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Glitter (Foot)ball Tactics: Negotiating Mainstream Gender Equality in Iceland

Abstract

The Icelandic football club Sterken is a grassroots LGBT football team whose motto is ‘role models, not stereotypes’. Sterken propose an enlarged range of possible gay identities, where playing football is just another channel through which young adults socialise and construct legitimate gay selves.

Sterken’s practices intersect and support Icelandic gender-mainstreaming. In this article we describe our ethnographic research that sought to understand the impact of this gender mainstreaming through a short immersion in the research field. We show how Sterken's motto of ‘role models, not stereotypes’ produced a tension between the club’s endeavours towards mainstreaming (e.g. ‘we are just like you’) and their activist identity politics. We conclude that Sterken's tactics constitute both a challenge to traditional hegemonic masculinities, while feeding back into an equality discourse that was deemed palatable to the mainstream, in the larger context of political discourse that lends itself toward (hetero)normative social structures.

INTRODUCTION

Football is a globally recognised symbol of masculinity. Yet there is a contradiction in contemporary theorising on the relationship between football and masculinity – and sport in general. For some, the context of sporting environments maintains a hierarchy of patriarchal dominance that retains men’s place within gender relationships (Curry 1991; Eng 2007; McDonald 2006; Messner 1992; Pronger 1999, 2000). However, in football, others have identified more fluid and complex forms of masculinity emerging on the pitch (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010; Anderson 2002, 2005; Caudwell 2011a; Spandler and McKeown, 2012); ones that appear at the intersection of the changing roles of men in a post-industrial society, the rise of a gender-blurring consumer culture, and the cultural significance of the women and gay rights movements. Football has shifted in line with these

broader social and cultural changes, while these changes themselves are part of a wider context and history of gender mainstreaming discourses in largely westernised countries. In this article, we take 'gender mainstreaming' to refer to a climate where discussions of gender (and gender equality) have become a highly visible and significant topics of politics, media and policy debate (Walby 2005). Discussions of gender issues have proliferated, creating the promise (although not necessarily the practice) of gender equality – and by implication less sexism and homophobia. The impact of these changes can be witnessed, for example, in the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, where commentators discussed the success of female Olympians from countries who had previously restricted women's participation. While this participation should be celebrated, what was missing from this was a reflection on the personal implications for these women (for example their experiences of sexism, regardless of equal opportunities to participate). Such gender mainstreaming and general discussion of equality thus provides an interesting context for exploring the changing nature of gender relations in an increasingly international and globalised context.

The impact of gender mainstreaming sits in contrast to typical notions of masculinity in football, where there has been a long history of research into the relationship between sport, sexism and homophobia. In education research, for instance, it has been suggested that young boys define their gender through competitive sporting contexts (Anderson 2005, 2011; Burgess, Edwards, and Skinner 2003; Connell 1995; Mac an Ghail 1994; McCormack and Anderson 2010a, 2010b). In relation to football, for example, Burgess, Edwards, and Skinner (2003) argue that the young boys they interviewed constructed a male 'norm' around concepts of toughness and violence, which was then demonstrated through their 'on pitch' performances.

There is also evidence to suggest that it is not only the student body that reinforce the relationship between football and masculinity; football masculinity is also honoured at an institutional level. Skelton (2000, 2001), for example, points towards a reinforcement of normative notions of masculinity in the way football is privileged in the schooling context. As her ethnographic research demonstrates, the dominance of footballing masculinity works to rearticulate structural inequalities, even when the school uses football as a strategy to overcome disadvantage. Moreover, this institutional acceptance of dominant notions of masculinity has been shown to contribute to exclusionary measures towards those deemed not 'fit-to-engage'. For example, Clark and Paechter (2007) show how playground football works through highly gendered dynamics that lead directly to girls' exclusion from the game; for instance in the way that conventional feminine qualities such as 'niceness' were positioned as opposed to the qualities needed to play well. In the same way, non-football playing boys were deemed both unpopular and feminine (see also Renold 1997; Swain 2000).

The studies we discuss above variously draw on a concept of hegemonic masculinity (albeit to different extents and in different ways). From the viewpoint of hegemonic masculinity, sport is a key site for men to practice culturally dominant and valued notions of what it means to be a man (Connell 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is often taken to mean being strong, competitive, dominating and invested in creating hierarchical relations with other men. Within the logic of hegemonic masculinity, everything about being a man is placed at the polar opposite of femininity. Like others, we read Connell (1995) and the notion of hegemonic masculinity in a Gramscian frame, meaning that masculinities contain within them the capacity to become rearticulated within the context of social change (Demetriou 2001; Spandler and McKeown 2012). For us, 'hegemony' is not an inherently fixed position or strict archetype. Instead we take an approach to hegemonic

masculinity that assumes what is dominant is likely to change, and is dynamic, depending on history, society and context. With gender mainstreaming, where discussions of gender issues are firmly placed on the political map, we might assume that notions of gender equality have become consensual and hegemonic – allowing the hierarchy to become potentially hidden.

Changes in dominant notions of masculinity are always relative to the historical structuring of gender relations; while individual men may practice a ‘softer’ masculinity, a wider hegemony is maintained at an institutional level. Thus, while the father may be the breadwinner, it is the patriarchal institution of the family that maintains his position of dominance; where the CEO and businessman may dominate in the boardroom, it is their position within a broader context of a capitalist system that favours having men in the top places (Connell 1995; Kimmel 1994). A commitment to gender equality might bring with it the promise that individual men can change; but it also has the potential to stifle political critique and resist genuine change, while doing little to challenge structures (in our examples above, of the family or of capitalism.)

As a competitive sport that involves physical strength and aggressivity, football has provided a prime space for men to perform, embody and celebrate dominant notions of masculinity. Football is deemed ‘not for girls’; therefore only ‘real’ men can succeed (Clark and Paechter 2007). This hierarchy of masculinities within football has been at the expense of women (Coddington 1997; Davies 1992; Gosling 2007; Woodhouse and Williams 1999). But football has also been shown to marginalise subordinate men, for example those that are excluded because of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Bryson 1987; Fielding-Lloyd and Meân 2011; McDonald 2006; Messner 1992; Vertinsky and Bale 2004; Welford 2011). Practices such as football

are thus able to hold cultural power and divide at every level of the social structure, thereby making football an important cultural site in which to study the role of gender exclusion and marginalisation.

The hegemonic masculinity we described above keeps few men at the top of the hierarchy. But even in relatively subordinate roles, men receive patriarchal dividends and can participate in forms of hegemonic masculinity, for example through supporting the team and cheering on those figures that are emblematic of manliness (Connell 1995; Day 1990; Dworkin and Messner 2002; Scraton et al. 1999; Williams 2003). We witness the homosocial performance of hegemonic masculinity in, for example, the 'wolf whistle' or 'cat call'; a group of men objectifies the woman, but also casts her in the crucial role of policing desire by demonstrating the heterosexual capital of that man to their male counterparts (Bird 1996; Connell 1995; Martin 2001). Similarly, being a football fan accrues the fan's hegemonic capital, and distances those fans from more subordinate forms of masculinity, such as effeminacy or gayness, which are stigmatised through the notorious chanting and homophobic abuse on and off the pitch (Armstrong and Giulianotti 2001; Caudwell 2011b; Crawford 2004; Giulianotti 2002; Giulianotti, Bonney, and Hepworth 1994). Hegemonic masculinity, as encapsulated by the footballer, is thus cemented by the inherently (homo)social team-based nature of football, where homosociality is key in defending and regulating the boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality (Flood 2008; Kimmel 1994; Martino 2000).

However, as we have already suggested, the culture of masculinity has been changing, so that it has become reasonable to suggest that we are seeing a shift to more diluted forms of masculinities.

These changes in the way hegemonic masculinity is culturally understood and articulated can be attributed in part to an increasing concern with and visibility of gender at the level of politics. In this context we might expect a hegemonic masculinity that is less founded on the logic of homophobia

that we describe above. It thus becomes interesting to explore contexts such as Iceland, which is currently deemed the most gender-equal country in the world (World Economic Forum, 2011ⁱ) and ranked 14 on the Human Development Index (United Nations 2011ⁱⁱ).

Influencing factors in Iceland's high rankings in the World Economic Forum and the Human Development Index include a gender balance in its parliament and its supportive policies in relation to child day-care and education (World Economic Forum, 2011). During the 1990s Iceland's economy underwent a sharp neoliberal turn, producing an economic boom. However this turn came to an abrupt end in 2008 with the banking crisis. Intersecting with this period of economic boom and bust, the gay population saw an increase in their rights, visibility and social capital through the gender mainstreaming policies defined at the level of government - an agenda pushed forward first by the then-ruling neoliberal conservatives. This shift towards visibility was further heightened when, during the economic down-turn, Iceland elected Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir: a lesbian woman, who upon entering government introduced gay marriage and banned strip clubs as part of her concerted efforts towards greater gender equality. Within this context of economic uncertainty and gender mainstreaming policies, it appears that masculinities in Iceland may be in flux. In an international context, Iceland has been much celebrated for being the 'feminist capital' of the world due to its gender positive policies; while for others there has been continued problematizing of Icelandic gender equality, with researchers pointing out a maintained hegemony of an individualised, misogynistic masculinity, especially in the finance and business sectors (see Thorvaldsdóttir 2011).

In this article we draw on our research with the gay-friendly Icelandic football team and sports association Sterken. Sterken's football players are mostly amateur (except for a few professional players). As a team they train twice a week and take part in international tournaments such as the

Gay Games. Sterken are well known in Iceland for their positive activism around gender and sexuality. They have close ties with the country's queer association Stolt, as well as various outreach activities that aim to recruit players with a wide range of sexual orientations onto the team.

Sterken pose a significant number of questions for academics interested in gender mainstreaming and its effects on homophobia and gender (in)equality. Sterken's ethos greatly increases the visibility of an enlarged range of identities for gay men, where football becomes the means through which these men can negotiate identity politics in the context of a supportive, accepting and outwardly anti-homophobic football culture. In this respect, gay football clubs have received attention in the literature; for example, Jones and McCarthy (2010) note how gay football clubs in the UK challenge older traditional notions of heterosexuality through positive action and inclusive non-aggressive behaviours. However, other authors have also suggested that gay football teams and sporting events create an ambivalent environment in relation to homophobia and normative gender roles. For example, many have identified the creative capacity of gay rights activism in relation to sport while also highlighting the limitations of (white, middle class) identity politics located in otherwise neoliberal, homonormative contexts (for example, Elling, De Knop, and Knoppers 2003; Davidson 2006; Duggan 2003; Messner 1989; Pronger 2000).

The aim of our article is to show how the politics of gender mainstreaming intersect with certain neoliberal constructs of individualism to create a doubled articulation in the ways the men in Sterken present their gender identity. In the context of Sterken's football masculinities, we ask: What is the role of football and its ties to hegemonic masculinity, conceived broadly as homophobic and misogynistic? In what ways might this masculinity articulate itself in homocentric and gender mainstream contexts? And, what are the implications of gender mainstreaming for how hegemonic

masculinity is challenged and rearticulated? Below we discuss our research methods, and identify the metaphor of 'glitterball tactics' as an analytical device. We then apply this concept to our data. We first show how, despite their position outside mainstream notions of footballing masculinities, the men in Sterken were able to maintain an appearance of 'appropriate' masculinity. However, we also note how this was doubled by these men's engagement in gender activism. In the final part of our analysis we show the unintended consequences of this articulation, in that Sterken's 'glitterball tactics' ultimately tied their gender identities back into neoliberal concepts of individualism without a critique of wider societal homophobia. We offer a perspective on such complex plays of masculinity in a context of rapid social and economic evolution, documenting a location different from the UK and US perspective, where the shift and collapse of neoliberal politics was faster and more extreme. We suggest that the notion of 'glitterball tactics' might be useful for a range of gender researchers interested in how normative social bonds between men are able to reinstate themselves and reflect the wider social constructs of masculinity within the sporting context.

METHODS

Our research is part of a series of projects about Iceland, which have taken place within our own department in the UK, and in collaboration with another European University. The initial idea for the research developed out of a module that both authors were involved in, and which required our second year students to take part in a sustained period of professional experience. We set up a broad research project exploring gender mainstreaming in Iceland, with an emergent design that, through discussions between staff and students, cycled down to a focus on gay male football players. Three student researchers from Media and Communication Studies participated in the project. These students were trained in ethnographic methods for several months before the field-trip, including workshop sessions covering broadly the practices of ethnography (e.g. producing field-notes,

becoming reflexive, and using photography, video and interviews in the field). These workshops (run by the second author) helped skill-up the students, and gave them the confidence to produce some of the work with us. Together with two researchers (the first author and a colleague from another European University), two of the students travelled to Iceland and participated in data collection. The third student helped plan the field-trip and transcribed the interviews. The team was composed of four female and two male researchers, all white and coming from a European background. The team included a range of sexual orientations, identifying variously as queer, bi, lesbian, and heterosexual. Only one researcher played football and was an active supporter.

The team began the research by identifying and contacting gatekeepers and by searching through websites and online forums. More contacts were found locally in the field. Gatekeeping was relatively easy to negotiate; our contacts were quick to engage with us and keen to help.

In line with the ethnographic practices used in media and cultural studies, the data presented in this article was gathered during a short immersion in the field that involved extended engagement with the football club's public facing website, and a week-long stay in Iceland that included a series of face-to-face and group interviews with key informants and on-site activities with Sterken (e.g. researchers went out with the team, and our football-playing student engaged in gameplay). A total of twenty-two people were interviewed for about one hour; four people were interviewed collectively, the others on an individual basis. All respondents were white and middle-class, and informant's age range was between 18 and 40 (seven aged between 18-25, three aged between 26-30, four aged between 31-35, and eight aged between 36-40). The research was granted ethical approval by our university. All personal information has been anonymised.

Once we returned from the field, we pooled all field-notes, interview transcripts, and other materials collected about Sterken. As part of our immersion, we cycled through the data and highlighted themes that these men were making central to their construction of gay male masculinity. The themes we identified pertained to how the men's negotiations allow them to do hegemonic masculinity in ways that were both normative and non-normative. We refer to this double articulation as 'glitterball tactics' because Sterken's emblem is a football coated in glitter. This football seemed to us a perfect representation of the way masculinity was played out in our interactions with the players; it captures both a sense of (hetero)normative football masculinity and 'effeminate' subordinate masculinity, while remaining part of the same object.

In our analysis below we consider how both sides of the glitterball were produced simultaneously by first identifying these men's performance of hegemonic masculinity. These men constructed football masculinity by drawing on the idea that 'it's a real man's game', and thus reproducing the culturally dominant symbol of the football. Their overall positioning as white, middle-class men makes Sterken's players very representative of hegemonic social norms. However, we also show how the same identities seamlessly moved from performing this normative hegemonic masculinity towards a more politically oriented gay identity. In our final analysis we show the implications of this form of masculinity in a homocentric and gender mainstreamed context, and identify how these men may end up reproducing neoliberal gender norms by tying homophobia to individual concerns.

REPRODUCING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

For many in the field, football is seen as a prime space for hegemonic or dominant masculinity because it is culturally valued, as exemplified in footballing icons such as Cristiano Ronaldo or Wayne Rooney. In non-gender equal contexts it should therefore be difficult for men like those in

Sterken to participate on equal terms in football's hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless Sterken players' performance seemed to be negotiating the footballer's hegemonic masculinity convincingly enough, and the men on the team were complicit in the ways hegemonic masculinity was still valued. For those who could play football (e.g. the professional football player who spent his winter recess playing with Sterken) a more typical hegemonic masculinity was performed. These men looked and acted the part. For example, in the extract below we see an exchange between two gay players, who recounted coming-out to other straight footballers; the rest of Sterken saw both players as 'good' and highly skilled.

Extract 1

Steve: yeah [when I came out] some of them [the straight players] didn't believe me because erm the...the gay people have an image you know...that [both laugh] that straight people say that gay people can't tackle that gay people can't...do this and this...but that's why they said "no way"

Aaron: okay [both laugh]

Steve: because I can play [laughs]

In the extract above, Steve recollected his negotiation of the reaction of his previous teammates. He framed this in terms of the way his athletic competence builds hegemonic performance. Because of his ability to play, he constructed himself as not conforming to the imagined feminine identity his team-mates attributed to gay players. Steve emphasised his ability to take part in more 'manly' aspects of the game; he implied that he could 'tackle', choosing to highlight a particular aspect of gameplay that involves physical strength and contact. Steve insisted that he *can* play, and thus takes part in what Anderson (2011) calls 'masculine capital' in order to offset homophobic stereotypes.

The distancing act was emphasised by Steve's body language. When discussing gay people's perceived image he adopted a languid pose; but when talking about his playing skills he shifted to a more 'macho' stance and a confident, self-assured tone of voice.

Another way in which the players construct and reinforce their hegemonic masculinity is in their social interactions. The excerpt below is from a pub conversation after training, where two players were discussing Icelandic politics with the interviewer. The players reference the lesbian Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir:

Extract 2

- Gary: do you see our Prime Minister [laughs]...it's a female....that tells you a lot
- I: yeah...but queer...no?
- Gary: you know all the ladies in the government, lots of the ladies in the government are feminists
- Aaron: that's the reason
- I: are all the same is it all the same type of feminism is it
- Gary: it's the same government that banned beer

In the extract above, Gary and Aaron affirm their hegemonic masculinity by distancing themselves from women. We can see this distancing, for example, in the way this interaction made assumptions about what it means to have women in parliament. Gary mentioned the Prime Minister, who is categorised as “female”, with the assumption that this category should provide enough information on Icelandic politics; later in the discussion Aaron stated, “that’s the reason”, again assuming that a government with “ladies” and “feminists” is enough to define the state of political discourse. Both

men worked at placing themselves in opposition to this construction of feminist and queer politics, as seen for example at two points in the conversation, where the interviewer prompted the players to categorise further along the lines of feminist and sexual identification. The players refused any further categorisation, although finally conceded that the feminism informing public policy is one that would go as far as to ban beer—a typically masculine drink and thus a potential threat to traditional masculinity. Throughout the extract both men employed misogynistic discourse as an analogous mechanism of hierarchisation, in the same way that we might imagine straight men use homophobia.

This form of hegemonic masculinity was evident across a range of our data, discursively performed through the use of markers of traditional masculinity and misogyny directed towards feminists and women in positions of power. However, the footballers' hegemonic masculinity was undercut by their political activism. We explore this below, drawing on our analytic of the glitterball to identify spaces where this hegemonic masculinity was done differently.

GLITTERBALL TACTICS

While Sterken enacts a convincingly hegemonic masculinity through their athletic performance and misogynistic tendencies, they also articulate a doubled identity, as encapsulated by the emblem of the glitterball. One of the pictures from Sterken's website, for example, portrays the team's float taking part in the 2009 Gay Pride parade in Reykjavik. This picture is a good example of doubling. The image shows players in uniform, complete with corporate sponsorship; but it also includes the rainbow symbol of the gay rights movement. Overseeing the scene, a huge football partially coated in glitter. The Icelandic Gay Pride is another example of gender mainstreaming; it is allegedly the biggest gathering of people in Iceland and was described by all interviewees as a key enabler of gay

visibility since its inception. Our interviewees described the Gay Pride as a family festival, where everybody takes part, rather than a political or social expression of a specific and distinct gay identity.

Our interpretation of the glitterball is evident in the way Sterken makes efforts at articulating their gay politics. For example, players talked about embodying Sterken's motto 'role models, not stereotypes'. This phrase was discussed in the interviews with reference to how it allowed multiple gay identities. Sterken also appeared aligned to the overall policies of Iceland's main queer association, Stolt, with whom they collaborate closely. Alan, for example, described Stolt as striving to be positioned as non-threatening, as "just like you", and as conducting their campaigns "one step at a time". Stolt's depoliticised normalisation of gay identities is a very calculated strategy, as we discuss later in our reflections on the intersections between Sterken, Stolt and neoliberal discourse.

Another way that Sterken constructed their glitterball tactics was in their ideals of gameplay. Players discussed an ethos of inclusivity and non-competitiveness based on strict 'fair-play' rules. In the last few years, Sterken became a gay-friendly team, rather than an exclusively gay one: that is, they accept players of all sexual orientations. While allowing them to have a larger pool of players, this move towards sexual inclusivity is also part of a discourse of openness and equal opportunities in their admission policies. For example, even if the team are engaged in competitive tournaments, they do not discriminate on the basis of athletic performance: anybody who wants to play can play, no matter their fitness or skills. Sterken is also happy to include guest players. During our week in Iceland, another visitor (a Spanish tourist) joined the gameplay, and was treated as courteously as we were.

The idea of fair-play and respect was discussed in the interviews mostly in terms of a zero-tolerance policy on insults. Football is often characterised by its homophobic banter (Armstrong and Young 1999; Brick 2000; Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1988; Spaaij 2008). But our observations of gameplay reflect Sterken's different 'hegemony of the pitch'. For example, when our student researcher engaged in gameplay with Sterken, his fieldnotes reflected the changing cultural positions these glitterball tactics created. He noted differences from his habituated football practices:

The differences I noticed when playing: They played in a very friendly manner with no aggressiveness...unlike when I play in England whether it's with friends or competitive...There was never ever that serious nature with a competitive edge in aiming to win...sometimes I had to bite my tongue in demanding for the ball. There was no derogatory insults which may have occurred when playing with my friends or on a competitive match. (Nick, fieldnotes 29th February 2012)

Nick's assessment is predicated on the notion of friendliness without aggression, unlike his habitual practice in the UK, where competition trumps cooperation. In his reflection he recounted not having demanded the ball, which meant adopting a more cooperative playing style. The other theme in the fieldnotes above is the absence of aggressiveness; in discussing his notes, Nick remarked how he had an extremely clear sense of a different 'language' being spoken on the field, no matter what *actual* language—Icelandic or English—was being employed. At the same time, Nick reported feeling comfortable in the way he fitted in with the team. This sense of fitting in led Nick to conclude that it was cooperative gameplay that allowed him to score a goal.

We could suggest that today such non-hegemonic identities are made available in football more generally, making Sterken merely evidence of a broader shift. The rhetoric of football organisations is rife with calls for more inclusive, tolerant, and respectful gameplay. At the same time these calls are undercut by episodes of extreme aggressivity, homophobia and other discriminatory language or behaviour. For example, in a recent speech that coincided with International Women's Day, FIFA President Sepp Blatter talked about the need for greater gender equality in the game and more support for female football teams. Such declarations appear to show a more supportive side within the wider global footballing culture. However, in 2004 Blatter was also criticised for the suggestion that female teams might gain popularity if players wore tighter clothing. For the most part, then, mainstream football's attempt to garner respect for marginalised players appears to be superficial lip-service. In contrast, Sterken's active support of gay football players, their links with the country's gay association, and the experiential evidence provided by our fieldnotes suggest to us that the glitterball tactics employed by the Sterken were experienced as authentic.

ONE FOR THE TEAM: COMING-OUT AND INTERNALISED HOMOPHOBIA

As we argue above, the men in Sterken were able to gain patriarchal dividends through the performance of a more traditional masculinity associated with the football player, while at the same time laying claim to an 'authentic' expression of gender activism. This doubled articulation was enabled through what we have identified as glitterball tactics. But while these tactics seem to enable a space for both identities to be done at the same time, below we show how the logic of these tactics also drew the men into a neoliberal framework. In the context of gender mainstreaming, attempts at political action became about challenging the individual problem: thus avoiding questions pertaining to the larger social structures in which homophobia in football cultures might take place.

In relation to the players' personal narratives of coming-out, the overall picture was presented to us in relatively positive terms. For example, Sterken's 'role models, not stereotypes' motto was clearly echoed in the broader politics of the gay association, Stolt. In 2003 Stolt produced an educational video where several gay and lesbian people describe their coming-out. One of our football players featured in this educational video. When he talked to us about his participation, he indicated that he would like to update his 'coming-out' narrative. His reasons were that he felt his personal narrative of coming-out would be more positive now: that the intervening nine years had made a difference. At this point in the interview another (younger) footballer volunteered his coming-out story, highlighting how his family took it entirely matter-of-fact (his father laughed and said, "so you don't like boobies, then").

According to our two informants, the only issue to be dealt with by the gay community was internalised homophobia, which Sterken was aiming to eradicate. In the extract below, Alan explained the difficulties gay people face when coming-out:

Alan: it's mainly...it's mainly yourself and your your own fears, and your fears I think...ah it's very very rare now...that we hear of someone being rejected...or something like that...it almost never happens so it's it's always the internal fear of facing your own feelings...erhm and and and I think and...the coming-out process is a lot shorter now and you hear more and more stories of people just coming home that 'oh this is my boyfriend, oh this is my [inaudible]' and I think you know the whole coming-out process...is...most people come out...to their parents to their friends and to their family but you hear more and more stories of people who just never come out...they just introduce their partners or whatever

As part of an organisation that supports people in their coming-out, Alan had extensive first-hand experience of the process. He framed the coming-out process as an individual fight against internalised homophobia and the emotion of fear, in a context where external obstacles are otherwise almost entirely removed. The social and political declaration of one's sexual identity becomes so personal that it is considered superfluous: when the long-term outcome was positive, the coming-out narrative provided by the men in Sterken was benign.

Such favourable narratives of coming-out appear, at first glance, to demonstrate a more accepting and supportive culture in the football community in Iceland, and thus evidence of a decrease in the levels of homophobia occurring in these men's livesⁱⁱⁱ. But if we read these narratives of coming-out as part of a broader shift towards gender mainstreaming, such positive narratives contain within them yet another doubled articulation. Across our data, all the men framed the difficulties of coming-out in terms of internalised homophobia. This was also reiterated at different levels of the gay community; for example, the queer association offers free counselling to anyone who wants to come out. Thus Sterken's visibility at a cultural level was not used to challenge a wider homophobia as supported by hegemonic masculinity. Instead the dominant discourse within the gay community arguably acted to overcome homophobia as an individual and psychological problem.

We could argue that this form of activism directed at the individual level is, in part, a result of the gender mainstreaming discourse. Since these men understood Iceland as an otherwise homocentric culture, it did not make sense to claim that disadvantage was rooted in the social structures.

Moreover, such talk resonates with neoliberal and late-modern self-reflexive discourses of 'being true to yourself' (Rose 1990; Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). The 'good' gay is

individual, visible and proud; whereas the ‘bad’ gay subject requires forms of governance, such as those provided by the self-help and therapy industries (Blackman, 2004; Illouz 2007). By linking sexual discrimination to internalised homophobia in this way, the closeted gay male is framed as suffering a tragic form of self-denial. This self-denial becomes an instance of not knowing the self well enough, with the attendant need to ‘find yourself’ working to regulate that person into becoming a better citizen of state control (Foucault 2008; Rose 1990).

The individualism of these men’s coming-out narratives also makes sense in the broader cultural context of Iceland, as a country transformed by neoliberal and free market policies, and in their attendant reconceptualisation of masculinity. Indeed, many of our informants worked in the banking sector, and their affluent lifestyle conformed to the new neoliberal financial masculinity, a kind of ‘business’ masculinity that uses the market as a metaphor for living (Connell 1998). Their position as white, middle class, Icelandic men inadvertently drew them back into a gender conservatism that was arguably at odds with their gay rights activism (Thorvaldsdóttir 2011).

DISCUSSION

Football's homosociality is predicated on the policing of homosexuality, so that 'being one of the boys' shouldn't slip into 'sleeping with one of the boys'. In this article, we have explored this dynamic of hegemonic masculinity in relation to our fieldwork conducted in Iceland with the sports association and gay football team Sterken. Iceland provides a rich field for such research given that it is understood as a country with high levels of gender equality due to its political rhetoric of gender mainstreaming. This article has understood gender mainstreaming as a visibility of gender issues in policy and public life and the assumption that such mainstreaming contribute to greater gender equality. In this context we could expect sexism and homophobia to decrease. In looking at this

context, we asked: What is the role of football and its ties to hegemonic masculinity, conceived broadly as homophobic and misogynistic? In what ways might this masculinity articulate itself in homocentric and gender mainstream contexts? And what are the implications of gender mainstreaming for how hegemonic masculinity is challenged and rearticulated? The research we have presented has identified a different kind of hegemonic masculinity that may partially hide patriarchal structures through the promise of equality. The implication of this rearticulated hegemonic masculinity is that individualism may work to locate homophobia in the psyches of particular men.

We have suggested that using the metaphor of the glitterball allows us to show how notions of traditional masculinity and gay rights activism are done simultaneously. Indeed a central theme emerging from our analysis was how the men in Sterken participated in a version of hegemonic masculinity. An image of the 'real man' was built based on misogyny, sexism, and valuing typically masculine qualities (e.g. the ability to tackle). The team act like 'men' in social interactions such as the discussion of the Icelandic Prime Minister, or in assessing their technical proficiency. But the shift to the homocentric context also mean the espousal of a football ethics that challenged the game's typical construction as a space for men to participate in the competitive maintenance of heterosexuality. Thus we get this complex mix of identity. On one side we have participation in a non-hegemonic version of football culture that highlights inclusivity; on the other, a continued presence and valuing of typical notions of masculinity. What glues these two sides together is a neoliberal notion of individualized activism and identity politics born out of gender mainstreaming.

The use of non-aggressive and supportive sporting contexts is common to gay sports associations. Here, the ethos is that by ensuring fair game-play, football can unpin itself from the homophobic culture that it once was. But this approach to creating networks of support, dedicated to fostering

safe spaces for coming-out, is not without its problems (e.g. Davidson 2006; Elling, De Knopp, and Knoppers 2003; Krane and Waldron 2000; Messner 1989). Homonormative contexts are often exclusionary, for example with regards to women and ethnic and racial minorities. We could see this as analogous to the 'colour blind' discourse in supporting racist talk, where claiming to no longer see racial difference (in a bid to appear non-racist) deems anti-racism redundant and invisible (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Thus, Barak Obama is deemed 'not black', despite his race clearly structuring his 2008 presidential election (Teasley and Ikard, 2010). In our data, the absenting of sexual orientation from the script of gender identity potentially weakens the otherwise positive relations that these men were creating. The outcome of creating such cultures within football is that the men in Sterken draw on potentially regressive hegemonic masculine qualities, which are, we would suggest, also tied into the broader social context of masculinities in Iceland (Thorvaldsdottir 2011).

The glitterball metaphor also highlights the limitations of these tactics in relation to the macro processes and discursive pulls of neoliberal logic. Icelandic masculinities have been in flux; but one thing that was clear to us was the way that these men were still tied deeply to notions of neoliberal individualism. This was most evident in how these men made sense of homophobia as a diminishing and individualised concern. Thus homophobia was discursively internalised. An unintended consequence of such an articulation was that hegemonic masculinity was maintained because the social structures were downplayed, and no longer seen to make a difference to life chances.

In our article, we have suggested that the Sterken players articulate different versions of masculinity through a sports practice symbolized by a glitter-coated football. Glitterball tactics permitted these men a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity *and* appear safe to the mainstream gender order, through a form of political action performed at the individual level, for example through their style

and code of conduct. Gender mainstreaming represents a situation where gender has become visible, but where this visibility is mostly discursive, while not necessarily enacting material change. Gender mainstreaming therefore permits a silencing of gender inequality discourses, which may end up privileging (hetero)normative social structures. Sterken's tactics thus fed back into a performative 'we are just like you' discourse, and so inadvertently reproduced heteronormativity by using heterosexual gender relations as framework for their own identities. This gender mainstreaming is linked to neoliberalism through its individualism, which impedes political action because it emphasizes individual rights ahead of collective action. By drawing on neoliberal discourse, Sterken's challenge to hegemonic masculinity is limited. Through glitterball tactics, the discourses the men draw on do not attack the same social structures where men are in positions of power. The men in Sterken instead reinforce a dominant construct of masculinity by holding both sides of the glitterball together through individualism.

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ⁱ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-2011/>

ⁱⁱ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The positive experience described by our football players was not the same for all sexual orientations and genders. Other informants confirmed how the individualized construction of internalized homophobia was specific to a white, middle class, male perspective; for example, an anarchist activist lesbian volleyball player pointed out the privileged position of gay men, and the persistence of low-level homophobia.