The re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in organised sport

In this qualitative research, we use one year of participant observation and 12 in-depth interviews of the men on a highly-ranked University rugby team in England in order to nuance the theoretical understandings of the re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in organised sport. Data collected through this ethnographic investigation is used to inductively theorise the complex relationship between language, homosocial masculine relationships and organised sport. In examining the political, intentional and inadvertent effects of these men's discourses, we define and discuss the notion of *gay discourse* as a form of heteronormativity that is distinct from the well-established traditional use of homophobic discourse. Highlighting that homosexually-themed discourse is best understood as a continuum, we stress the importance of context in interpreting the meaning and effect of discourse when used in men's teamsport settings.

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Heteromasculinities and men's organised sporting participation

Although there are various purposes and outcomes of sporting participation for men in Western cultures, a consistent finding is that organised, competitive, teamsports serve as a deeply ingrained social institution principally organised around the political project of defining acceptable forms of heteromasculinity (Anderson 2005a; Messner 1992; Nauright and Chandler 1996). In a culture that distributes gender and sexuality privilege unequally, boys and men are compelled to associate with hegemonic dominance by partaking in sporting endeavours that construct their identities to align with dominant perspectives of heteromasculine embodiment and expression (Pronger 1990).

Multiple studies show that boys and men who most strictly adhere to orthodox understandings of heteromasculinity maintain high levels of what Anderson (2005a) calls *masculine capital*. Similar to Becker's human capital, where a person is socially esteemed because of skills or education, Anderson describes masculine capital as the degree of masculinity one maintains' in any given setting. Given the centrality of sport to Anglo-American conceptions of masculinity (Messner 1992; Pronger 1990), organised, competitive sport is a particularly effective setting to achieve high masculine capital.

In the United Kingdom, rugby is positioned alongside soccer as a leading definer of masculinity (Chandler 1996; Dunning and Sheard 1979), and many scholars have documented that men's rugby esteems and encourages bravado, risk taking and violence. For example, Dunning and Sheard (1979) examine how the early 'barbarians' of rugby believed that violence was an essential part of the game; a way of proving masculinity and courage. Furthermore, Collins (2009) describes

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how punching and kicking were regular occurrences in rugby matches until the
1990s, when television coverage meant that such violence would not go unseen.
Throughout its history, the linking of violence and masculinity has been central to
the sport of rugby (Chandler and Nauright 1996).

As well as esteeming violence and aggression, rugby privileges
heterosexuality and is implicated in the maintenance of patriarchy (Burton-Nelson
1994; Collins 2009). Accordingly, as part of their masculinity-making process, rugby
players often discursively stigmatise gay and/or feminine men (Dunning 1986; Muir and
Seitz 2004); and they consolidate their masculinity at the expense of women (Dunning
and Sheard 1979; Schacht 1996). Rugby has therefore existed as a microcosm of
society's gendered values, myths, and prejudices about men, actively constructing them
to exhibit, value and reproduce traditional, orthodox (misogynistic and homophobic)
notions of heteromasculinity (Anderson and McGuire 2010; Nauright and Chandler
1996). Accordingly, the performance and mobilisation of heteromasculine rugby
discourses is important toward heterosexualising the players, and elevating men over gay
men and all women.

Discourse and the power of homophobic language in sport

Although a multitude of social forces and institutional influences construct and regulate
hierarchies of gender and sexuality, language is central in their re/production (Butler
1997; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Kiesling 2007). Foucault (1979, 1990) argued that
discourse 'literally' creates the rules and identities by which we live, suggesting that

people inhabit the 'real world', but that their experience, thoughts and desires can only be understood through the discursive tools available at the time. The use of language therefore has a direct and material effect on peoples' subjectivities.

Butler (1990) has been the most prominent theorist for understanding the affect of discourse on sexualities in sport studies (Davidson 2006; Sykes 2006). She employs a Foucauldian understanding in order to theorise how hierarchies of sexuality and gender are culturally inscribed via discourse. Highlighting the interdependency of sexuality and gender, Butler (1990) uses psychoanalytic theory to conceptualise what she argues is an inherently homophobic construction of gendered identities. She accomplishes this by conceptualising a 'constitutive outside' (1993, p. 3) where gendered behaviours deemed socially unacceptable and/or undesirable are situated. For Butler, this necessarily includes same-sex desire. Her concept of performativity suggests that it is by violently and repeatedly repudiating these desires that one 'proves' they maintain an acceptable (heterosexual) gender—heteromasculinity.

Other scholars employ social constructionist frameworks to explicate the deleterious effects of homophobic discourse on homosexuality and the construction of heteromasculinity (Anderson 2002; Flowers and Buston 2001; Pronger 1990). They examine how discourse works in the regulation of masculinities (Burn 2000; Plummer 1999), and how homophobic discourse reflects and reproduces homophobia among its users (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Thurlow 2001).

Interviewing 32 openly gay athletes, Anderson (2002) finds that homophobic language is present in all types of men's sports. He theorises that because gay athletes do

not fit dominant notions of masculinity, intolerance is exacted in both explicit and covert ways. Here, homophobic discourse acts as a resistance toward the intrusion of gay subculture, serving to maintain orthodox masculinity and patriarchy of sport (Griffin 1998; Wolf Wendel, Toma and Morphew 2001).

Highlighting the operational aspects of homophobic discourse in discrimination, a number of scholars find that the primary way to subordinate a young male is to call him a 'fag', or accuse him of being gay—even if one does not believe he is (Davis 1990; Pascoe 2007). Accusing someone of homosexuality demonstrates one's heteromasculinity at the expense of another.

Pascoe (2007) provides a more nuanced perspective with her concept of 'fag discourse'. Here, the label 'fag' is continually hurled between boys as they jockey for masculine position among peers. Although gay boys are at most risk, Pascoe argues that all boys fear the 'spectre of the fag' (p. 71). This is because the epithet is used indiscriminately; even when there exists no 'suspicion' one is gay. The fag discourse occurs because the primary motive is to create a marginalised 'other' by which one's own heteromasculinity is consolidated (Butler 1990).

Pascoe (2007), however, maintains that many of those who use fag discourse do not intellectualise homophobia. Accordingly, Pascoe's work is somewhat different from other frameworks of discourse and homophobia. She also demonstrates that it is possible for fag discourse to lose its sexualised meaning, although the consequences of a fag discourse without homophobic sentiment remains relatively unexamined (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; Rasmussen 2004). Accordingly, in this ethnographic research, we

develop a grounded theory concerning the variability of homosexual discourse, as it relates to intent, sexual content, and effect[1]. We highlight that, as power and definitions shift, prejudice becomes covert, implicit and complex (Nylund 2007). However, as the acceptability of cultural homophobia decreases (an uneven social process) we suggest that it is homophobia and not homosexuality that is increasingly stigmatised (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010; McNair 2002; Weeks 2007). This means that the effect of homophobic discourse must also change, and new forms of homosexually-themed discourse will emerge.

Decreasing homophobia in organised sport

Despite decades of overt homophobia in sport, there is strong evidence that sporting homophobia, as determined through attitudinal positioning, has decreased in recent years; even if homophobic language remains rife in sport (Anderson 2008a; Harris and Clayton 2007; Southall et al. 2009). In 2005, Anderson used in-depth interviews with 68 gay athletes to document how men are increasingly emerging from their athletic closets and contesting orthodox masculinity. He shows that once athletes come out, they positively influence their sporting environments. More important, he shows athletes are coming out because of the gay-positive attitudes they assess among their peers.

We also highlight that, in December 2009, the Welsh rugby union player, Gareth Thomas, publicly declared his homosexuality, making him the first openly gay professional rugby player still playing in Britain. Although this prompted much public and media discussion about levels of homophobia in sport, the reaction to

Thomas was overwhelmingly supportive. Indeed, in an article in British newspaper, *The Times***, Thomas commented that two of his teammates, '...came in, patted me on the back and said, "We don't care. Why didn't you tell us before?"' (Walsh, 2009, p. 32).**

Of course, positive change in attitudes about sexuality in sport may not be unilateral (Anderson 2005b). Even if increasingly progressive sexual and gender attitudes are all found to predominate in many settings (Anderson 2009; Weeks 2007), this does not mean they predominate in all. However, research documenting high levels of homophobia is also contextually specific. Indeed, given the changing attitudes toward sexuality in youth cultures (Author et al forthcoming; Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2010; Savin Williams 2005), it is no longer possible to speak abstractly of the level of homophobia in sport—it varies within institutions, and across teams (Anderson 2005b).

It is not known, however, what happens to the discursive practices of men who have traditionally maintained high degrees of homophobia in settings where homophobia is no longer acceptable. Accordingly, in this research we seek to investigate the types of sexually-based language that emerge, the frequency with which they are used, and what the intent and function of this language is in re-producing and/or challenging homophobia in the sporting context.

Methods

Positing that the most productive method toward understanding the structure of power and gender relations in a masculine culture comes from a multi-method approach (Connell 1995; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995), we used both participant observation and in-depth interviews in this research. Participant observations provided naturalistic observations of behaviour and employment of language, while in-depth interviews provided rich data about participants' attitudes (Brewer 2002). This permits us to capture the complexities of the 32 men who participate as members of this university's elite rugby team.

The team, a fairly homogenous group of men aged 18–22 come from England, Scotland and Wales. All are students, and most come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds. All but one are white, and all identify as heterosexual. These demographics limit generalisations; however, our purpose is not to create generalisable findings about homosexually-themed language. Instead, we desire to interrogate the complexity of language as it relates to gender and sexuality. It is our desire to explicate a framework for understanding the diversity of homosexually-themed discourse in sporting settings (and beyond); not to show that this language is being used in all settings.

Data collection for this ethnographic research came by training one of the players (who has insider status) in data collection methods. He collected ten months of data during rugby training, socialisation and competition, partaking in all of the team's functions, practices, and competitions. While his teammates signed consent forms, care was taken not to make notes in their presence. Instead, all notes were left to immediate recall (Emerson et al. 1995). We believe that this approach helped teammembers forget

one of their teammates was conducting research and it certainly lead to less Hawthorne affect than having an academic in the setting. Furthermore, we encouraged researcher reflexivity and critically interrogated his interpretations.

We approached this research from both a constructivist and an interpretive perspective, suggesting that the informants co-created a reality through their shared experiences. Our aim in approaching this work is to incorporate what Altheide and Johnson (1994, p. 489) call 'validity-as-reflexive-accounting'. Here, researchers, the topic, and the sense-making process, interact to produce an exhaustive investigation into the social and cultural processes of the group under investigation. We therefore tried to capture the core meanings and contradictions of rugby players' experiences by examining their *actions* alongside and against their *language* (Katz 2004). Thus, after completion of the observations, we used twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews to corroborate and challenge the observational data.

Interviews also enabled interviewee's agency to point the research into new directions (Brewer 2002), as observations only reveal the 'what,' while interviews reveal the 'why.' Care was taken to interview men from throughout the stratification of abilities, as well as participants with varying degrees of core team membership (Ridgeway 1983). An attempt was also made to interview the coaches. However, one refused, citing that he was not interested in a study about masculinity. The other missed repeat appointments. After the fourth attempt, we ceased trying.

We transcribed and coded interviews using a constant comparative method (Bakerman and Gottman 1997), where emerging themes were organised into conceptual

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and thematic categories (Goetz and LeCompte 1981) and cross-checked by each researcher. We coded and compared a portion of the field notes and interview transcripts, until our coding of what categorical behaviours represented what codes concurred (Emerson et al. 1995). Finally, all ethical measures have been followed to assure anonymity.

Researcher Reflexivity

A body of methodological literature highlights the impact that a researcher can have on the research process (Gitlin 1994; Lawson 1985). In attempt to ameliorate this issue, reflexivity has become a central concern in qualitative research. As Willis (1978) argues, reflexivity provides the researcher with the conceptual tools to 'analyse the intersection of his own social paradigms with those of the people he wishes to understand' (p. 197). Accordingly, we explicitly examined our personal, emotional and theoretical influences that are implicated in any analysis of data, and it is through interrogating our own (various) attitudes to rugby, masculinity, homosexually-themed language, and youth culture that we maintain validity in this project. By allocating specific times and places to reflect on the data collection process; maintaining reflexive and critical positions throughout the analysis of data; and by all three authors independently coding data, the analysis presented here recognises and accounts for (as far as this is possible) the perspectives through which we view the social and sporting world.

Homophobic discourse and pro-gay perspectives

Grundlingh (1994, p. 197) describes rugby as the 'ultimate man-maker', inculcating characteristics of courage, self-control and stamina, alongside a deeply engrained culture of homophobia. However, we found no overt or intellectualised homophobia whatsoever among the athletes of this team, although we did find ostensible homophobia among the coaches whom used homophobic discourse in a manner consistent with older research on sport (Messner 1992). Observations found the coaches used the terms 'poof' and 'queer' with regular frequency, and malevolence.

'Don't be a fucking poof', a coach screams after Graham fails to properly complete a play. And when John tells his coach he should not practice because of an injury, the coach yells, 'For God's sake, what are you, gay?' Here, homophobia is used to maliciously stigmatise and subordinate Graham.

The athletes, however, despise their coaches' approach to masculinity building. Graham ardently complains about his coach, 'He calls players poofs when they are injured all the time, and he frequently says, "You're fucking gay", just to put a player down. I don't like it…I hate my coaches'. Tom agrees, 'It's their old-school way of doing it. It's not right, and I don't like it'.

Ben sees his coaches' language as archaic, 'That's their generation. But it doesn't work…It doesn't make me think, "Oh, no. I'm not a real man. I need to play harder". It just makes me think he's a fucking idiot'. Seth, too, is offended by his coach's homophobia. 'It's nasty. He should be fired. Period'.

However, none of the players intellectualise homophobia. The players do not use the same type of homophobic discourse they condemn their coaches for using. Conversely, the players value gay men. Highlighting the positive association they have with homosexuality, when asked if he would mind having an openly gay player on the team, Graham says, 'Maybe my coach would, but I wouldn't.' John agrees, 'I wouldn't give a shit. Not in the slightest.' Tim adds, 'Seriously, what kind of people do you think we are?'

These answers reflect the myriad of pro-gay responses to questions designed to probe for homophobia. When asked if he thought homosexuality is wrong, Alex says, 'No man. Of course not. I have gay friends'. Ian says, 'I'm for gay rights. I think most people are nowadays'. Observations also support these statements. For example, Seth has a gay roommate, Charlie, who occasionally attends nights out with the team. Charlie is always welcome, and players dance with and freaking him. Several players have gone to a gay pub with Charlie, too.

Flirting with gayness

Although these rugby players intellectually distance themselves from homophobia, they nonetheless manage to ironically proclaim their heterosexuality through acting gay. We call this *ironic heterosexual recuperation* (Author et al forthcoming). Here, heterosexual men joke about maintaining sexual desire for each other; parody stereotypes of gay men; and act out mock homosexual behaviours. For example, several of the players frequently greet each other with, 'Hey, gay boy'.

Interviews with the players show that these greetings are, without exception, interpreted as a sign of endearment. For example, when Graham is greeted this way, he smiles and points suggestively to his butt, playing-up to the suggestion that he is gay. Similarly, Mike greets Colin with, 'hey homo', and Colin replies, 'Yeah, sister. Good weekend?' By proclaiming homosexuality, these players ironically assert their own heterosexuality. Similar to Pascoe's fag discourse, use of the word 'gay' does not automatically connote gay identity. However, unlike fag discourse, this discursive production of heterosexuality is not used aggressively, or with intent to stigmatise someone (gay or straight). The participants perceive their greeting as innocuous, maintaining that there is no homophobic intent.

When asked about the 'gay' content of this banter, participants say it is decidedly not homophobic. They argue their pro-gay attitudes prevent this gay banter from being interpreted as such. Mike says, 'It's simply banter. We don't mean anything by it'. Colin adds:

> We do it as a laugh. I don't mean anything nasty. I say 'You're gay' all the time to my friends, but I don't mean it that way. Anyway, I normally give them a hug or something so they *know* I love them.

Alex clarifies that this type of gay banter is understood as indicative of close friendship. When asked if he would banter with someone on the team he disliked, he responds, 'No. Of course not! You only banter with those you like'. Accordingly, participants' assert that gay banter is used only among friends, a finding supported through multiple interviews and observations.

This does not absolve this type of language/behaviour of promoting a framework of homosexual stigma. However, the perniciousness of intent is absent—something that cannot be said with fag discourse and homophobic discourse.

Gay men often use homophobic words with irony within their communities. This is designed to expunge the stigma attached to once hurtful words. In doing this, gay men attempt to reclaim the words, reducing their capacity to wound. There are some similarities between these players usage of ironic heterosexual recuperation and gay men's usage as a form of reclamation (Bell and Healey 1992; Brontsema 2004). While these heterosexual ruby players may not belong to gay culture, the lack of stigmatising intent is noteworthy.

Simultaneously, however, this use of language is also part of a larger project of masculine bantering. It serves as a form of homosocial bonding between friends. It is not used as an expression of displeasure. However, the nature of power, its invisibility and its re/production, means that the issue of whether there is an element of homophobia in the 'text' remains important. Accordingly, we now interrogate the negative effects of using homosexually-themed language.

'That just doesn't make sense': The contested meanings of 'gay'

Although the players intellectualise their support for gay rights, they nonetheless use homosexually-themed discourse alongside ironic heterosexual recuperation. The most frequent use comes with the phrase, 'That's so gay'. For example, Graham fails a technical manoeuvre in practice and, out of frustration, shouts, 'That's so gay!'

This phrase is heard twice a day, on average. And while this is a regular occurrence, compared to the dozens of times a day it was heard in Anderson's (2005a) research we highlight its declining frequency. Plays are frequently missed, but gay discourse is only *occasionally* used. Players are more prone to swear 'fuck' or 'shit' to vent their displeasure, than to use homosexually-themed language.

It should also be noted that the use of the phrase 'that's so gay' is somewhat sporadic—observations document that three practices might go by without our researcher hearing the phrase, but at other times it might occur several times in just one practice.

Under interview, all players argue that they do not intend to be homophobic when they say, 'that's so gay'. Dan says, 'It doesn't mean gay in that sense. That would be wrong'. Colin agrees, 'I don't think of sexuality when I say it. Look, when I miss a shot, I don't think that my aim is actually gay. That just doesn't make sense'.

When participants are asked about how they think gay people might interpret their use of 'that's so gay' there is mixed response. Some do not use it in front of gay friends for fear of being misunderstood, others say they use it nonetheless. 'I don't mean anything by it', Jack says, 'So I don't see why anyone would be offended'. Seth defends his usage, arguing that both he and his gay roommate use it to describe things displeasing. 'Hey, if gay guys use it, you can't tell me that it's bad'. These differing perspectives highlight participants' attempts to mediate the complex terrain of sexual and gender discourse.

Apart from 'that's so gay', 'don't be gay' is also used (although less frequently). This phrase, heard once a week, is normally used between friends, normally as a way of

debating the merits of a standpoint. For example, Mike tries to persuade Colin about the quality of a television show. Colin responds, 'Don't be gay, man. That program's shit'. But when interviewed, Colin insists he does not mean this to insult about sexuality, but about Mike's standpoint. He does not desire to stigmatise gay men in the process. 'I was just expressing my dislike of the program. It has nothing to do with sexuality at all.'

However, effect counts too. It is not surprising that, in a culture of heteronormativity, people will argue that their own discourse is not homophobic. Still, calling these expressions 'homophobic' might be to mischaracterise their intent *and* effect. While these expressions privilege heterosexuality, and while some may be offended by them, there is a clear difference between this discourse and the homophobic discourse traditionally described in the literature (Burn 2000).

Failed gay discourse as homophobic discourse

In addition to using homophobic language against players, the coaches also try to relate to their players through gay banter with them. Their attempts, however, fail. Graham explains, 'Occasionally he uses it in what he thinks is good humour; to try to be one of the boys and banter with us about being gay. But it is just bad most of the time'. Alex agrees, 'No. They don't banter like we do. It's like they try to use our way of relating to each other, but then they twist it to insult'. He adds, 'It's really derogatory. It's more bullying than bantering'.

The players reject their coaches 'banter' for several reasons. Foremost, they perceive their coaches' intend to stigmatise by using this banter—making it a form of homophobic discourse. Seth says, 'Yeah, like I'll say to a mate, "you're gay", and that

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will bring us closer. But he does it differently. He says, "That guy's gay", and it's a totally different thing'. Graham adds, 'I hate it how they use homophobia to insult people'. Alex agrees, 'He [the Head Coach] talks about gay people in ugly and disparaging ways. You can't say you hate gay people and then say, "don't be gay", and have us take it in a joking manner. We know how he really thinks, and we don't like it'.

Highlighting their homophobia, when discussing the fact that Seth has a gay roommate, the coach remarks how 'fucking gross' it must be for Seth to see his roommate bring a guy home. While the players fail to confront their coach, they complain about him. John says, 'What an idiot'. Seth agrees, 'Who cares who he [the gay roommate] brings back.' From players' perspective, Graham says, the coaches' homophobia poisons their attempt at banter:

> Look, if you're cool with gays, people know you like gays, and you make that
> clear, then you have some freedom to joke around about who's gay, or to joke
> with friends that are gay. But if you're not cool with it, then you really should just
> shut the fuck up.

One can only banter about homosexuality if a person also espouses pro-gay attitudes, Graham says. From the players' perspective, gay banter is seen as a way of expressing comfort with homosexuality, and distancing oneself from explicit forms of homophobia, not reproducing homophobia. This is also found by Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007), who argue that, 'the new use of *gay* functions as an in-group marker, when talking to peers or when 'having fun', as opposed to being used when talking to adults, parents, or non-familiar acquaintances' (p. 164).

Reproducing frameworks of heterosexual privilege through gay discourse

Homophobic discourse, as traditionally conceived, has deleterious effects to both heterosexual and gay sporting men (Anderson 2002; Messner 1992). However, not all homosexually-themed language is equally damaging. To conceptualise the broad range of effects that discourse has, we categorise *gay discourse* as homosexually-themed language where there is no attempt to stigmatise. In this section, we argue that the phrases 'that's so gay' and 'don't be gay' are *less* damaging (and more complex) than homophobic discourse, and we explicate a continuum of homosexually-themed discourse to help understand the broad range of discourse.

There are several important points to consider when theorising the use of gay discourse. First, we are primarily concerned with theoretically mapping the terrain of language, its intent, meaning and purpose. Accordingly, it is important to recognise that the use of the word gay (as an expression of displeasure), without intent to reflect or transmit homophobia, is well documented in youth settings (Author citation; Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2010; Rasmussen 2004). However, we also argue that these men are not cognitive of the complexity of discourse and its effects. They fail to recognise the heteronormativity of 'that's so gay'. From their perspective it 'simply' serves as a cathartic expression of dissatisfaction, but it also reproduces privilege.

We add to this literature by viewing this phenomenon through Ogburn's (1950) lens of cultural lag. Cultural lag occurs when two interlinked social variables become dissociated because their meanings change at different rates. In this case, youth employ

this discourse without knowledge or consideration of what it once conveyed. That is, their use of homosexually-themed language lags behind their attitudinal positioning on homosexuality.

For these young men, the word 'gay' is a placeholder for their negative emotions—but it is not intended as an expression of homophobia. We therefore argue that it is unjustifiable to see 'that's so gay' as part of homophobic discourse. It continues to privilege heterosexuality—something we critique later—but it does not have the pernicious, deleterious effect that homophobic discourse has been shown to have (Author forthcoming; Rasmussen 2004).

Without being immersed in the data, it might be difficult for progressive academics to interpret this discourse according to this suggested framework. Indeed, much scholarship has used the analogy of racial discourse to analyse gay discourse, concluding that it is pernicious and homophobic Parker, 2001). This position articulates that because the term, 'That's so black' is not used because it would be considered racist and unacceptable, it is therefore equally homophobic to say, 'That's so gay'. Certainly there is credence to this argument, but we maintain that this analogy is faulty.

This race analogy fails because scholars do not allow for multiple meanings of the term 'that's so gay'. 'That's so black' would be racist (if ever used), because there is clearly just one meaning of 'black' in the phrase—it must refer to race. However, there is growing evidence that 'gay' in the equivalent phrase does not connote sexuality. This is true for young people in particular. Indeed, Lalor and Rendle-Short (2007), McCormack (2010) and Rasmussen (2004) all document that gay has multiple meanings; referring to

being happy, a sexual identity, and being passé/rubbish, and that young people are particularly skilled at differentiating the second and third meaning.

We do argue, however, that the contemporary usage of the phrase 'that's so gay' privileges heterosexuality, but it is not necessarily homophobic. Cultural lag theory contributes to our understanding of the use of this type of language because it too overly-simplistic to conceive of the broad range of homosexually-themed discourse as all (equally) homophobic. This is evidenced by the phrase 'You suck,' which meant different things to each author aged 16. To the older author it invoked a framework of sexual stigma. This is because he recalls the original insult (from the 1980s) in full: 'You suck dick.' Yet the other author (17 years younger), finds/found it a genderless and sexually neutral insult. Thus, this phrase invoked different emotions in each of us when we were 16, and it appears to have lost its sexual meaning entirely for youth today.

In order to explicate the affect of cultural lag on discourse, we call homosexually-themed discourse (where there is no intent to wound), *gay discourse* instead of homophobic discourse. It is our central thesis that because the effects of homosexually-themed discourse vary in their intensity and damage, it is necessary to distinguish them. To help explicate our categorisation, Figure 1 details how we classify language into homophobic and gay discourse. It should be noted however, that all of this language implicitly contributes to heteronormativity.

Insert Figure 1 Here

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Inductively theorising gay discourse

The multiple and varied use of the homosexually-themed language used by this rugby team is too complex and heterogeneous for it all to be classified under the rubric of homophobic discourse. Building on this data, and our experience researching homophobia in multiple sport settings (Author citations), we have inductively formulated a typology for the usage of homosexually-themed language.

We conceptualise two broad forms of homosexually-themed (socio-negative) language: *homophobic discourse* and *gay discourse*, as explicated in figure 1 above. Homophobic discourse is the form of homosexually-themed language that is well-established in the literature (Plummer 1999), the kind the coaches on this team use, and the type the primary author heard in his socialisation into sport (Author citation). We theorise that this type of discourse will dominate in cultures of high homophobia. Gay discourse, however, conceptualises homosexually-themed language where there is no intent to subordinate or marginalise another person; an effect brought about by a culture of decreased homophobia.

While we present two discrete categories of language, we highlight that the complexity and contextual specificity of discourse means that rather than being distinct classes, this language use is a continuum. Homosexually-themed language is far more complex than 'being homophobic,' or not (cf. Clayton and Harris 2008). When determining how to categorise a particular phrase, it is necessary to consider *how* it is said, as well as what one says. That is, the social context in which it is said, and the

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relationship between speaker and listener, are important, too. Accordingly, there is much slipperiness in how discourse is used, and the intent with which it is spoken.

In our classification, intent is the determining factor in which type of discourse is employed. That is, we identify language as part of homophobic discourse if *intended to wound*, regardless of whether it stigmatises sexuality (Burn 2000), or gender (Pascoe 2007); whether it is meant to 'make the man' (Plummer 1999), or just improve performance (Anderson 2005a); what counts is that there is a desire to subordinate another person with its usage.

This intent to wound is important, because it affects both the manner in which discourse is used, and how it is received. However, we recognise that the perception of prejudice in interaction is as important as the intent of the speaker. As Brontsema (2004 p. 11) writes, 'intent alone cannot control the fate of a word'. In other words, discourse can still have negative impact even if this is not the intent. However, since scholars document that harmful intent exacerbates the negative effect of pernicious discourse (Plummer 1999; Thurlow 2001), it is logical to argue that the intent to wound is a determining factor in the effect discourse has.

There is yet a further reason for a more nuanced perspective of homosexually-themed discourse. Consider, for example, the espousal of pro-gay attitudes. It would be erroneous to suggest that a proclamation gay support is convincing evidence of equality for homosexuality, because the claim alone does substantiate annulment from re/producing homophobic discourses in all temporal and spatial capacities. Similarly, to argue that this new form of discourse is universally homophobic is equally unconvincing;

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such an argument diminishes the progress that has been achieved concerning homophobia. Instead, it needs to be recognised that, in a culture that stigmatises overt homophobia, the impact of homosexually-themed discourse is different—because of the way it is *perceived*.

It is fundamental to distinguish homophobic discourse from the use of gay epithets when there is no intention to stigmatise any individual or group (Thurlow 2001). It is for this reason that we call this use of language *gay discourse*, highlighting that it is widely used to express displeasure not homophobia (Laler and Rendle-Short 2007; McCormack 2010; Savin Williams 2005). We are not alone in examining homosexually-themed language from a more complex standpoint. Rasmussen (2004, p. 304) comments, '…it does not *always* have to be read as homophobic. It can also be ironic, self-referential, habitual, or even deployed without a "knowing" relation to gayness as a sexual signifier'.

The importance of context

While scholarship on homophobic discourse captures its deleterious effect in the homophobic zeitgeist of the time it was written, cultural discourses concerning homosexuality are rapidly changing (Anderson 2009; McNair 2002; Weeks 2007). Accordingly, we argue that rigid theorising of homophobic discourse no longer maintains utility in understanding the social dynamics of this setting; it does not accurately describe

what is occurring on this particular rugby team, because it does not provide for full contextualisation.

Our argument is that the recent diminishment of cultural homophobia requires a fundamental reconsideration of the power and effect of gay discourse: Particularly important, the word 'gay' cites markedly different cultural norms in settings where homophobic discourse is absent or stigmatised (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2010). We acknowledge that for those socialised into hearing homophobia, it is easy to read homophobia in today's gay discourse. Yet these discourses do not invoke images of gay subordination and homophobia for younger men (Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007). It is poor sociology to apply one's academic framework to those one studies, without hearing their voices, meanings and narratives. Accordingly, we argue that scholars need to give central consideration to context when discussing the impact and effects of discourses of sexuality and gender.

Our argument places stronger onus researchers to investigate the intricacies of language, as it is understood by the informants (and not the researcher). It recognises that intent and social context are vital for understanding the meanings and effects of discourse—something which requires researcher reflexivity. We believe that this epistemological standpoint is crucial to properly understand how contemporary discourses structure relations and hierarchies within and between sexualities. Learning to view matters through informants' eyes is simply good sociology.

The argument for the contextualisation of language is not new. Davies (1999, p. 179) wrote, 'It is simply recognised that ethnographic knowledge is in part a product of

the social situation of ethnographers and that this must be acknowledged and its significance addressed during analysis'. Unfortunately, this framework does not always extend to how scholars conceptualise the effect of homosexual discourse. Our experience of presenting this data at conferences, and receiving previous rejections on this article, highlights that too many scholars assume *just one* valid interpretation of the effect of discourse. This is not consistent with interpretive sociology. As Brontsema (2004, p. 7) states, 'One usage does not disallow others; one group's pejorative use of a word does not prevent another group from using it in new contexts and with differing intentions'.

We do not deny that gay discourse might continue to reference homophobic norms for some people, in certain settings; and we certainly argue that this discourse continues to privilege heterosexuality. But to say these discourses are *necessarily* homophobic to *all* people seems to us peculiarly structuralist and unhelpful in documenting male youth culture. This is why we argue for the centrality of contextualisation: It examines the beliefs and attitudes of those who partake in gay discourse, accounting for the social context of the location. Thus, this framework does not position our informants *solely* as naïve actors who ignorantly re-inscribe homophobic norms.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined how members of a highly ranked English university rugby team reconstruct discourses of sexuality and their associated meanings through social interaction. Traditionally, rugby is an overtly masculinised sport, where homophobia and

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homophobic discourse predominate (Muir and Seitz 2004). Yet members of this team do not use homophobic pejoratives, and they intellectually verbalise their support for gay men. Indeed, men on this team consciously and critically disengage from the homophobic attitudes historically associated with the sport of rugby. We therefore explicate the complicated ways in which language reproduces, as well as challenges, these once-dominant understandings of masculinity and homosexuality. By categorising the use of homosexually themed discourse according to intent, we nuance the theory that underpins how sexual language in social settings might be understood.

We also document that these men bond through ironically proclaiming their homosexuality—something we call ironic heterosexual recuperation. Here, the intention is to ironically draw heterosexualising attention by demonstrating comfort with homosexuality, while also maintaining one's heterosexual identity. In this setting, homosocial bonding has appropriated homosexually-themed greetings, and mock gestures of homosexuality, as a way of demonstrating friendship and proving heterosexuality, without overt homophobia (cf. McCormack 2010).

However, this local meaning is likely to derive its codes through the exceptional degree of heterosexuality and heteromasculine capital that these men are accorded because of their teamsport affiliation (Anderson 2005a). Indeed, the masculine capital accorded to rugby players means that it is possible for them to conditionally transgress some of these heteromasculine norms in ways that might not be permissible for non-athletes (Harris and Clayton 2007). The heterosexualisation of rugby players that was developed through generations of homophobia and femphobia means that today's

participants have their masculine capital raised simply by being associated with rugby (Nauright and Chandler 1996). In more recent years, however, the cultural lag of homosexually-themed discourse has spread to men who are outside of the heteromasculinising institutional affiliation of sport. For example, in a separate study, the first author documents that gay and straight English high school boys (who are not athletes) also now bond together through this form of homosexually-themed banter (Author citation).

This research argues that in examining the use of gay banter, it is important to recognise that the intent and meaning of homosexually-themed discourse will be, in part, determined by the culture in which it is used. Given that Nauright and Chandler (1996) highlight that the culture of rugby varies according to national, cultural and ethnic contexts, it is important to consider how these impact on the social meanings of language use. Another central issue with regards to context is the difference in levels of homophobia of coaches and players. While we recognise that attitudes toward homosexuality are never homogenous (it is possible to find pro-gay coaches, for example), we emphasised that there was clear and substantive differences between players' language and banter and its interpretation, compared with the language and interpretation of their coaches' failed banter.

The use of gay discourse and banter is, however, still problematic. First, there are often no openly gay teammates who can judge the effect of this language. Accordingly, there is no way that these men can know that their discourse is not causing damage to

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their (potentially closeted) friends. Second, whatever the ostensible purpose of this banter, it also reproduces heteronormative assumptions about sexuality.

However, because gay discourse does not serve as a traditional, pernicious form of heterosexual weaponry (that intentionally inscribes a subjugated framework around gay identities), it should be considered differently to the old form of homophobic discourse. It is for these reasons that we postulate the need for a continuum of homosexually-themed language: A notion that recognises the historical situatedness of the subject and audience. Taking cultural lag into consideration, we highlight that the same phrase can be interpreted differently. Thus, intent, cultural context, and affect are all important in judging the relationship between homosexually themed language, and affect. With this purpose, we hope to open new ways of thinking about discourse—ways that do not render all gay discourse necessarily homophobic, nor its users passive re-inscribers of homophobic norms.

Footnote

1. We stress here that our focus on this article is on the use of gay discourse among men, and that the use of homosexually-themed language may be very different between women (cf. Griffin 1998).

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Figure 1: Homosexually-themed Language

"You're fucking gay"   "Don't be gay"   "Hey gay boy"

Increasing
Homophobia   —————————————————————————   Decreasing
                                                                                              Homophobia

Homophobic Discourse   **Gay Discourse**