players and football fans.” The insinuation by both participants is that players should avoid any predicament that situates the agent as passive, helpless or victimised. Such characteristics, in the minds of these participants, are likely to be considered as a form of ‘weakness’ and are to be judged via the process of lateral surveillance relating to the implicit understanding of ‘acceptable’ codes of practice from fans, players, managers and coaches. The extent of surveillance is acknowledged by the following participant (amateur football player, aged 24) who makes reference to an incident involving the social commentary of a famous sports pundit, in November 2016.

When you’re a player, it’s important not to lose face in front of team mates and opponents. If you do, then it’s pounced upon... There’s a fear of how this testosterone filled culture will react if you say that you’ve been abused. A key



example is that they might get the Eric Bristow comment like – why did you not just knock him out? What’s wrong with you?

In his comment above, the amateur football player is referring to the much publicised views of former darts champion, Eric Bristow who, on hearing the breaking story of historical child sexual abuse in football, labelled abused football players ‘wimps’. He wrote on the micro blogging site, Twitter “if some football coach had been touching me when I was a kid, as I got older I would have went back and sorted that poof out.” He went on to say “sorry meant peado not poof”, and continued... “everyone working on TV is frightened to say the truth because they are frightened of losing their jobs.” Soon after such comments, Bristow was sacked from his role as a sport pundit on Sky TV. (*The Telegraph*, 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2016).

Notwithstanding the swift sacking of Bristow by Sky, and according to participants, it would be naïve to dismiss such comments as the thoughts of a solitary man whose Neanderthal views are stuck in the past. For instance, comments from a minority of participants hinted that they too, whilst being sympathetic towards victims, were surprised that sexual abuse can ‘happen to’ football players who are considered to be ‘tough’. A thirty-three year old amateur player and Spurs fan said:

You don’t expect this kind of thing to happen to tough men like Paul Stewart. It’s hard for me to think that hard players like Stewart can stay quiet about this for so many years, allowing the guy [the perpetrator] to get away with it. In a masculine driven team sport it’s just something you wouldn’t expect a footballer to put up with.

The expectation placed on football players (as exemplified in the comment above) is not uncommon. Since football was professionalised in 1888 it has been known as a tough game for working class men who exemplify values of ‘masculinity’ and have had bestowed upon them the duty of defending the locality, town, city, region, or country from other tough men (Taylor, 2008; Dixon, 2013). Even before this period, scholars have long argued that competitive teams sport were linked to the Muscular Christianity movement at the end of the nineteenth century amidst hysteria that men were ‘going soft’ (Gaston et al, 2017). Likewise, in the 2017 book *Sport, Theory and Social Problems*, Eric Anderson and Adam White situate the genesis of men’s team sports

as the conspicuous societal antidote to perceptions of male softness, as men of the period set out to 'prove' their heterosexuality.

Focusing on football in the new millennium, Martin Roderick takes this one step further. Reporting on an ethnographic study with apprentice players, Roderick's 2007 book, *The Work of Professional Football*, reveals how young players are encouraged to develop the 'right attitude' in order to attain and then maintain a career in football. Masculine identities are constructed and reconstructed through general discourse as players learn how to survive and flourish in the game. Feeling the need to play through injury or to fit in with bravado is essential to survival, from boys playing in the school team to men playing for professional clubs. The punishment for deviation from cultural norms is to be "stigmatised as a poof", adds Roderick (p.43). By way of example and to substantiate his claims, Roderick provides verbatim extracts from an interview with a professional player, who was asked: how do managers react to those with a good attitude?

"They think it's fantastic... We have another player from another country and his attitude is any little niggle, 'that's it, I'm not playing'...everyone's attitude towards him is that he's a poof, he's... no heart... he's a fucking wuss" (p.46).

With this, Roderick reminds us that in the world of professional football, players are constantly under surveillance and that not agreeing with advice or choosing not to play hurt, may make them appear disrespectful and weak minded. Players are therefore encouraged to be 'masculine' at all times. They understand that anecdotal discussions between coaches, managers, players and physiotherapists are likely to play a role in career progression, stagnation or rejection. Given the competitive nature of recruitment, players do not wish to draw negative attention to themselves.

With reference to his experience of men's football, a participant and current semi-professional player in his early thirties writes: "many people in football will say that they are liberal but may not hold liberal views at heart". He continues "what people say in public and what they say in the dressing room or think in private are not always the same." In other words, this participant points out that views like Bristow's are not uncommon within football. Consequently, such views must remain a consideration for football players when disclosing personal information. A twenty-one year old amateur player reminds us "in the dressing room individuals are quick to exclude those that do

not fit in for whatever reason that this may be". Another player of similar age adds, "in football it's not manly to express feelings about certain topics". And a thirty-year-old amateur player admits, "if I'd been abused I can't imagine I'd ever confide in my football team even though they are a great bunch of lads. I think it goes back to how you're wired to think as a footballer."

### ***Dressing Down***

"The dressing room is a harsh environment" wrote a fifty-three year old former player, "I've seen many tough men turn to jelly after a dressing down off the manager and other players. It's not a place to show weakness. Back when I was playing, it would have been a difficult environment to admit that you had been sexually abused."

From the philosophical perspective of French social theorist and predominant intellectual, Pierre Bourdieu [1930-2002], the findings above are likely to be symptomatic of the inner workings of football's sub-cultural practice. To clarify, in his 1977 book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu asserts that within any given 'field' (at any particular time) there tend to be a set of ideas, rules, regularities and forms of authority that are likely to be accepted and upheld in practice. (by 'field', Bourdieu is referring to the context in which social interaction occurs, and in this chapter we locate action in the fields that intersect with football cultures).

Bourdieu draws on the theoretical construct, 'habitus', to explain how values and practices are internalised by members of specific cultural fields. As he explains it, habitus is a complex term that encompasses many things, but simply put, it can be defined as a system of dispositions (that is - lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action) that humans develop in response to the cultural and physical environment that they find themselves in. Simplified even further, our habitus is what makes us who we are and it effects our capacity to make decisions in this way or that. It's principally influenced by previous cultural teaching and in football cultures, players are taught how to be 'real men'.

Learning to be men, as Andrew Parker and Andrew Manley (2016) explain, entails the adoption of 'manly qualities' such as bravery and emotional toughness. Paul Kivel (1999) adds to this when he suggests that heterosexual masculinity has

long dictated that 'real men' should be tough, aggressive, courageous and able to withstand pain. Thus, for boys that are set to spend most recreational time in an all-male environment, football culture can heighten views relating to what ought to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for men (Spiegel, 2003). This is particularly the case during adolescence as children and adult men occupy the same space as peers. For the first time, youths and adults foster the role of equals as boy's model behaviour in their desire to become 'football men' (Brackenridge, 2001; Burstyn, 1999). Participants were aware that young players are influenced by the men that they spend most time with; and moreover, they imply that the teachings that youth players will receive (overt or implicit) is likely to impact negatively on the disclosure of sexual abuse. For example, a twenty-eight year old amateur player writes:

I'm not saying that people involved in football are bad people, it's just that homophobic comments are ingrained in how footballers talk to each other. It's seen as a laugh to call someone gay, and it's always as a put-down. I would say that footballers who have been sexually abused in the past know how football works and they don't want to put themselves up for ridicule. They probably think there's nothing to gain in coming forward.

'Banter', otherwise known as a light-hearted form of dark humour, characterised by Andrew Parker and Andrew Manley (2016) as containing 'shop floor language' is central to lives within football cultures. It involves the adoption of sexually explicit and derogatory vocabulary which is characterised by razor sharp wit and heterosexual promiscuity (Parker, 2006). Indeed, heterosexual masculinity is thought to be revered within football cultures with any deviation from group norms routinely punished with slurs of weakness, homosexuality or femininity (Rowe & McKay, 1999; Robertson, 2003).

Eric Anderson (2008) refers to the heightened cultural significance of homophobia as 'homohysteria'. He argues that, historically speaking, masculinity and homosexuality have long been viewed as incompatible. This is particularly the case in male sport sub-cultures, where men have been known to avoid any action that might be perceived as 'gay'. In other words, the demonstration of heterosexuality has long held a predominant role in sport sub-cultures where it has been used as a tool for agents to gain affirmation from the group. Anderson recounts how homophobia can

be used as a weapon to stratify men who are indifferent to dominant 'norms'. Indeed, by using homophobic language to stigmatise others, agents can promote their own hetero-masculine standards. Here, it is worth noting that athletes are known to be hyper-conformers to subcultural 'norms' (Coakley, 2009) and this is thought to contribute to the maintenance of heterosexual masculinity within male sport.

With this general principle in mind, participants have implied that fear of losing credibility or 'cultural capital' (to borrow another term from Bourdieu) within this largely masculine environment is likely to drive continued silence in this regard. For instance, a player in his late twenties writes: "homophobic overtones could mean that the stigma attached to anything that might be considered 'gay' could lead to silence on abuse". Sharing this logic another participant hypothesised that sexual abuse victims may be "fearful for their future involvement in the team, or even for their careers and social life beyond football."

At first glance this might seem to be an overreaction, though recent evidence from sport media employers would imply that the anecdotal forecast above may hold elements of truth. For example, whilst the media are by in large supportive of victims of historical sexual abuse in football, a discussion tabled in the House of Lords on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 2016 revealed how disclosure of child sexual abuse can result in suspension of employment (Hansard, 2016). Lord Goddard of Stockport told of his meeting with ex-professional football player David White, who scored the first Premier League goal for Manchester City, played over 400 games in his professional career and won an England cap. White had spoken at length with Lord Goddard to reveal that when he was ten years old he had been abused by a coach when his team went to Spain for a week to bond. Goddard reports how, since this incident, White has suffered "darkness and despair and has suffered in silence." But ever since revealing details to the authorities, his employment as a radio expert was suspended. Lord Goddard explains, "he had a phone call from the BBC saying that it no longer wanted his football-commentating services until this matter was dealt with."

If employment can be suspended after a football career, as it is in the case above, participants were certain that disclosure during a career would have negative consequences for the victim of child sexual abuse too. One participant in his late thirties asks "why are there no gay football players? And concludes, "I rest my case. If

gay players can't speak out, then you can understand why abused athletes won't either." At this time, there is only one openly gay football player playing any form of professional football, anywhere in the world - Anton Hysen (semi-professional player in Sweden). Former professional football player, Justin Fashanu was the first, openly gay professional football player, 'coming out' in 1990. Fashanu faced much bigotry from teammates, fans and the media. He committed suicide in 1998 (see Cleland et al, 2018).

According to Martin Dorahy and Ken Clearwater (2012), the logic expressed by the participant above is common amongst sexual abuse victims who weigh up the potential pros and cons of disclosure based on their understanding of the social environment. In football cultures, participants have explained that the risk of exclusion, ridicule or simply not being believed could be an overwhelming and prohibiting factor. A current football player in his mid-twenties explains:

... The dressing room is only part of it. It is what directors, owners and scouts will think if someone comes forward. They will question whether they want that person who is affected by abuse in the team – potentially highlighting them as weak, not manly and at risk of being too sensitive.

The thoughts of this participant are similar to the thoughts of the formerly abused NHL player Sheldon Kennedy, who, in his 2006 book *Why I Didn't Say Anything*, recalls a conversation that he had with his wife about the abuse he suffered. "I told Jana I was afraid that no one would believe me if I accused Graham [his abuser] of sexual abuse... People would say that I was gay and wanted to have sex with Graham. I told her that I was afraid that my career would be ruined and I would lose my friends." Kennedy's wife pointed out that his arguments were illogical, but let's consider this further.

## **Hazing**

"Even if you're brave enough to make an allegation who's to say you'd be believed?" said a twenty-five year old football player. "You'd be labelled a 'grass' as well as 'gay'." Another participant, aged twenty-seven added, "If you're an apprentice in a professional team there's no chance you're speaking out against an authority figure."

With this, he attached a URL to a newsprint story involving allegations of sexual abuse made by former professional football player George Blackstock. The media story revealed that when Blackstock was an apprentice football player at Stoke City (between 1986-89) he was assaulted by teammates as they held him down (aged 15) and inserted the finger of a goal keeper glove smothered in deep heat (a heat producing rub for muscular pain) into his rectum. He was also alleged to have been routinely scolded with a metal teapot after making drinks for the first team. All of the accused and the team manager (Mick Mills, former England International Captain) deny any knowledge of the alleged incidents (Herbert, 2013).

Factual or not this behaviour, widely known as hazing, is thought to be an enduring part of the initiation into the professional game (Parker & Manley, 2016). In an institutional context such as this, Michael Kimmel (1994) has argued that homophobia becomes masculinity. He means that homosexualising behaviours can be used as an effective tool to humiliate and effeminize new recruits in hazing rituals. Sandra Kirby and Glen Wintrup (2002) explain that hazing rituals are not only a test of a recruit's masculinity but also of their readiness to accept a set of power structures. The idea being that homosexual acts are thought so despicable that a man's willingness to do them might signal devotion to the team. Alternatively, if enforced on the individual, and, if they handle the punishment by adhering to a code of silence, they can gain the respect of teammates.

In his 2018 autobiography *Old too Soon, Smart too late*, ex-professional football player Kieron Dyer reveals how the cultures that young apprentices have had to endure across time can be daunting. He recalls an incident that occurred in the 1990s after he had outperformed a senior professional in training. The senior professional approached him in the dressing room and started straining. Dyer reveals, "he splattered excrement all over the floor. He pointed at me 'clean that up you little shit', he said... I thought to myself, so that's how the new school was going to be." (p.32).

In the 1990s such practices were commonplace, and whilst Dyer admits that the practice is waning in professional football, he offers his thoughts regarding the longevity of such practices. He writes, "If young players are taught to behave like animals by senior professionals, if those kinds of actions are tolerated and encouraged by the system" then it should be no surprise that cultural trend will continue with hazing

practices focusing on demeaning behaviour as a rite of passage (p.33). At its worst there have been reported instances of anal rape, usually with objects (Finkkel, 2002). More common examples include 'games', for example, that require participants to masturbate and ejaculate on a cracker. The last person to ejaculate is made, or agrees, to eat it (Anderson, 2005).

Knowledge of the recent history of such hazing practices and the historical homo-hysteria that is known to feature within football cultures, have led some participants to conclude that football players will be discouraged from disclosing details of child sexual abuse. They have highlighted that a dichotomy exists between perceptions of masculinity and homosexuality. The assumption being that historical sexual abuse orchestrated by a male perpetrator can cause feelings of guilt in individuals who may believe that their actions have transgressed a social or moral code (Lee et al, 2001). According to Martin Dorahy (2010) disassociation with the abuse is a common strategy used by victims for managing feelings of shame and guilt.

### **Over the Rainbow**

"It's not the dark ages" wrote a nineteen year old football player and youth football coach, "society is much more compassionate when it comes to these things." When referring to 'these things' we can assume that our participant is talking about child sexual abuse, but it is unclear what other 'things' he is referring to. Another former amateur football player provides further clues. "Football does not exist outside of society" states the man in his late-forty's. He continues, "If society embraces the rainbow flag by openly supporting equal rights for LGBTQ communities, then we can presume many people in football think the same way as well. Views of people in football reflect the views of society."

We have heard this argument many times before. Sport does not exist in a vacuum. People designed it, and it is largely reflective of the dominant and prevailing values of any given time and space. The point that our participants make is that prevailing values within society have changed over the past twenty years, and this is inflected within football cultures too. Eric Anderson uses the British Social Attitudes survey to reveal this change in process. He illustrates how in 1987 sixty-four percent



of people thought that homosexuality was wrong. In 2006, this figure dropped to twenty-four percent and by 2013 it had significantly decreased again. Scholars, Ben Clements and Clive Field, writing in 2014, point out that this change is also reflective of wider social transformations and cite the 2002 adoption rights for same sex couples in the UK, and the legalisation of gay marriage in 2014. Ethnographic research on sport cultures in Southwest UK universities offers further support too. Studies involving soccer teams (Anderson & Rivers, 2010) and Rugby teams (Anderson & McGuire, 2010) demonstrate that players express pro-gay attitudes and most maintain friendships with openly gay men. Likewise, current and former players in my sample refer to what they perceive as the increasingly common internalisation of liberal attitudes. Football cultures, they assume, have moved away from the dark ages and into the liberal light. Fifty-two percent of participants thought that football cultures were no longer oppressive 'masculine' environments and believe that this would help people to speak out against abuse.

"Values of football supporters, players and the hierarchy are changing and the game is less masculine now than it has been at any time in the past" said a fifty-year-old former Football League player. He was making the point that football cultures are in a permeant state of flux, and consequently the practices and general principles of players are different to the situation he inherited when he began his football journey. He continues, "In the past players were reluctant to show emotions or express feelings that they think other members of the squad would view as weakness, but now things are different. People are more accepting of everything, really".

### ***Bear Pits and Beauty Parlours***

"I can see how it used to be impossible for boys to speak up about sexual abuse because football clubs were bear pits where no inch is given or conceded" wrote a former player in his fifties. Drawing on his experience as a practicing P.E teacher he continued, "kids still try to be macho but they do it in a different way. They are still 'men about town', but not afraid of their emotions. They are much more emotionally aware of their rights than my generation were and that's a good thing." Another participant who is a current manager of an under 15s team said, "The dressing room is like a beauty parlour" and he concedes "my players are really open with each other. They

talk about relationship breakdowns, hair, jewellery and stuff like this.” He poses the question “Imagine players doing this years ago without ridicule?” What the participants above (and many others too) are suggesting, is that attitudes towards ‘masculine’ practice within football cultures have changed. So, this begs the question what does masculinity look like in the twenty-first century and how can we make sense of it?

Hegemonic masculinity is perhaps the most used theoretical tool to explain the stratification of men in masculine cultures. Modified from the work of Italian sociologist and political activist Antonio Gramsci [1891-1937] it is used by Connell (1987; 2005) to explain intra-masculine domination. Connell argues that one form of masculinity is valued above all others and that men seek to gain social capital by adhering to the rules of this social construction. Masculine characteristics such as bravery, athletic prowess, alpha-male personality, aggression, assertiveness, heterosexuality etc. are prized as desirable for men to hold. As such, there are winners and losers in hegemonic masculine cultures, and those stratified at the bottom of this power hierarchy believe in the right of those at the top to rule or dominate. They tend not to dispute this position because they too believe in it. The important point is that rule is by common consent.

But, hegemonic masculinity is not a viable explanation for all researchers. Eric Anderson (2015) explains that the hegemonic masculinity model is reliant on cultures of homophobia, and that the conditions required for homophobia to exist are waning. He argues that the following three factors must coincide in order for homophobia to take effect in society (1) the mass cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant proportion of the population; (2) a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval towards homosexuality; (3) cultural disapproval of femininity in men or masculinity in women, as they are associated with homosexuality. As these features do not coincide in many western societies at this time, a new generation of scholars are turning to new conceptions of masculinities (see Adams, 2011; Jarvis, 2013).

Those participant extracts outlined at the head of this section are suggestive that new forms of masculinity are acceptable within football cultures, a position that has been supported by scholars, Ellis Cashmore and Jamie Cleland when writing of football fan cultures in 2012. In an online study that canvassed views from sample of

over 3000 football fans and industry professionals, the authors projected a picture of new aged football cultures. Ninety-three percent were relaxed about the presence of gay players and agreed that there was no place for homophobia in football.

As unlikely as it sounds (i.e. football fans defending homosexuality), the findings echo those of Eric Anderson in 2005. Anderson interviewed forty openly gay athletes and his findings, much like Cashmore and Cleland's, were counterintuitive to cultures that are heavily suspected of adhering to the principles of hegemonic masculinity. Not one of the gay athletes in his study had been assaulted physically or treated harshly by fans, players or members of the public after coming out. Anderson concluded that sport environments were not nearly as hostile as expected. In fact, in the current survey a number of participants noted that the practices portrayed by heterosexual players have directly challenged ideas of hegemonic masculinity. The assumption being that celebrity culture has played a role in encouraging football audiences to think beyond aged attitudes of masculinity. One man in his twenties had this to say:

Players like Beckham [David Beckham, former England International captain] have changed our sport...In our dressing room players have all sorts of products and grooming regimes after the match. No one cares about this stuff anymore because it's becoming normal so I don't think that players that have been abused have anything to worry about within the dressing room.

In his 2002 book, *Beckham*, Ellis Cashmore notes the importance of football stars (in this case, David Beckham) for challenging dominant masculine ideals. Beckhams polished appearance, taste in fashion (infamously wearing a sarong), and product advertising (i.e underwear, aftershave and various other beauty products) led the media to label him, footballs first 'metrosexual' (Metrosexual: meaning a heterosexual urban man who enjoys shopping, fashion, and or similar interests traditionally associated with homosexual men). With this in mind, the idea that victims of abuse would lose cultural capital amongst teammates for being 'de-masculinised' was not considered viable by 52 percent of those surveyed.

## Hegemony's Obituary

“Without hegemony there can be no hegemonic masculinity” write Edward Kian and colleagues in a 2015 article relating to the views of sports journalists on gay sportsmen (p.898). The point that the authors make is simple but effective. As cultural homophobia decreases, power is distributed more evenly between men and homosexuality is not stigmatised as much. Consequently the dominant practices of the past begin to look archaic as modern concepts of masculinity take hold. According to Steve Redhead in his 2017 Book *Theoretical Times*, as we come to terms with social transformations of the new millennium, the frantic search for theory is beginning all over again as scholars and social commentators begin to tear apart what they had once settled on as satisfactory explanations for all sorts of phenomena, and this includes the study of masculinities.

Zygmunt Bauman is one such theorist that has sought to explain cultural transitions by breaking away from established theoretical approaches. In Bauman's view, our world, its cultures, and our innermost concepts of meaning are becoming 'liquid-like'. He uses the term liquid modernity to describe the conditions of constant mobility and change in relationships and identities within contemporary society. In his 2007 book *Consuming Life*, Bauman contrasts what he considers as the liquid conditions of the contemporary world with a bygone era of solid modernity. He states that liquid modernity reflects a society “in which social forms can no longer, and are not expected to, keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast, for them to set” (p.1).

If we pause for one moment and think of this statement in terms of masculinities and the perceptions of our participants, Bauman has a point. Indirectly, 52 percent of my participants argue that hegemonic masculinity has a place in history, firmly positioned within the era of solid modernity, where structures and traditions were rigid and agents 'knew their place'. But, as one participant in his twenties emphasised when making reference to the open attitudes that are expressed by players in the football dressing room “the game has changed.” In Bauman's terms, those strong roots and heavy foundations that once characterised the 'solid' period are swiftly diluting and changing shape. Other scholars too agree that masculine cultures are lacking the stability or permanence that hegemonic masculinity demands.

“Changes to the modern environment have summoned conditions via which the ‘reflexive habitus’ has become increasingly common” write Ellis Cashmore and colleagues in the 2018 book, *Screen Society*. They make the point that uncertainty and change are becoming a familiar occurrence in most fields. And whilst social fields might look or feel stable to agents in the moment, they are in fact continuously in flux as people shape and react to emerging social circumstances, trends, political movements, business ideology, technological advancements, and many other issues besides. Just like a domino effect, small alterations reverberate throughout cultural fields, nudging agents in the direction of change and gathering momentum as the message spreads. Those out of line with the domino rally are left standing (effectively becoming relics of a pre-gone age) while others keep pace with the changing trends of our times.

With such circumstances in mind, Eric Anderson set out to articulate a new theoretical approach towards masculinities. His 2009 book *Inclusive Masculinity*, highlights the changing nature of masculinity from hegemonic to inclusive. He argues that attitudes towards homophobia are changing and can be evidenced by shifts in the law, processes of individualisation (where social institutions have less influence on collective moral values), and the development of online communications (which have the potential to give a collective voice to minority groups). Moreover, as homophobia decreases within society, homosexuality and femininity in men is not stigmatised as much and the narrow set of behaviours and practices that are valued by men continue to expand.

Recent studies conducted within sport cultures corroborate this position. For example, Jamie Cleland’s research in 2015 demonstrates that acceptance amongst football fans extends into online forums through the frequent contestation of homophobic posts in online discourse. Cleland’s research with colleagues in 2018 on the response of football fans to the ‘coming out’ of former German international player, Thomas Hitzlsperger were further demonstrative of the liberal attitudes of football fans. Likewise, research featuring the views of Premier League academy players in the UK (16-18 years) revealed that they were unconcerned about sharing and changing in a locker room with gay players, and espoused generally positive attitudes towards increased social and legal rights for sexual minorities (Magrath, Anderson & Roberts, 2015). According to Lindsey Gaston and colleagues, this is symptomatic of wider

trends that have shown that “young straight men reject homophobia; include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends; are physically tactile with other men; recognise bisexuality as a legitimate orientation; embrace activities once coded as feminine; and eschew violence and bullying” (2017, p.4).

### **All Things To All Men**

If masculinities are now ‘inclusive’, what is stopping current football players from speaking out? This question was contemplated by a participant in his thirties who wrote “Is it any wonder that all of those that have come forward so far [victims of sexual abuse] are ex-pros?” He continued “there must be millions of pros currently playing and you’re telling me that none of them have been abused?” Another ex-amateur player offered an explanation to the questions posed above. “It’s [football culture] trying to be all things to all men!” reported the man in his late forties. “Outwardly its supportive of players but internally it’s still very macho.” In the view of these participants, attitudes within the game are rife with contradiction which invariably makes it difficult for current professional players to find the courage to risk disclosing details of sexual abuse.

As players adjust to new masculinities and acknowledge inclusivity at surface level, some of the ‘old school’ concerns persist. In the manner that Martin Roderick (2006) has explained, football players remain cautious when raising their profile within the sport. Players are reminded by authorities and by each other that football is an ultra-competitive game where millions of talented young people compete for only hundreds of spaces as part of professional teams. As one participant puts it, “on the pitch players need to be high impact in the way that they can help the team. Off the pitch they need to be low maintenance.” The point that this forty-two year old football coach makes is that football players “need to make a decision on whether drawing an awareness to themselves as ‘damaged goods’ will effect their career.” The decision that players make will be heavily influenced by what they see and hear around them and on this point participants drew attention to two potential influencers that they had read about in the media.

They were aware of the fact that a landmark investigation into child protection, commissioned by the FA was left incomplete. A participant in his thirties wrote “The

FA pulled funding from a study into child abuse, so that's how serious they were!" The participant is referring to the fact that an FA commissioned project, which involved an audit of all professional FA affiliated clubs in 2001, was designed to take place over four years but was reduced to two due to funding issues. In a report produced in 2003 the research team from Brunel University disclosed how they were met with traditionally robust masculine attitudes and failure to accept the relevance of child protection to that level of the game. Gaining credibility within the field was deemed to be a considerable challenge too, especially where researchers were unable to present credentials as current or former football players. (Brackenridge, 2003).

They further explained how child protection officers were viewed as "jobsworths" by some officials who were fiercely protective of their autonomy. It should be noted however, that since the formation of the Child Protection in Sport Unit, formed by the NSPCC in 2001, and following policy implementations within football, lead researcher of the commissioned research, Professor Celia Brackenridge, told the *Guardian* newspaper in December 2016 "I am definitely not an apologist for the FA but I would argue that for the child protection work they do now, they are the leading sport governing body in the world" (Conn, 2016)

Notwithstanding this, participants speculated further about the institutional attitude towards sexual abuse based on media reports of the payment of 'hush money' to victims of child sexual abuse, such as the alleged £50,000 paid to former player Gary Johnson by Chelsea FC in an attempt to stifle allegations against Eddie Heath, a scout for the London club in 1970s (Cunningham, 2018). A twenty-eight year old participant reminds us that the "scandalous cover ups that have come to light recently from Chelsea and others are enough to show victims that football doesn't care about them." The insinuation made in this case is similar to that made by Dale and Alper in 2007 when discussing sexual abuse within the church. The authors refer to a code of silence that has taken place in the church to protect the institution. According to this participant and more like him, the same could be attributed to football and the protection of its many brands.

## **Conclusions**

The child sexual abuse scandal in professional football has raised numerous complex interconnected issues for those within the 'beautiful game' to contemplate. For the amateur and semi-professional players (current and former) whose views are centralised within this chapter, discussions of sexual abuse were intrinsically connected with discussions of masculinity. In the view of approximately half of the respondents, football cultures have been complicit in allowing a hegemonic masculine hierarchy to be developed within a sport that takes pride in creating tough men who are strong but silent and loyal to the implicit masculine codes that underpin the unwritten rules of the sport.

This, they assert, has provided the perfect smokescreen for historical child sexual abuse to have occurred in the past. Moreover, they suggest that the ingrained attitudes that are passed in an active and reciprocal manner through generations of 'football men', is likely to have an enduring impact on the decision of current football players towards the disclosure of child sexual abuse now and into the future. The thoughts of forty-eight percent of participants suggest that it is precisely because of masculine cultures in football and the heightened competition to 'make it', that the risk of disclosure is too high. Fear of ridicule and the stigma attached to victims of sexual abuse in this masculine environment is enough to stop players from disclosing such crimes whilst actively pursuing / playing out careers.

In stark contrast to this viewpoint, more than half of participants were optimistic that the woes of the past would and could never return to football. Moreover, they suggest (theoretically, at least) that the cultural environmental conditions in football were now in place to allow any person within the sport to disclose details of historical and current sexual abuse crimes without fear of negative consequence. Whilst participants briefly attributed this viewpoint to changes in law and policy (in relation to child protection in sport), they argued more forcefully that the widespread adoption of liberal values across society has, over time, slowly infiltrated into football cultures "changing them for the better." One of the consequences of the widespread adoption of liberal values, they suggest, has been the transformation of ones understanding of masculinity from dominant and repressive, to tolerant and inclusive.

Whilst we must be cautious not to overstate the findings of this small-scale study, the polarity of views tends to indicate, however tenuous, that football cultures



are in transition towards a more liberal and inclusive outlook. As one participant summarises “football has altered dramatically from being exclusive space for males to an inclusive environment that includes women and children and this has helped the culture to adapt to change.” Whilst acknowledging that football has become more inclusive, a football coach in his thirties adds a word of caution. “To the outside football is politically correct. It is against racism, sexism, homophobia etc. but behind closed doors it is not always the case.”

In an environment that emphasises liberal attitudes and political correctness (whether forced upon institutions or integrated voluntarily) modifications to attitudes and dispositions is inevitable. However, as in any culture that is undergoing cultural transformation, it is important to note that the generational attitudes that underpin masculine practice are not easily erased. This perspective is best expressed by football player in his twenties who describes processes of change in football as “a slow burner” but suggests that “slow changes in attitudes have sparked the courage in some to speak up.” He concludes, “What they [victims of child sexual abuse] have suffered is horrific, but it’s the fact that they feel confident to say it without fear of reprisal that is really positive. A clear sign that football has changed.”

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