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Abstract

This paper offers a theoretical exploration of the growing trend in the UK to utilise football (soccer) practices and ideas in various health and welfare programmes, primarily as a means of engaging men. Drawing on critical men's health studies; pro-feminist critiques of sport; and the notion of hegemonic masculinities, we survey the 'field of play' to elucidate the perils and possibilities of using football in health and welfare programmes. We theorise gender as a social relation, inseparable from the way that football operates as a contested and gendered space. We outline the way that football acts as a means to re-assert, but also to reconfigure, dominant gender relations and hegemonic masculinity. If health and welfare initiatives are to use football to address welfare issues, then the paradoxes of football, masculinity and health need to be taken seriously when these initiatives are developed and theorised. We propose the idea of football welfare programmes as potential 'paradoxical spaces' where participants might be able to consciously reflect on the conflicts and possibilities of using football as a vehicle to improve welfare.

Key words: hegemonic masculinity; soccer; health and welfare; gender studies; feminism.

Introduction

There has been a recent public health policy and practice trend in England to use football (soccer) to address what has become a key social issue, the engagement of men in health and welfare programmes. As we are currently evaluating one of these initiatives (a football and mental health programme) we wanted to think through some of the wider implications of this trend. We are specifically interested in examining how this trend might mirror, reproduce or even challenge prevailing gender relations, both on and off the football field. As such, this

paper is a theoretical exploration of some of the potential perils and possibilities of using football to 'engage men'.

We suggest that these football initiatives represent both the potential to tackle the thorny issue of a relative lack of engagement of men in constructive reflection on their health and well-being. However, they also raise the peril of uncritically reproducing damaging constructions of gender and inequalities that are not unconnected to men's health outcomes and other social problems. Hence we describe these football interventions as being potentially 'paradoxical' social spaces and argue for future practice and evaluation to be better informed by feminist and other critiques of gender relations. This could result in locating gender relations more central to their ethos, content and associated inquiry.

We suggest that understanding the use of football to engage men requires a gendered approach which is thoroughly and consistently 'relational' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender is not a given but constantly performed, negotiated and contested, in relation to men *and* women (Connell, 1995). Masculinity, in particular, is 'to a significant degree constituted in men's interaction with women' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.850). In other words, constructions of masculinities are inevitably bound up with constructions of femininities: one does not 'make sense' without the (real or imagined) 'opposite' other. As a result, a thoroughly relational approach to gender means taking seriously ideologies and practices of oppression. In turn, this 'makes it impossible to ignore women's experiences while studying men and masculinity' (McKay et al. 2000, p.5). By extension, if 'engaging men' cannot be separated from gender as an embedded social relation, then the practice of using football cannot be understood in isolation from wider social relations either.

Therefore, in order to understand the implications of using football as a vehicle to engage men, we also have to appreciate the role of sport, and football in particular, in reproducing the prevailing gender order. We develop the well-established idea in pro-feminist critical sports studies that football plays a 'paradoxical' role in reproducing dominant social relations (Gatz et al. 2002; Messner, 2007; Keane, 2009). Football, in other words, operates as a contested territory where spatial arrangements of domination are produced, maintained (and sometimes resisted) through sports-specific practices such as 'chanting'ⁱ (Caudwell, 2011a) and 'football talk' (Nylund, 2004). We will argue here that initiatives that use football in welfare programmes also need to be seen as contested *gendered* spaces.

There are many examples of attempts to use sport as a vehicle to address wider social issues as a potential medium for progressive social change. For example, the ‘humane and democratic possibilities in sport’ (Connell, in Messner, 2007, p. xi) have been used to advance human rights and promote greater participation (Guilianotti, 2005) and some sports stars and athletes have been involved in political activism (Kaufman and Wolf, 2010). In addition, campaigns have also developed to challenge the emergence of racism and homophobia *within* football cultures, for example, in initiatives such as ‘Kick Racism out of Football’ and ‘The Justin Campaign’ in England (Caudwell, 2011a).

This paper, however, specifically explores the potential implications of shifting gender relations for welfare initiatives that use football to engage men. We begin by exploring the rationale of using football as a means to involve men in health and welfare contexts. The next section addresses how football has historically operated as a site for the assertion and re-assertion of hegemonic masculinity. The following section looks at how football has operated as a site for the reworking and reconfiguration of masculinities and gender relations. The penultimate section explores how football initiatives might be used in positive ways to undermine dominant gender relations and, as a result, improve the health and welfare of both men and women. We conclude with some thoughts about potential ways forward.

Football as a vehicle to engage men

As the ‘national sport’ in England, football has been viewed as well placed to promote men’s health and engagement and as a medium to also support wider policy objectives such as social inclusion, participation and employment (Carter-Morris and Faulkner, 2003; Kelly, 2010). Football initiatives can be seen as interventions at the point at which ‘social problems’ (especially urban social ills) and ‘individual health problems’ meet (Gatz et al. 2002). In particular, football has been viewed as an important medium to engage men who are seen as reluctant or unwilling to access services (Audit Commission, 2009; White & Witty, 2009).

As a result, numerous football-based initiatives have been developed to tackle health and social issues as diverse as reducing mental ill-health and challenging stigma; tackling domestic violence, youth crime and drug use; and promoting physical health (Robertson, 2003). Football has been used both as a *practice* i.e. playing and/or watching football (e.g. Evans et al. 2008; Pringle, 2004; Strong, 2009) and also as a *concept* i.e. using ideas or metaphors from the game, such as goal-setting to enable personal change (e.g. Jones, 2009;

Pringle and Sayers, 2006). For example, public health campaigns have used involvement in football as a practice to endorse the importance of physical exercise to healthy living (Robertson, 2003; White and Witty, 2009) and other recent initiatives have used football to engage men who may be marginalised and stigmatised, such as those with mental health problems (Carless and Douglas, 2008).

For example, 'It's a Goal!' uses football metaphor and football venues to engage men who would not ordinarily access traditional mental health services in a goal-setting therapeutic programme (Pringle & Sayers, 2006; It's a Goal! 2011). 'Imagine your Goals' engages men with mental health needs in physical exercise by playing football, and attempts to reduce the stigma of mental health problems and encourage social inclusion (Time to Change, 2011). Programmes have also used football to raise awareness amongst men about domestic violence (Flood, 2002b; Stanley et al. 2012). For example, high profile sportsmen have endorsed the message that violence against women is unacceptable, using sporting metaphor to position violence as 'against the rules' and not 'fair play' and, by implication, as 'failed' masculinity, a sign of weakness and cowardiceⁱⁱ.

Football is also seen as having important therapeutic potential (Steckley, 2005) and, more specifically, as a 'remedy or outlet for undesirable masculine traits' (Keane, 2009, p.165). This is because men are viewed as having a specific, and often complex, emotional relationship to football which these initiatives are able to tap into (Donaghy, 2006; Duffin, 2006). Football is believed to allow the safe expression of emotion allowing men to express feelings which are usually frowned upon such as sentimentality, romanticism, fear, pain, hurt, doubt and the need to be nurtured. It is, for example, seen as acceptable for men to get upset about the fate of their football team. Indeed some commentators have suggested that 'much of sport...is an elaborate stage set to enable men to feel' (Burton Nelson, 1994, p.115). In another way of looking at this, some critical theorists contest the assumption that men cannot (or do not) 'do emotion', but suggest that men often tend to 'do' emotion *through action* (Robertson, 2007). It is this 'action orientated' mode that is tapped into when sport is utilised in health and welfare programmes, for example by focusing on goal-setting, achievement and solutions, rather than reflection. This may relate to the idea that sport enables what has been called 'covert intimacy' i.e. men *doing things together*, rather than developing a mutual intimacy (Messner, 1992).

There does appear to be some evidence that football might be a potentially useful mechanism for health and welfare programmes to utilise. Echoing Durkheim's insights, some have argued that football serves important societal functions by uniting individuals and communities and preventing social isolation, even suggesting that football might actually prevent suicide (Kuper and Szymanski, 2009, p.257). Some have argued that in post-industrial societies, like England, which are 'unusually rootless'ⁱⁱⁱ (Kuper and Szymanski, 2009, p.253) people are attracted to the idea of belonging, loyalty, fandom, authenticity, connectedness. Because of its uniting effect, and especially during big tournaments, football is seen as giving individuals' meaning and common purpose, bringing people together who may be isolated, especially those who find social interaction and intimacy difficult. This is the flip-side to the other phenomenon Durkheim noted, that suicide often decreases during war. In this way it has been argued that 'other than sport, only war and catastrophe can create this sort of national unity' (Kuper and Szymanski, 2009, 269)

Moreover, feedback on these initiatives by men is usually positive (e.g. Smith and Pringle, 2010). Research has suggested, for example, that football can help disenfranchised men (such as those labelled with 'serious mental illness') by providing opportunities for them to create more positive and less stigmatised identities (Carless and Douglas, 2008). The emotional connection many men have with football and its 'action orientated' mode appears to enable some men to feel safer engaging with these initiatives, and the solidarity and collectivism of football appears to provide a buffer against isolation.

Some social critics, however, have called for caution in too readily assuming that football can be used uncritically as a vehicle to promote socially progressive aims (see, for example, Coakley, 2002; Kelly, 2010; Robertson, 2003; Flood, 2002b). Whilst it is logical to use traditional 'masculine' spaces and practices to engage men who are embedded within masculinised social relations, it can potentially generate a set of contradictions, especially if these very social relations are not sufficiently acknowledged or theorised. Instances of football hooliganism and some violent ultra right wing political fan bases illustrate in an extreme way the need for caution against an overly positive appraisal of the possibilities offered by football, especially in a context of gendered social relations^{iv}. Therefore, the following section looks in more detail at the role of football in reproducing unequal gender relations.

Football as a (re) *assertion* of hegemonic masculinity

The dominant and most popular sport in every country has historically maintained male privilege and systematically excluded women through a variety of means such as definition, direct control of women's sport, ignoring and trivialisation (Bryson, 1987; Lopez, 1997). It follows that, as the dominant sport in England, sexism is well-established and deep rooted in football. This is fundamentally still the case, despite increasing levels of women playing and watching football and associated complications of gender relations (Coddington, 1997; Pope, 2011; Caudwell, 2011b).

This situation is well recognised in sports scholarship. Yet, whilst there is some literature about the long history of women's involvement in football, as players and supporters in their own right, this history rarely figures in official academic, sociological and popular histories of the game (Pope, 2011). In addition, when women have been encouraged to take part in football, it has primarily been as spectators of men's football or, occasionally, as a side-show to the men's game. For example, after the highly publicised spate of English 'football hooliganism' in the 1980's, football authorities encouraged women to be spectators in the hope that their presence would help 'socialise' (Lopez, 1997); or 'soften' (Crolley and Long, 2001) male supporters. This is another example, both of how football has been used to address particular social issues, and also of how football is tied up with gender *relations*, not 'men' or 'women' per se.

We do note some important progress. For example, in 2011 the English Football Association finally supported a limited semi-professional women's league. However, whilst sexism and homophobia in sport is less obvious and more subtle, it is still pervasive. Whilst men's football is systematically promoted, funding and media coverage of the women's game remains poor. As a result, the dominant cultural image of sport is still men's sport (Messner, 2007). This situation underlies the continued importance of developing critical, yet nuanced, feminist and critical sports studies (Caudwell, 2011 a & b).

The idea of sport and football as a key site where dominant forms of gender relations are constructed, maintained and amplified has been particularly important to feminist critiques:

Football is male, masculinity, manliness. So when women demand the right to play, control, judge, report on or change football – and other manly sports – their struggle is

not just about equal access...It's about redefining men and women. It's about power.
(Burton Nelson, 1994, p.11)^v

This means that football is a primary site where gender is 'performed' – not where men *are* men, but where men 'do' (or don't do) 'being male'^{vi}. In particular, football has been seen as a specific 'gender regime' which institutionalises and justifies dominant gender relations and inequalities through the reproduction of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Pringle, 2005; Rowe, 1998).

When used as a thoroughly relational and dynamic concept, hegemonic masculinity has been extremely useful in gender studies, sports studies and especially in relation to men's health and welfare (Robertson, 2007). However, the concept has rarely been used in relation to understanding the intersection of these three areas together, as we try to do here. Flood (2002a) has helpfully outlined two interrelated notions of hegemonic masculinity – first, as a particular configuration of gender practice related to *legitimising* male authority and second, as a description of the type of masculinity which is *culturally valued* in a given society. Demetriou (2001, p.341) refers to it as 'hegemony over women' and 'hegemony over subordinated masculinities'. In both of these understandings, football has been seen as a key site for its social reproduction. For example, one way that cultural hegemony works is through the production of symbolic and authoritative 'exemplars of masculinity' (such as football stars) which few men and boys can ever live up to (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

In the current context, far from sport becoming less significant in reproducing dominant gender relations, some have argued that sport has actually become *more* important and popular (Messner and Sabo, 1990; Messner, 2007). For example, in *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football*, Mariah Burton Nelson argues that the more women have progressed in society, and the more they have challenged sexism and traditional gender roles, the more important sport has become in bolstering male privilege. Sport becomes a site where, despite the wider social progress of some (albeit primarily middle class) women, men can still feel and express their superiority, *as men*:

Fans and players can smile or scream (even hug each other!) *without any loss of masculine face*. While sport offers a man a place to worship traditional manhood,

paradoxically it also offers a man a place to loosen the rigid masculine role *without losing status* (Burton Nelson, 1994, p.115, emphasis added).

In other words, the less acceptable sexism has become in society, the more it is concentrated in particular sports as one of the 'last bastions' of male domination. Here sport becomes increasingly important as symbolic proof of male (physical) superiority (see also Messner, 2007):

[O]rganised sports, with its emphasis on strength and physicality, functions as a popular homosocial situation to counter men's fear of feminization in the new economy and to help men cope with changes in the gender and economic order (Nylund, 2004, p.141)

In this way, for Burton Nelson, culturally dominant sport becomes an avenue for men to 'express their affection for men – and their anger at women – in a socially acceptable form' (1994, p.120). Though it may be too simplistic to claim that this is the case for all men, especially when noting the increasing numbers of men who attend football matches with women, the dominant culture within football remains inescapably masculine. This gender privilege is often performed through 'sports talk' (see also Nylund, 2004).

Men use sports talk to establish their niche in the gender hierarchy...Mere recitation of sports names can grant you – if you are male – entry into the old boy's network. Sports talk is the *abracadabra* that opens the door...When men talk sport it is a competitive conversation - competing with information to establish who is the most informed – a verbal one-upmanship. This establishes the hierarchy – the one with the most information usually wins the argument – and unity: 'we are men, talking about men's interests' (Burton Nelson, 1994, p. 108-9).

To some extent, football initiatives have developed as a way to engage men who are seen to struggle in the context of wider challenges to male authority. However, in Burton-Nelson's terms, it is in this very context in which dominant sport operates as a buffer *against* such challenges. However, health focused football projects may represent for men the sort of paradoxical social space that problematically still privileges hegemonic masculinity, yet also opens up possibilities for remodelling dominant gender relations *and* achieving some positive

health related outcomes. Similarly, the notion of masculine sports talk as universally competitive is contestable and need not be the experience of all men. Indeed not all men will feel comfortable in spaces that privilege hegemonic masculinity, and many men, as well as women, may feel excluded by such talk. Nevertheless, in the context of health-related initiatives, sporting referents or metaphors may be a useful opening gambit to engage some men in relevant, or even politically progressive, conversations (Spandler et al. 2012).

The health field is further complicated by other important factors in the development of attempts to engage men through football initiatives. Crucially, these include targeting inequalities in health outcomes amongst men generally, but, specifically, men from lower socio-economic groups, such as lower life expectancy. Such developments can be seen in this context to be a response to a failure within neo-liberal economies to adequately meet the health needs of men (or women) whilst having to nevertheless demonstrate the semblance of attempting to do so: a palliative for a gaping wound (see Williams et al. 2009). It is with such insights in mind that a critique of engaging men through football is necessary, although, as we shall go on to argue, not sufficient.

Unfortunately, dominant gendered relations can lead to various assumptions about men, women and sport within sports-based welfare programmes. In an important critique, Flood questions the way that football initiatives bolster certain ideas about essential maleness and masculinity:

We should be very wary of approaches which appeal to men's sense of 'real' manhood or invite them to prove themselves *as men*. These may intensify men's investment in male identity, and this is what keeps patriarchy in place. Such appeals are especially problematic if they suggest that there are particular qualities which are essentially or exclusively male (Flood. 2002b, p.27).

The idea that men *as men* have a special relationship to sport essentialises and homogenises men's experience and this functions to *exclude* as well as include. If a particular form of (embodied male heterosexual) masculinity is actively constructed through sport (Messner, 2007), this potentially excludes many gay or bisexual men as well as disabled men (Robertson, 2003). This is especially the case given the continued, if subtle, homophobia within the game and the fact that there are, to date, no 'out' gay or lesbian players or officials

within elite male (or indeed female) football (Caudwell, 2011a). This situation has led some to argue that the mere presence of women, lesbians or gay men within the game presents a unique threat to the maintenance of male hegemony (Nylund, 2004, p.150).

Given this situation, football welfare programmes may inadvertently reinforce the idea that football is a 'man's game' to the continued exclusion of both some men and women. In this way, sports-based interventions have been viewed as 'divisive social practices' which reinforce certain gender based assumptions and fail to address wider structural inequalities (Kelly, 2010). Consequently, commentators have warned that football initiatives should not be promoted uncritically:

Men's relationship with sport is not problematised, it is taken for granted as a neutral (or even inherently positive) relationship that can (and should) be exploited for the purposes of engaging men in discourses about health practices (Robertson, 2003, pp. 706-7).

Further, and paradoxically, it is precisely the particular masculine and competitive values that are instilled in boys and men - *through sport* (e.g. acting tough, ignoring pain and 'playing on') - that are deemed responsible for men's poor health and uptake of health services in the first place (Robertson, 2003)^{vii}. In this way, sport can result in situations in which men are at risk *to themselves*.

In addition, dominant sport also constructs particular forms of masculinity that help create men's risk *to others*, by contributing to the 'construction of violent masculinity as a cultural norm' (Flood, 2002b, p.28). Echoing Burton Nelson's earlier point, Flood highlights recent research about higher levels of violence and sexual aggression amongst sportsmen, especially those involved in contact and team-based sports (see also Messner, 2007; Flood and Dyson, 2007). A cursory look at recent publicity about the behaviour of some of the top male professional footballers in England towards their wives, partners and fellow players, helps to appreciate this point^{viii}.

Therefore, Flood argues that it is potentially problematic to use sport as a medium, for example, to combat domestic violence (2002b). He points out that whilst domestic violence initiatives that use football often received positive feedback from men, they do not appear to

result in men actually talking about, or addressing, violence against women. Whilst peer acceptance and collective norms are explicitly utilised in football initiatives to ‘engage men’ it is important to be aware of the tendency for male bonding to be linked with negative attitudes and behaviours towards women. For example, while men remain statistically at most risk of harm from other men, there is some evidence that men’s groups often focus more on violence *by women* ‘as a defensive reaction to the critique of men’s violence against women’ (Flood, 2002b, p.30). It has been argued that when dominant social groups separate themselves off, their gatherings have a tendency to solidify their sense of superiority, increase an ‘us and them’ mentality and denigrate ‘others’ (Burton Nelson, 1994). Historically this tendency has also been noted in other all-male institutions such as the military and all-male schools. It is also a criticism that has been levelled at particular men’s organisations such as ‘Justice for Fathers’ (Rossi 2004) as well as the men’s health movement in general (Broom and Tovey, 2009; Crawshaw and Smith, 2009).

The reproduction of dominant gender relations is, however, complex and subtle. Wider social challenges to the prevailing gender order have resulted in - not only the re-assertion of masculinity - but also its reworking and re-configuration. The next section explores the role of football in this situation.

Football as *re-working* gender and masculinity

Football does not *just* exclude women and reinforce male privilege through the assertion of hegemonic masculinity; and even within football these are constantly challenged. We will give two recent illustrations of the challenge to gender relations in football.

In January 2011, two Sky Sports presenters were forced to resign over their insulting comments about a woman assistant referee at an English Premier League football match (Booth, 2011). This was by no means the first outburst of its kind at the presence of women football officials (see Caudwell, 2011b). This time, their comments - suggesting that women ‘couldn’t understand the off-side rule’ - were widely discredited by the public and the media^{ix}. Despite Sky Sports themselves having a poor track record of women’s participation (they had no regular women football presenters) they ‘knew’ these comments were out of kilter with their audience and the two presenters were deemed ‘pre-historic’ in their attitudes. Second, in 2009, in an event which resulted in very little media coverage, boys in an under-

12 football team in Warrington, in the North West England, reportedly went on ‘strike’ after the FA banned two of their team from playing because they were girls who were not allowed to play in mixed teams (Bridge, 2009).

These examples indicate a shift in gender relations. If football is seen as a way to legitimise male superiority and if women are beginning to be seen as players, officials or commentators *in their own right* – if they metaphorically ‘understand the off-side rule’ - it undermines the legitimisation of male superiority and helps prevent women’s continued exclusion. Moreover, if boys are coming out in support of their female team-mates this demonstrates a form of solidarity which potentially undermines gender inequalities and highlights the possible convergent interests of men and women.

If ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is defined as the current ‘most honoured way of being a man’ in a given culture (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and the two male sports presenters were publically *dis-honoured*, then hegemonic masculinity is surely shifting. However, whilst the challenge to prevailing gender relations is evident in this example, the limits to its success are equally apparent. Although the presenters had to leave Sky Sports, they were quickly offered a regular spot as commentators on another popular radio sports show – ironically, in the light of the remarks above - ‘Talk Sport’, aimed at, and presented by men, and known for its traditional views about sport and masculinity. This is perhaps not surprising as many sports scholars have analysed how, in the face of challenges to masculine hegemony, ‘sports talk’ shows, have become an ‘attractive venue for embattled White men seeking recreational repose and a nostalgic return to a pre-feminist ideal’ and thus operates to restore masculine hegemony (Nylund, 2004, p.139) In relation to our second example, whilst the English FA have caved into mounting pressure to slowly increase the age at which girls are officially allowed to play in mixed teams’, adult football is still strictly segregated (Caudwell, 2011b)^x.

These shifts in gender relations can be understood within the notion of hegemonic masculinity itself. This is because the notion is embedded in the Gramscian idea that cultural hegemony is continually contested (by various counter-hegemonic forces) and therefore has to continually reinvent itself in order preserve its legitimacy and survive (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed the term explicitly refers to the ways that gender relations are not static but are modified *in practice* and ‘can differ according to the gender relation in a particular social setting’ (ibid, p.836).

Demetriou (2001) has described how hegemonic masculinities are continually negotiated, translated and reconfigured, illustrating how the ascendant gender is able to ‘appropriate’ what appears ‘pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment’ (p.345). In contrast, what appear to be ‘useless or harmful elements’ are ‘subordinated’ or ‘eliminated’ (ibid). This process of ‘dialectical pragmatism’ secures the reproduction of dominant gender relations by making them *appear* flexible and reasonable. Thus in the above example, Sky Sports can be seen as ‘eliminating’ the two sexist presenters in order to demonstrate sport’s reasonableness and credibility. Rather than undermining the dominant gender order, this strategy preserves its legitimacy and ensures its survival^{xi}.

Taking these insights into account, there is a danger that football initiatives to ‘engage men’ are concerned with ‘re-working’ gender so men are able to perform gender within the boundaries of a revised and more acceptable masculinity. In other words, so they are able to retain a ‘male’ sense of themselves but still feel able to ‘fit in’ or feel more comfortable within modern social relations. Here, locally hegemonic versions of masculinity can be ‘used to promote self respect in the face of discredit’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 842). For example, it might mean cutting off the ‘sharper edges’ or ‘worst excesses’ of masculinity and allowing individual men limited expressions of emotionality. This clearly may have some important benefits for individual men (and indirectly, for women too). However, it is important to note that more flexible, hybrid and ‘softer’ masculinities are not *necessarily* or inherently emancipatory. Arguably, they can actually mask enduring inequalities by making them harder to identify and challenge. Whilst this flexibility makes prevailing gender relations appear less oppressive and more egalitarian (ibid: p.355) it is actually ‘pernicious because it casts the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared’ (Hennessy, in Demetriou, 2001, p.353):

It is its constant hybridization, its constant appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures...the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position at a given historical moment is a hybrid bloc that incorporates diverse and apparently oppositional elements (Demetriou, 2001, pp 348-349).

If, then, modern sport has evolved to respond to social changes that undermine the traditional base of male power and authority (Burton Nelson, 1994; Messner, 2007), football initiatives can be viewed as bolstering, not undermining, male privilege. If football is still seen as a preserve of male privilege, then, echoing Audre Lorde's famous words, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 1984). Indeed, football initiatives are not designed to *dismantle* the master's house but perhaps to house more men within its walls. By using the language and modified practices of the powerful, even men who do not fit prevailing ideals of masculinity, can still find some solace in being part of a broader male culture that includes them.

This kind of cautionary analysis is necessary in order to stay 'grounded in - rather than distracted from or antithetical to - feminist theory' (McKay, et al; 2000; Caudwell, 2011b). However, pro-feminist sports theorists have also warned against an overly pessimistic analysis which writes 'the narrative in advance' and follows 'the script of inevitable defeat' (Rowe, 1998, p.248). In this context, it is important to note that 'hegemony in gender relations can be contested and can break down' (Connell, 2002, p.89).

This was the element of optimism in an otherwise bleak theory [of hegemonic masculinity]. It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading towards an abolition of gender hierarchies (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.833),

Therefore, in the next section we move beyond critique to consider how football initiatives might actually contribute to this process - to undermine (or at least not reinforce), dominant gender relations. In this way, we endorse the idea of 'criticality' which moves beyond criticism and critique to 'an emphasis on how situations are lived out in the present...of the possibilities of actualising some of its potential rather than just revealing its faults' (Rogoff, 2003, p.3).

In the following section we outline the paradoxical place of football within wider social relations and tentatively explore how football-based interventions could operate as a potential 'paradoxical space' (Rose, 1993; Spandler, 2009) which subverts and resists dominant social relations.

Football initiatives as a paradoxical space

Football's paradoxical role relates to its historical position in wider society; its semi-autonomy as a social practice; its local configurations and the psycho-social dynamics of gendered spaces. Football, like gender, has 'distinctive local constructions' (Connell, 2002, p.89). This means it has various functions and meanings in different contexts. Whilst the dominant sport in a given culture is inherently exclusionary in relation to gender, it can be inclusionary in relation to other social relations. One of the appealing elements of being a football supporter is that what matters is one's allegiance to 'our team' above most other social markers of social difference (and this can include gender). Having said this, it is important to note that this feeling of 'inclusion' is usually predicated upon the exclusion of others and the attribution of negative characteristics to another team or nation, the 'us' against 'them' (Searle, 1990). In this sense, football is *inherently* exclusionary and awareness of this dynamic urges caution in relation to its inclusionary potential in any wider sense.

Yet whilst football does not operate as an autonomous sphere within society, it does have its own dynamic, one that does not simply reproduce dominant social relations (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, whilst football tends to reflect and construct dominant gender relations, it does not necessarily reflect dominant class relations^{xii}. Historically, English football culture has been embedded within the modern urban working classes. This is equally true of men and women's football as most clubs started off as factory teams. Bourdieu has suggested that dominant sports may actually challenge the values of the dominant social class:

[t]he most typically popular sports [such as football etc] combine all the features which repel the dominant class: not only the social composition of their public,...but also the values and virtues demanded, strength, endurance violence, sacrifice, docility and submission to *collective* discipline – so contrary to bourgeois 'role distance' – and the exaltation of competition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.214)

Some have argued that, on the whole - and despite public perception to the contrary - football does not operate solely along the lines of capitalism and big business: 'football is neither big business nor good business; it arguably isn't even business at all' (Kuper and Szymanski, 2009, p.108). In so far as football (or at least the support of football) operates according to its own 'field specific' rules (Bourdieu, 1986) it may embody progressive, counter-hegemonic

values^{xiii}. Therefore, whilst embodying some of what might be considered to be the worst aspects of 'masculine culture' (such as aggressiveness, competitiveness and sexism) football *also* represents some of the positive aspects of - predominantly working class - culture (such as loyalty, team spirit, community and solidarity). It is this - a primarily emotional, rather than financial - attachment to the game that is harnessed in football welfare initiatives.

In light of the social and economic problems caused by the 'banking crisis', and the imputed pathology of many 'highly successful' professionals (Babiak and Hare, 2000) it is worth noting that initiatives have not used the stock market, banking - or indeed golf - as a vehicle to engage men^{xiv}. Such spaces might actually be more important arenas for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities and tend to be even more male dominated and exclusionary than football. Within Global capitalism, hegemonic masculinity is not associated with traditional working class masculinities but with those attributes and values associated with 'those who control its dominant institutions'^{xv}. Indeed whilst sexism exists at all levels of football, it might be argued that it is particularly concentrated in the higher echelons of the game (Lopez, 1997).

Despite, or perhaps because of this, many of these 'counter-hegemonic' aspects have been more readily apparent in women's football, especially given its continued lack of financial support and status. Historically, the popularity of working class women's football in the 1920's -1950's was largely due to its links with philanthropy (Lopez, 1997). Women's involvement in football is not necessarily part of the gentrification of football, nor are they necessarily part of the 'new consumer fans' as has often been argued (Pope, 2011). Indeed Pope's research suggests that women fans may be as rooted in community, solidarity and place as working class male 'authentic fans' are deemed to be^{xvi}.

With this in mind it may be that football represents something essentially 'human' and certainly not something intrinsically 'male'. Although rarely mentioning women in his 'global history' of the game, Goldblatt argues that 'football's cultural ascent and popularity are rooted at the very deepest level in humanity's need and desire to play' (2007, p.909). In this sense, football might express an aspect of humanity that is antithetical to, or even a relief from, wider marketised social relations. This can be witnessed in seemingly 'outdated' collective sentiments such as belief, belonging and loyalty sentiments which, as we have noted, is not confined to male fans (Pope, 2011). Although these collective sentiments can be

easily appropriated by the market – as witnessed by the rise of so called ‘consumer fans’ - resistance is evident, for example, in the phenomenon of fans supporting smaller, more ‘authentic’ and un-corporatised versions of their teams^{xvii}.

Yet within the modern (men’s) game there has been an increasing - and much noted - distance between the higher echelons of football (in terms of salary and status of players, managers and executives) and football *supporters*, many of whom cannot afford tickets to watch matches at the ‘top clubs’ (Taylor, 2008, Malcolm, 2000). These supporters are thus seen as doubly disenfranchised: from the material and status benefits of neo-liberal society and from their traditional ‘heartland’ of football. It is predominantly these groups of men who are targeted by initiatives which use football to ‘engage men’ rather than middle class ‘professional wanderers’ who tend to strike up weakly held allegiances with different teams as they move around the country to progress their career (Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

In this context, it is important to be aware of the specific, often marginalised, social location of men who may engage with football initiatives. In other words, men who are targeted by, or who access, these football initiatives, might be considered fellow sufferers of the conditions which we analyse and critique (Arendt, 1998). In this sense we need to avoid an ‘over-socialised’ view of gender and masculinity (Jefferson, 2002) and bear in mind the particular consequences of using football - both on hegemonic masculine cultures and on the diverse lived experience of men (and women) with their own unique biographical (gendered) histories and shared existential struggles. For example, Flood acknowledges that domestic violence projects which utilise football might:

[S]imultaneously shift sporting culture as it shifts the attitudes of men in general...by rupturing the association between masculinity and violence...enough to make a difference to men’s attitudes and behaviours...If men’s perceptions of collective masculine norms can be shifted, then individual men may shift as well’ (Flood, 2002b, p.28).

Whilst football is still predominantly a conservative force in contemporary gender relations on a general level, it is also a contested terrain in which gender is constructed in complex and often contradictory ways on a local level (Messner, 2007; Robertson, 2003). This can be harnessed in football initiatives. For example, Robertson (2003) describes how some men

were able to strategically deploy, comply with or resist masculine expectations through sport-based public health interventions. In this way, they were arenas in which ‘masculinities can become unstable’ (ibid, p.711). He concludes that the emphasis on participation, supportiveness and relationships in football initiatives may actually provide a useful model for health promotion work.

Whilst football may be a primary site for the reproduction of heterosexual masculinity, there is also an often noted powerful homoerotic undercurrent (Pronger, 1990). In addition, whilst ‘talk sport’ shows are part of the corporatisation of sport and ultimately reinforce masculine hegemony, they can also call it into question, for example, by ‘providing an opportunity for men to discuss and even raise their awareness of gender and sexual issues that they might not otherwise have’ (Nylund, 2004, p.144). This relates to the possibility of closeness and bonding that is possible through team-based sports like football.

Rather than seeing football initiatives to engage men as *necessarily* and *inevitably* reproducing oppressive gender relations, it is possible for them to act as a forum which consciously challenges masculine hegemony. This is possible because such initiatives can consciously develop counter cultural spaces, which do not merely reflect and reproduce dominant sports cultures, but actually build in reflection and contestation. In this way, it may be possible to turn the contradictions, complexities and ambiguities within football (and gender) into important topics for discussion and intervention. This is where the notion of ‘paradoxical space’ is important (Rose, 1993; Spandler, 2009). We contend that football welfare initiatives have potential to act as ‘paradoxical spaces’ whereby these wider social dynamics are made explicit and reflected upon. In order to be transformative, participants within ‘paradoxical spaces’ need to be consciously aware of, and actively address, questions of gender, difference and diversity.

This possibility has been recognised in recent critical studies of sport: ‘because sport is a ‘key site for the reproduction of gendered relations it is also a key potential site for its contestation’ (Messner, 2007, p.109). To come full circle, then, this is one of the reasons why confronting these issues *within* sport – where they tend to be played out - might actually be beneficial (McKay et al 2000). If there are ‘internal contradictions’ in hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.852) and ‘cracks and fissures’ in the matrix of gender domination in sport (Messner, 2007, p.5), it may be possible for football initiatives

to expose these contradictions and reflect on them - in helpful, rather than harmful, ways. In particular, given the emphasis that critics have placed on the role of 'sports talk' in reproducing gender inequality, it is important that such initiatives employ different ways of talking about, and practicing, gender as well as sport.

If sport both represents and re-produces social relations, it is possible that football initiatives could represent and produce *different* gender relations. If men and boys are active agents in constructing dominant norms of masculinity, then presumably they can be actively *deconstructed*. If football is a way of 'doing gender' then can football interventions help to 'undo gender' (Butler, 2004; Risman, 2009). If 'undoing gender' is about people not conforming to gendered scripts based on binary sexed distinctions, then women's participation in football (and indeed their potential involvement in football interventions themselves) might help to achieve this – to move towards a 'postgender society' (Risman, 2009, p.84).

It is interesting to note that, despite being aimed at men, a minority of women are often referred (or self-refer) to football initiatives (e.g. Smith and Pringle, 2010). It is conceivable that this situation could actually be developed and harnessed to mirror the changes happening in football and potentially prefigure future possibilities (e.g. greater equality and participation of women in football at all levels of the game). The fact that women are also accessing these initiatives - and appear to benefit from them (Spandler et al., 2012) - begins to undermine the assumed and essentialised links between men, masculinity and sport. In turn, this might potentially undermine football as an exclusionary site. Indeed some have tentatively suggested that girls and women may actually benefit more from sports-based interventions precisely because of its inherent challenge to gendered expectations (Gatz et al., 2002). The idea that women may also benefit from these initiatives potentially lifts football out of its gendered enclave and enables it to more fully embrace its potential as a medium for improving the health and welfare of individuals and society.

Concluding Thoughts

By harnessing the humane and democratic possibilities in sport, football initiatives might bring together mutual interests (for example between diverse groups of men; men and women) to forge alliances based on solidarity, trust and respect. In this respect it is worth

noting that our ‘relational’ approach to gender means that men and women’s welfare is interrelated and interdependent (Broom, 2009). Although men’s health and welfare cannot be *reduced to* gender inequalities or gender relations, ideologies and practices of ‘gender’ structure how these problems are manifested, lived out and addressed. This does not mean that football initiatives should *necessarily* be ‘mixed sex’ because, in the current gender order, there may be something about the homosocial environment that facilitates sharing and reflection. However, this situation is certainly something to be questioned, interrogated and reflected upon. Our point is that if health and welfare programmes are to draw on football to engage men, it is important that they understand the role of football in re-asserting, re-working and potentially challenging dominant gender relations. In particular, if public health initiatives are to use football to address men’s health, then the paradoxes of football, masculinity and health need to be taken seriously when these initiatives are developed and theorised.

We cannot predict in advance whether such projects will challenge *or* reproduce gender relations, and it is more likely that they will do both simultaneously - that is the paradox. It will ultimately depend on the way initiatives are developed in practice and the wider context in which they are implemented. This has been an exploratory paper and we recommend more research to investigate the precise mechanisms, social relations and dynamics in football welfare programmes. For example, it would be interesting to explore any potential differences between projects which are mixed, men or women only (and if they are facilitated by men or women) and whether this has any impact on participants’ experience of them; both their benefits; and their potential to challenge prevailing gender relations. Perhaps more importantly, it would be worth exploring the possibility and desirability of making the social relational aspects of gender more central to the content of these initiatives.

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ⁱ Football chants can be humorous, creative, poetic, but also nasty and offensive (Armstrong & Young, 1999). Some football chanting also exposes the murky side of football and masculinities and can connect with violent and aggressive forms of expression and action. Shouting 'Die you bastard, die' at injured opposition players is quite unexceptional, but the goading of Manchester United and Liverpool fans with doggerel about the Munich Air Disaster and Hillsborough tragedy respectively plumb depths of viciousness (Brick, 2000). Chanting coloured by particular expressions of sexism and homophobia are illustrated starkly by such examples as the unfortunately commonplace 'get your tits out for the lads' or the homophobic baiting of Brighton and Blackpool fans (both cities are known as having a visible gay community) (Pink News, 2008).

ⁱⁱ For example, David James (a former England International goalkeeper) is a public supporter of the White Ribbon campaign (men working to end violence against women) <http://www.whiteribboncampaign.co.uk>

ⁱⁱⁱ As the heart of the Industrial Revolution, where people moved to work in large industrial cities, it has been argued that the English population tends to be particularly transitory with weak connections to place and community (Kuper and Szymanski, 2009, pp.253-4)

^{iv} With reference to the high tide of hooliganism in English football during the 1980s, Dunning et al. (1988) link achieving the social status and intra-group prestige of 'manhood' to participation in football violence, especially for men from lower socio-economic groups. This violent and aggressive male habitus is compounded by seeking out gender segregated work and social circles which escape any softening effect of female company. Spaaij (2008) identifies common features of hooliganism across international and local contexts, and these include expressions of hard masculinity, defence of reputation and sense of solidarity and belonging.

^v Burton Nelson (1994) is actually referring to American football but the argument could equally be made about any culturally dominant sport.

^{vi} This idea of 'doing gender' is based on various theories of the social construction of gender e.g. ethnomethodologists who argued that gender is 'achieved' through action and interaction and post-structuralist

ideas about how gender is 'performed' (West and Zimmerman, 1987; and Butler, 1999). This idea has been applied to men's expression of health and distress (e.g. Ridge et al., 2010).

^{vii} It is important to note that women can also 'do masculinity' (or hyper masculinity) and in some contexts, they can often 'do it better' than men. For example, recent research has shown how women footballers often ignore their injuries and 'play on', even more so than male players in order to demonstrate their competence and embody a specific form of 'masculine culture' within sport, especially when their physical abilities are frequently questioned. <http://info.uwe.ac.uk/news/uwenews/news.aspx?id=1901> Accessed December 2011.

^{viii} Despite sports stars such as footballers often being held up as role models, they can exhibit a range of drunken or violent and objectionable behaviour towards women (see Lines, 2001). For example, incidents of partner assault reported in relation to Paul Gascoine (Hattenstone, 2011) and Stan Collymore (Brookes, 2006), players' convictions for assault and various acts of violence against team-mates (Press Association, 2010), and multiple allegations of rape and sexual assault by footballers (Scott, 2004, Laville, 2005, James, 2009). It is interesting to note how male player's sexual aggression towards women has actually been defended, in some cases by women themselves. Women may minimise the extent of the problem in an attempt to reconcile their own experience with wanting to stay involved in the game (Mewitt and Toffoletti, 2008). This, in turn, serves to reinforce a masculine gender legitimacy that continues to degrade women.

^{ix} This event created a flurry of media coverage. Events such as these, which result in extensive media interest, have been referred to as 'pegs' onto which salient socio-cultural issues become focused (Nylund, 2004)

^x In England, the age was increased from 11 to 13 years in 2011.

^{xi} The ways in which challenges to dominant forms of masculinity get re-absorbed leaving them intact, if more subtle and 'ironic', has been described elsewhere. For example, homophobia and sexism in football (Caudwell 2011a) and talk sport shows in the US (Nylund, 2004).

^{xii} Social historians have argued that nineteenth century codification of sports such as football can be seen as part of capitalism's project to pacify the (mostly male) working classes. Critics such as Gareth Stedman Jones (1977) have argued against a too simplistic view of the relationship between class expression and social control, noting that cities with great passion for football are not always lacking in militancy, and that the history of gendered segregation of leisure is under-explored.

^{xiii} This possibility is complicated by various counter-trends. These include the obvious commercialisation of the top echelons of the game and the increasing ownership of Premier League teams by super-rich individuals. Following the Taylor report, the introduction of all-seating stadia coincided with a perceived bourgeoisification of the sport, with relatively affluent middle class supporters supplanting traditional working class fans who struggle to keep up with the inflated cost of match tickets (Taylor, 2008, Malcolm, 2000). Nevertheless, significant working class supporters continue to follow the game, and other spaces, such as public houses have increasingly become venues for working class spectating of football matches (Weed, 2008)

^{xiv} In a similar way, Coakley (2002) asks whether we would even consider controlling middle class corporate deviance and violence through youth sports programs aimed at privileged young people who are likely to acquire power in society as adults.

^{xv} Connell refers to hegemonic masculinity within global capitalism as 'transnational business masculinity' characterised by egocentrism, conditional loyalties and commitment to capital accumulation (Connell, 2000). Perhaps this is more likely to embody the pernicious, hybrid and subtle gender expressions that Demetriou (2001) refers to.

^{xvi} Pope (2010) argues that women football supporters have often been dismissed as 'inauthentic' and 'consumer' fans (as they are seen as connected with the growth of the social gentrification of football fandom) and have been counter-positioned against the more 'authentic' working class male fans. Ironically it is precisely women's involvement in the game that has often provoked a backlash against women supporters, players and officials. It is also worth noting that women's involvement in football has also been seen as 'paradoxical'. For

example, womens' football can be seen as reproducing the flip-side of hegemonic masculinity - 'emphasised femininity' - or what Caudwell (2011b) calls 'embodied femininity'

^{xvii} Examples include FC United in Manchester and the Spirit of Shankly grouping of Liverpool FC fans. The latter notably changed its name from 'Sons of Shankly' because of perceived sexism. Such developments can be seen as associated with fan protest movements against particular ownership regimes.