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Negotiating sexuality and masculinity in school sport: an autoethnography

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This autoethnography explores challenging and ethically sensitive issues around sexual orientation, sexual identity and masculinity in the context of school sport. Through storytelling, I aim to show how sometimes ambiguous encounters with heterosexism, homophobia and hegemonic masculinity through sport problematise identity development for young same-sex attracted males. By foregrounding personal embodied experience, I respond to an absence of stories of gay and bisexual experiences among males in physical education and school sport, in an effort to reduce a continuing sense of Otherness and difference regarding same-sex attracted males. I rely on the story itself to express the embodied forms of knowing that inhabit the experiences I describe, and resist a finalising interpretation of the story. Instead, I offer personal reflections on particular theoretical and methodological issues which relate to both the form and content of the story.

Keywords: *Identity; Sexuality; Masculinity; Autoethnography; Story; Gay; Bisexual; Sport; Education*

Introduction

In this paper, I explore—through a storytelling approach—experiences related to sexual orientation, sexual identity and masculinity within the context of school sport. My exploration will touch on what some might see as ‘taboo’ tales of same-sex attraction and desire, but also, emotionally laden experiences of same-sex relationships, companionship and love. Researching this topic among school-age males presents numerous ethical and practical challenges, not least the problem of how to explore same-sex attraction among those who may not yet have acknowledged their feelings or think of themselves as gay or bisexual. These challenges perhaps go some way to explaining the current silence in the sport literature regarding the voices and experiences of same-sex attracted young males.

To break this silence, I offer a personal story to shed light on the difficulties that same-sex attracted males can face in negotiating their developing sexuality and masculinity in school sport contexts. The story is autobiographical in that it is grounded in particular moments from my own history in school sport when same-sex relationships and conceptions of masculinity were prominent or problematic. The story connects to culture in multiple ways, not least because the events I recount occurred within a sporting culture in which homophobia, heterosexism and

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hegemonic masculinity are prevalent (Anderson, 2005; Gough, 2007; Sparkes *et al.*, 2007). The story has political implications because entrenched power dynamics and social processes operating within school and sport settings have shaped—and continue to shape—the identity development, health, well-being, safety, privilege and prospects of same-sex attracted young people (Barron & Bradford, 2007; Hemphill & Symons, 2009). It is on these bases that I have decided that the tale is worth telling.

Sexuality and masculinity in sport

Sparkes (1997, p. 25) observes that gay males are ‘an absent Other in the world of PE in particular and sport in general’. While gay men are increasingly visible in certain sections of society, sport remains an arena where few ‘out’ gay males are seen. At the elite level, this invisibility is demonstrated by the observation that in the 2008 Beijing Olympics there was only one openly gay male among 10,708 competitors (Buzinski, 2008). As a result, in comparison to other leisure fields, sport offers few role models for young same-sex attracted males (Elling & Janssens, 2009). Despite improvements in other sections of society, continuing accounts of heterosexism and homophobia in sport suggest that the environment is still a difficult one for same-sex attracted males (Hemphill & Symons, 2009).

While numerous factors are likely to be implicated in the difficulties same-sex attracted males face in sport, a key issue is the effects of the dominant hegemonic form of masculinity seen in sport. In Anderson’s terms:

sport remains a bastion of hegemonic masculinity, homophobia, and misogyny. That is to say that sport remains an arena that reproduces a desire for the toughest form of masculinity, an attitude in which ‘men are men’; an arena in which homosexuality, femininity, and other assumed ‘weaknesses’ are not perceived as being conducive to the ultimate quest for victory. (Anderson, 2005, p. 7)

A key problem faced by same-sex attracted males in sport can be understood as a conflict between prevailing expectations of athletic identity (e.g. a hegemonic version of masculinity) and what is often pejoratively assumed to be a gay identity (e.g. ‘effeminate’, ‘camp’). This tension has been described by Barron and Bradford (2007, pp. 236–237) in this way: ‘Gay identity has become defined in essentialized terms; it is simply not possible to be gay and other than camp, “effeminate”, or in some way negatively compared with hegemonic versions of hard masculinity’. For young same-sex attracted males immersed in sport culture, a consequence of this might be a clash between the individual’s athletic or ‘jock’ identity and his perceptions and expectations regarding gay identity.

Hemphill and Symons (2009, p. 398) describe heterosexism as ‘the widespread and often unquestioned assumption that heterosexuality is the natural and the only legitimate form of love, partnership, marriage, or sexual relationship’. For these authors—and others (e.g. Holman Jones & Adams, 2010)—heterosexism is a significant obstacle in the day-to-day lives of same-sex attracted individuals,

particularly when it comes to negotiating an 'authentic' identity. For Anderson (2005, p. 114), silence is the foundation on which heterosexism rests because the fear of speaking out has led 'homosexuality to be thought of as a private sexuality, while heterosexuality is so public that it is assumed to be the default sexuality'.

To challenge this assumption it is therefore necessary to *speak* about same-sex attraction within the context of sport and physical education in order to resist the damaging silences that surround these experiences. In speaking, however, I face two questions: (1) Through what processes might I explore the ethically sensitive, complex and sometimes ambiguous experiences that occur when emerging sexualities and masculinities collide?; and (2) In what form might I publicly write/speak about personal and intimate experiences that challenge widespread assumptions and expectations within sport culture?

Stories as knowledge

One possible approach might be to construct a realist tale (see Sparkes, 2002) that draws on existing theory concerning sport, sexualities and masculinities. Others have used this kind of approach to provide insights into related topics (see, e.g. Anderson, 2005; Caudwell, 2006; Renold, 2007; Atkinson, 2009). An alternative approach—one my colleagues and I have used in previous work (e.g. Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Carless, 2010; Carless & Douglas, 2010a)—is storytelling. I see three interrelated reasons why storytelling can contribute alternative insights into this topic.

First, stories have the potential to show readers their own involvement in socio-cultural processes, thereby stimulating 'local' knowledge relevant to each reader's circumstances. Sparkes (1997, p. 36) suggests that 'Stories are able to provide powerful insights into the lived experiences of absent Others in ways that can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they may not be consciously aware'. A desire to help readers appreciate their involvement in social processes—in this case, heterosexism and/or homophobia—guides my strategic use of storytelling here.

Second, by sharing stories, I strive for *connection* in order to reduce the barrier of Otherness or difference regarding same-sex attraction among young males, which permeates sport. As Sparkes (2003) points out, presenting stories of personal experience—as opposed to theoretical analysis or argument—provides an opportunity for emotional connection between storyteller and reader based on empathic understanding of what we *share*, over and above how we differ. As Diversi and Moreira put it:

We are touched by stories representing humans long gone from earth. We are inspired by the stories of strangers from distant lands finding the same redemption we seek. We shed tears watching fictitious characters overcome familiar odds on the screen. Yet, when it comes to identity, we seem to be transfixed by the differences we attribute to the Other. In our reading of history and experience of the world,

humans seem to focus on communality with the Other only after personal emotional connections have been made. (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p. 220)

Facilitating emotional connection necessitates a move away—at least for a moment—from the abstract and theoretical forms of knowledge that dominate social science and education, towards the kinds of knowledge that inhabits visceral, embodied experience.

A recognised need to bring ‘body knowledge’ (Evans, 2009) to academic dialogue underlies my third reason for using stories. It is through creative analytic practices such as storytelling that I have been able to share the kind of knowledge that stems from embodied experience (see Carless & Douglas, 2009). Like Sparkes (2003), I have found writing in the form of scientific or realist tales to be ill suited to exploring and representing the understandings that inhabit my own embodied experience. As I have observed elsewhere (Carless, 2010), the very *form* of these writing styles seems to have prevented me from exploring my own intimate, personal experience. In this sense, form and content are closely related: the *way* I write influences not only the issues I am able to explore, but also the insights and interpretations I realise and represent. Stories are at once a way of knowing and a way of communicating that knowing.

For Frank (2000), working as a storyteller requires taking a standpoint that focuses on particular aspects of one’s biography that are shared with others. Autoethnography is a methodology well suited to this task as it aims to connect the personal to the cultural and social by privileging action, emotion and embodiment (Ellis, 2004). By writing autoethnography, I write in the wake of an emerging tradition within sports studies and physical education, which has provided new and provocative insights into a number of topics related to sociology, psychology, health and education (e.g. Tiihonen, 1994; Sparkes, 1996, 2003; Smith, 1999; Duncan, 2000; Tsang, 2000; Douglas, 2009; Carless, 2010; Gilbourne, 2010). By doing so, I contribute to deepening and expanding the genre of autoethnography, while offering alternative insights regarding the problems and possibilities of same-sex attraction and relationships among young males in the context of school sport.

Writing the story

There is much of my youth that I do not remember. There are times that I remember a little hazily or vaguely: I remember that they happened but the details are not clear. There are other moments—particular events—that I remember vividly, with clarity. When I remember these moments, it is not just the objective details that come flooding back, but the subjective feelings too. Somehow, I feel myself back *in* that moment, physically re-immersed in something that has already happened, feeling the emotions of the moment, aware once again of bodily sensations that accompanied that particular event. It is these kinds of moments that I recount here.

I began by compiling a list fourteen moments (which I felt pertained to the topic of this piece) that I could remember vividly. Over a period of time, I thought back to each moment and, slowly, I tried to re-create it in written form as a stand-alone 'fragment'. At this time, I made the decision that two moments were not essential to the overall tale and, later, removed two further fragments for the same reason.

While writing, I held in mind two concerns. Firstly, I tried to provide enough specific detail for each event to create a vivid 'picture' for the reader. Keeping each fragment to a manageable length required me to make judgement calls about which details were necessary to achieve this, and which details could be omitted. Although I think specific objective details *do* matter in storytelling, whether or not the story actually 'works' seems to depend more on the extent to which it succeeds in re-creating the subjective emotions and feelings associated with each moment (see Douglas & Carless, 2010). The second concern that I held in mind, therefore, was the need to re-create as best I could the feelings and emotions that *I* experienced in each moment. These two concerns are most likely interrelated in that adequate description of objective detail helps to 'transport' the reader into the event in the kind of embodied manner that supports emotional engagement and response (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

When I came to make a call on whether a particular fragment was 'working', I did so primarily on subjective grounds that relate to the emotions evoked by the writing as it takes shape. At this stage, I was less interested in the extent to which I had accurately described the objective details of the particular event. The songwriter Paul Simon describes how he uses a kind of subjective process that mirrors my own. Simon describes how *he* is the first 'audience' of the song—if *he* is moved by a line then he can feel some degree of confidence that others will be moved too when listening to the finished song (see Zollo, 2003). This is the first step in 'quality control' for me in my writing and it is only when I am reasonably happy with what is written on these terms that I seek feedback from trusted colleagues and friends. Their responses provide valuable insights about the extent to which the story—as a single piece and as individual fragments—is effective in terms of my aims.

A story in ten fragments

'D'you want me to nail him for you, Dave?' Stuart asks, dipping his shoulder in a mimed tackle and grinning as we jog out to the pitch.

Word has got round that another scrum-half named Robert Brent—new to the school—will be joining the squad for the first practice of the term. Today will be the first chance the team coach has to see us play side by side. I suppose I should be flattered that Stuart cares enough about me keeping my place to offer to physically take Brent out of the selection reckoning. I laugh awkwardly.

'Well, a little bit wouldn't hurt, I suppose', I reply, playing along with Stuart's gallows humour. 'Nah, it's alright Stu, you might finish him off! But thanks anyway'. I had thought I was the only one in the squad who knew of Brent's arrival as it was

me the coach had asked to stay behind after under-14 pre-season training the previous week.

‘Dave’, he’d said, ‘I have some news I think you should know about. A new lad’s starting this term, he’s just moved down from London-way. I’ve heard he’s a pretty good player. He’s quick, strong, has a good pass on him and it sounds like he scores a lot of points from the base of the scrum’. The coach paused for a moment and looked at me as if he was expecting a response. I was thinking: *OK, that’s at least three things he has on me: quick, strong, scores points. So it looks like this Robert Brent is going to take my place. But that’s the way it goes. I’m surprised to have been in the team for the past two seasons, so it’s no big shock if I lose my place now.* But it felt like this wasn’t the right response, so I stayed quiet. ‘I just wanted to let you know in advance, Dave. Depending on how you look at it, it might be just the incentive you need to, you know, raise your game a little, show him who’s boss?’

When Stuart and I get to the pitch, I spot Brent right away—he’s the only kid there I don’t recognise. As we wait to start, I get a chance to look him over. He’s about my height and build—lean but not skinny—although he’s better looking than me and has stronger looking quads. He’s acting twitchy and unsettled, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and fiddling with the cuffs of his rugby shirt. He doesn’t talk to anyone and no-one talks to him. He doesn’t seem to notice me looking at him and never makes eye contact.

‘OK lads, we’re going straight into a practice match. Can I have the following people in blue, the rest in red?’ Our coach reads out a list of names and it’s no surprise that Brent and I will be playing opposite each other—me on red, him on blue. There’s a burst of chat as everyone swaps shirts, before making their way to join the rest of their team. ‘C’m on boys, let’s move it, we want to make full use of the time!’ the coach shouts over the hubbub.

Within a few minutes of the start, I am already surprised. Robert Brent doesn’t seem to be so good after all. He doesn’t seem to know where to stand, he’s often out of position, and when he does get the ball, he freezes or hesitates, wide-eyed and uncertain what to do or where to go. Stuart has already caught him in possession at the base of a scrum and knocked him down hard, spilling the ball for the red forwards to steal. I feel obliged to do the same, to ‘raise my game’, to ‘show him who’s boss’.

I get my chance fifteen minutes in, at the base of a maul, near the blue try-line. I hang back behind the rear foot, staying on-side, watching, waiting. Brent stands, hands held out in front of him, saying nothing, waiting for one of the blue forwards to flip the ball back to him. I imagine he’ll either pass to his fly-half, in which case I probably won’t have time to reach him, or perhaps kick for touch himself. I’m close enough to see the colour of his grey-green eyes, concentrating eyes, as they search out the ball among the mass of bodies. Tensed, alert, I bide my time. Suddenly, the ball pops out and I explode forward—straight at Brent, as fast as I can, my eyes locked on his. *And he looks up at me.* He shouldn’t have. He should have been looking at the ball. He *was* looking at the ball, but now he’s looking at me. Eyeball to eyeball, grey-green to brown, two 13-year-old boys, hunter and hunted. In the second before I

reach him, I see something in his eyes that I think is fear. Not terror, just fear. What is he frightened of? *Who* is he frightened of? Surely it can't be *me*? Can it?

He fumbles the ball—rather than catching it cleanly, it bumps weakly against his fingertips, rebounding into the empty air in front of him. In an instant, he looks back towards the ball and makes a second attempt to gather it before it disappears from his reach. As he does, I connect with his body. Not that hard—but hard enough. *The red boy hits the blue boy*: I drive my right shoulder into his ribs, and wrap my arms around his torso, his arms and the half-held ball. *The blue boy crumples*: I squeeze my arms around him as hard as I can—they join and overlap behind his back. My momentum knocks him backwards and down. *The red boy and the blue boy hit the ground*: I land on top of him, we bounce once, his body 'gives' a little, acting as a cushion for my landing. The ball is gone. *The red boy and the blue boy lie together on the ground*: My chest presses on his stomach. I release my squeeze, feel his breathing as his ribs rise then fall. His head lolls back into the grass, I feel his body relax. We lie there—just for a second.

★

Robert undoes just the top two buttons and slips his white poly-cotton school shirt over his head. He hangs the shirt roughly on a metal peg above the bench in the sports hall changing room and slides into a plain white vest. He kicks his shoes under the bench, stuffing his socks inside. 'Let's have a go at a max today, Dave, I'm ready for it', he says, with a half smile and a raised eyebrow, as he peels off his trousers and pulls his blue nylon tracksuit up over his briefs.

By now, it's been over a year since Robert and I started training together on the school's multi-gym. I'd been trying for ages to find someone to use the multi-gym with at lunchtime—we weren't allowed to use it alone—and although a few others had joined me for one or two workouts, it had never become a regular thing. With Robert it has been different. Two or three times a week, we eat our packed lunches at morning break and then spend most of lunchtime on the big blue machine. Usually, we begin on the bench press station, taking in turns to make ten lifts of as much weight as we can manage, before moving on to each of the other stations.

Robert leans down and pushes a steel pin into the hole between two of the black weight plates. He lies back on the bench, shuffles himself a little closer to the machine, and lets his arms stretch out and drop to the floor on either side. He takes a long, slow breath through his nose and then, quickly, exhales the air through his mouth. He reaches up and grasps the two plastic handles. One more quick breath and then he pushes, his knuckles turning white, the muscles of his body tense. The weight stack clanks upwards, faltering momentarily before continuing and allowing his elbows to lock out. After the briefest pause, he lowers the handle back to its starting position.

'Nice one!' I say from beside the bench. 'I reckon you've got another one in you, y'know'.

Robert grins and, like a dog, shakes his head from side to side. 'Phwwaar! I dunno! That was tough', he says, exhaling loudly. Letting his arms flop down to each side again, he opens and closes his fingers. 'What was that I just did?'

I lean over him and peer at the weight stack behind his head. 'Seventy. No, seventy-five'. I pat him twice on the side of his knee. 'I think you should have a crack at eighty'.

'Mmm, I dunno, I haven't done eighty before', he pauses. Then, with a glint in his eye and a chuckle: 'What the hell? Alright, give it to me baby!'

I lean over him again and slip the pin down one hole, then stand back to watch. The same routine: breaths, arm hang, grip, white knuckles and the explosion of every ounce of his power. He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth. His face contorts into a scream: '*Aaaaargh!*' The machine begins to yield, but slower this time. Robert keeps driving, his back and then hips arching up off the bench. But the machine budes no further. *Crash!* The weight stack drops back, the plates colliding with each other, the springs absorbing the impact.

'Shit! So close!' I reach out and, laughing, take his right hand in my two hands and haul him to his feet.

'Alright, it's your turn mister muscles!' he says, slapping me on the shoulder, 'Seventy-five to beat!'

★

I unhook my feet and, clumsily, swivel off the inclined sit-up bench to the floor. 'Awww, that kills!' I say through a wry smile, stretching back and pressing both hands into my aching abs. 'I'm not gonna be able to move tomorrow!'

'Tell me about it—that's how I was last week!' Robert replies, as he grabs the handles and slides his feet under the pads. Knees bent, the blue fabric of his tracksuit stretches over his knees and quads. He leans back, placing his hands behind his head, and hangs there, upside down on the steeply angled bench. He looks towards me and asks: 'How many to finish?'

'You're going for ten . . . in your own time Rob'.

Robert closes his eyes—not a tight scrunch this time, but gently and softly so that he looks relaxed, serene almost. Slowly, very slowly, he starts to bend upwards, elbows towards knees. He breathes through his nose, and his nostrils flare slightly with each inhalation. Other than that, his face remains still, his expression calm. *One.* As he lowers himself back down, my eyes are drawn to his forearm, the smooth, hairless skin of his inner arm—roped with veins now—and the fair, downy hair on his outer arm. *Two.* I watch his biceps, balled up hard and tight, contracting tighter still as he raises his body once more. *Three.* Hands gripped behind his head, his armpits are exposed to reveal a tuft of fine brown hair. Smooth skin stretches away down his side until it disappears under his vest. *Four.* Should I be looking at him like this? I force myself to look away, down at the ground. *Five.* His vest has slid down his torso, away from the waistband of his tracksuit. *Six.* I try not to look but my eyes are drawn to the hairless skin of his stomach. Robert has virtually no body fat—the skin is smooth and taut over the tight ridges of his contracting abdominals. *Seven.* His

navel . . . his eyes closed . . . his face still relaxed. *Eight*. The faintest line of the thinnest hair stretches towards his waistband. I give up trying not to look. *Nine*. The skin between his hip bones, exposed by the growing gap between waistband and vest, reveals a V-shaped muscle working beneath. *Ten!*

He hangs there, almost upside down, motionless, eyes closed. I do nothing. I want so much to touch him. But I know I can't. Or, rather, something is telling me that I can't. Yet it would feel so . . . natural . . . so right . . . to touch him at this moment. I fight against a feeling that is pulling me to take the step—just one step—to be beside him. I tense my entire body against an overwhelming desire to place my palm and fingers on his forearm—and to leave them there. I close my eyes to the image of my hand on his stomach, my fingers resting on his skin. I bite into my lip in an effort to resist this . . . this *need*—yes, that is what it feels like—to wrap my arms around his torso, my skin against his, and squeeze him tight.

So easily, so fluidly, Robert slides off the bench. As he stands up, he gently bumps his right shoulder into my left shoulder and wraps his arm around my back, warmly clasping my shoulder in his hand. 'Phwaar! That was a good session Dave! How are you feeling?'

★

'God, the water feels so *good!*' I say, resting my chin on my chest, closing my eyes, letting the warm water splash against my neck and run down my back. 'I sometimes feel like the only reason I workout is because the shower afterwards feels so great'. I turn round and watch the water run down my chest and over my stomach.

Robert laughs. 'Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like the pleasure after the pain'. He dips his face in and out of the flow of water, folding his arms tight to his chest and trying to catch a pool of water in the reservoir formed between his chest and arms.

We stand there under the running water for fifteen, twenty minutes. We always do. We stand there and talk—about anything. Then maybe we're quiet together. I feel no pressure, no need to be anywhere else. I just feel so comfortable and content standing there with him. And I imagine that, because he stays so long, he does too.

Every now and then I find myself looking at bits of his body, one bit at a time: his arms, his neck, his stomach, his thighs, his buttocks, his penis, his calves. His body is lean yet curvy, smooth yet hard, muscled yet balanced. I find his body—all of it—beautiful and glance over at him from time to time. Sometimes, feeling guilty, I turn my head away, something again telling me not to look. Other times, I'll catch his eye and realise—or *think* I realise—that he knows I've been looking at his body. We'll make eye contact for the briefest second then both look away—fast, way *too* fast. Sometimes, perhaps while I'm washing my hair, out of the corner of my eye I'll see that he is looking at me too, bits of my body, one bit at a time: my arms, my neck, my pecs, my penis, my stomach, my thighs. I like that he looks at me. I don't want him to stop.

'Ahhhh! You two are *always* in here!' A loud, abrasive voice calls out from the corner of the tiled shower area. It's Marcus—a team-mate from the under-15 rugby team—and he's leaning round the entrance to the showers, in his army uniform,

grinning and staring at us. Simultaneously, Robert and I turn away from Marcus to face the wall. ‘*Oh brilliant!*’ I whisper to Rob sarcastically, jolted from my relaxed state. Since giving up rugby, Robert has mostly been spared Marcus’s presence. I have not.

‘So, let me have a look now . . . which one of you is the giver and which is the taker?’ Marcus shouts out, chuckling to himself. ‘C’mon, turn around, don’t be shy!’ Both Robert and I stand where we are, facing the wall. Neither Rob nor I look at each other and neither of us speaks. ‘Oh yeah! *You* are definitely the taker!’ Marcus laughs, pointing his finger. ‘You’ve definitely got the arse for it’.

★

‘Marcus?’ Jonathan whispers during the maths lesson, trying to contain his laughter. ‘That bloody soldier-boy, fucking around in that stupid uniform! What a prick! He’s clearly a latent homosexual—like just about everyone else in the army!’

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know at that moment what *latent* meant—and didn’t think to look it up in the dictionary. It wasn’t until a long time after that I realised I didn’t really know what *homosexual* meant either. I would have been too scared to look that up in the dictionary and even if I had, it wouldn’t have helped.

★

Awkward, wobbling, Darren makes his way down the aisle from the back of the bus, bumping against a headrest when he loses his balance. There’s a thin film of sweat on his forehead from the struggle, his cheeks are flushed, his shirt untucked. He is pulling on the waistband and pockets of his black school trousers, which look twisted and uncomfortable. He flops into the seat beside me, halfway down the bus.

‘Shit. Those bastards!’ he says, sinking low into his seat. I look over at his face, then at his hands, which still fiddle with re-arranging his trousers. I’m not sure what to say to Darren, but I feel relieved that they got him and not me. Accompanied by a burst of laughter from the back of the bus, a pair of shredded red underpants come flying through the air and land on the seat opposite. Darren looks over at them and laughs bleakly. ‘Wankers’.

A slowly rising chant of five or six low voices in unison resonates from the back rows: ‘Marcus Hopper . . . Marcus Hopper . . . Marcus Hopper!’ I turn and look to the row behind me where Marcus, from his window seat, is flicking a ‘V’ over his head to the under-16 team members at the back of the bus. The chant increases in volume and urgency. Eventually, Marcus, grinning, climbs over his neighbour and starts to walk down the aisle. Still grinning, he puts his hands above his head in a mock-surrender pose. *Why does he go back there? Why doesn’t he just stay put?* I think to myself. *I wouldn’t walk back there, they’d have to come and get me if they wanted me. If they called my name—thankfully, for some reason they never do—I wouldn’t budge.*

When Marcus gets to the second row from the back, several arms shoot out simultaneously and grab him, hauling him into the back corner of the bus. He disappears from view, as the countryside rolls by outside the windows. Just the occasional flailing limb or head is visible above the row of headrests. For a few

seconds, there is the sound of a tussle, then the sound of ripping fabric, before loud cheers and laughs echo forwards. Another pair of shredded briefs flies through the air towards the front of the bus.

It's only a few moments later that the under-16 coach—a brave man, I think at this moment—strides down the aisle. He is literally spitting with rage, I've never seen him look so angry. He stops three rows from the back, grasps the headrests of the seats either side, and squares up to the back row boys. With an intensity I've never seen before in any of the teachers, he raises his finger like a pistol and points it at each of the older boys in the back row in turn. As he does, he shouts through clenched teeth: 'Right, you little shits! I've had enough of this. You cut it out, d'you hear me? You cut it out *now*! Otherwise I'm gonna come back here and bloody well wedge you'.

★

Even on the longest away trips, my year group never gave 'wedgies' to the younger boys—even when we progressed to under-16 level. *Thank god*. Or, perhaps, thank the under-16 coach for making his position on the activity totally clear. But still 'the boys' needed something to occupy and entertain themselves on journeys to and from away matches. One game was played regularly.

'Five and four', calls Darren, in time with the group's 4/4 rhythm, slapped out by palms on thighs. As Darren calls, he fingers the numbers for the group to see. *Count one, count two*.

'Four and two', Stuart chants, theatrically waving his fingers in front. *Count one, count two*.

'Two and three', chimes Jonathan. *Count one, count two*.

'Two and ...'

'*Show us your willy!*' comes the booming shout as someone screws the sequence up again. Wild laughter ensues and in an instant somebody is leaning forward, covering—in mock horror—his face with his hands. Those of us in the rows in front turn and look down the bus, our attention grabbed by the enthusiastic shout. *Who is it this time?* The 'victim' pulls his hands from his face, to reveal his identity along with a sheepish grin and a deep blush. It's Marcus—yet again. I sometimes wonder if he *deliberately* gets the numbers wrong—it really doesn't seem that difficult a game to get right.

With an air of resignation, he leans back in his seat, opens his legs, unfastens the button on his trousers and unzips his fly. As the other 'players' egg him on with surprisingly creative catcalls, Marcus looks upwards at the roof of the bus and simultaneously pulls the waistband of his trousers and briefs down to reveal his penis and testicles.

'Agghhh, maggot dick!' shouts someone.

'Urrrgh! Oi' marble balls!' squeals another.

'Haaa! Minnow features!' calls someone else, amid shrieks of laughter.

Still looking up at the roof, Marcus weathers their insults without complaint before fastening his zip and resuming the game.



Gordon and Jeremy. So little ever seemed to be said about them, to them or around them. Unmarried 50-somethings. Often in each other's company in and around school, often out together in town on a Saturday night. One taught English, the other maths.

I never saw them touch each other, not even shake hands. I never saw them make more than the briefest, fleeting eye contact, the meaning of which I found impossible to understand or interpret. Was that a collegiate smile? A friendly glance? Or something more? Speculation, pure speculation. I never heard a word.

Yet there were always flippant, out-of-context remarks from one boy or another: *'the homos' did this, 'the homos' did that. Have you heard? 'The queers' are taking us for games this afternoon.* And they did; they'd lead rugby practice, hockey practice, cricket practice. Together, always together. Gordon was funny, had a mischievous grin and a dynamic personality—always on the go, talking, telling jokes, smiling, teasing kindly, laughing. Jeremy, so often close by, more reserved, serious, thoughtful, quieter. They seemed to be such good friends. I liked them both. But nothing was ever said. Not ever. Nothing ever seemed to happen. Never.

Were they close? Did they live together? Were they a couple? Did they sleep in the same bed? Occasionally? Every night? I don't know. I hope they did. I hope that—amid all the boys and the deafening noise—they were happy, that they *were* together.



It had been the biggest, most important match—quarter-final in a knockout cup—that I had played for the school. And we had lost. Heavily. Seventeen years old and the last game of rugby I would ever play. An away match, deep in the rural English countryside, 100 noisy home spectators lining the touchline of the 1st XV pitch at this remote 'rugby school'. Had we already lost by the time I stepped up to shake and toss? *He* stood a clear head above me, looking down. The ref flipped a grubby 10p coin, it spun through space in an arc. Before it hit the grass, I called 'tails'. It was heads. We lost. *He* must have scored 30 points himself. We were out of the reckoning, no debate necessary.

I was last to leave the grotty changing room. I walked alone through the late-afternoon drizzle to the waiting bus, kit bag slung over my shoulder. It felt like everyone on board the bus was peering through the steamed-up windows, watching me, judging me. It felt like every window in the school building held a face that watched, with an air of superiority, smirking at my ineffective captaincy and missed tackles. I used the handrail to haul myself up the steps into the bus. I didn't make eye contact with our coach—who patted me on the back kindly as I walked by—with any of the team, or with the 20-odd supporters who'd come along on the bus, filling the spare seats. I had nothing to say.

Robert was sitting in a window seat, four rows from the front. He held my old, heavy black woollen donkey jacket on his lap. He looked up at me without saying a word and leaned forward in his seat a little. He held my gaze. The expression on his

face was still. Calm. Warm. Concerned. The seat next to him was empty. I flopped into it, with my last remnants of energy, and slouched forwards, putting my head in my hands and my elbows on my knees. He pulled that coat right over us both, over our heads, over our bodies, separating us from the world. He put his arm round my shoulder and he rested his head against mine.

★

We'd been hanging around together over the lunch hour, as we nearly always did. I can't remember why we hadn't used the multi-gym that particular day—perhaps we didn't have time, perhaps we were just too tired from the mini-dramas of our exams and university applications. We'd been talking about the subjects we thought we might like to study: Rob was set on medicine, I was half-heartedly thinking about psychology. We'd been talking about where we might go to study those subjects. We wandered the school grounds and, at some point, found ourselves outside the sports hall—the site of so many hours of shared workouts. I was not aware of having any particular plans or designs in mind. Instead, I was preoccupied with the thought that Rob and I would very likely find ourselves living in different towns in four or five months time. I'd spent hours a day with him for nearly five years. I knew him—or felt like I knew him—better than anyone. We'd talked about so much, yet some things—some important things perhaps—remained unsaid. Perhaps it was only me who felt, as a stubborn lump in my throat, something I was unable to identify, understand or begin to put into words. Who knows if Robert felt the same? Perhaps he'd already said all that he needed to say.

I peered through one of the narrow reinforced windows to see if the hall was in use. It looked empty, so I pushed on the scuffed steel kick plate with my foot, opening one half of the brown-painted double doors. I walked through and Robert followed. The door swung closed behind him with a soft *clunk*. We kicked off our shoes and walked down the hall, our socks silent on the hard floor. Robert ran his fingers along the wooden wall-panelling that ran the length of the hall, and looked up at the high ceiling. Neither of us spoke. I stopped and watched him walk until he noticed me watching and stopped as well. He smiled and slid to the floor. With his back resting against the wall, legs stretched out in front, he crossed his feet and clasped his hands on his lap. I sat down close beside him, our shoulders just touching.

'I wish we didn't have to move away Rob, I can't imagine living in another place to you, you know', I said, turning slightly to look at the side of his face.

'Yeah, I wish too. But I'm ready to leave here, I want to move on. And, you know, we might end up at the same uni, or very close together. Even if we don't, we'll see each other over the holidays'.

'Mmm, I s'pose'.

We sat for a while in silence. But I felt the lump again—something that seemed to want to be said. But I didn't know what it was or how to say it. The right words weren't clear to me so I tried instead to keep quiet. But I couldn't.

'You know Rob', I half whispered, before faltering and pausing once more. He turned and looked at me. He looked me right in the eye with that kind look of his again. Seconds passed. 'You know Rob'... more pause... 'I love you. I really do'.

One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, five thousand... He continued to look at me, with soft eyes, before turning his head away and looking down at his hands. 'Wow', another pause. 'I so envy the girl you end up saying that to'.

Reflections on the story

I do not want my stories to be consumed as 'knowledge' or received passively. I don't want readers to sit back as spectators. I want to engage them and evoke a response. I want readers, whatever their positioning in relation to me, to feel, care, and desire when they read my stories. (Sparkes, 2003, p. 67)

These remarks resonate with me, and mirror my purposes for sharing the preceding stories here and now. As I noted previously, my aim has been to connect with readers in a way that reduces the sense of 'Otherness' and difference regarding same-sex attracted males in sport. Drawing on the work of Barone (1995), Sparkes (2003) suggests that stories are often a better way to achieve this aim than realist or scientific forms of writing. In recognition of this, I want to resist limiting the reader's interpretive options by making a finalising interpretation of my story. I hold the view that stories are irreducible: no summary can do the work of the story as the insights that pertain are best expressed through the story itself. I therefore want to leave room for the story to 'breathe' in such a way that readers have an opportunity to *feel, care and desire* in response to the story. That said, I will share some personal reflections on the story, which connect to theoretical and methodological issues I raised earlier.

Although no story can answer every question about sexuality and masculinity in school sport, the story-writing process has increased my understanding of certain issues. Put another way, through storying these past moments, I have come to appreciate theory more sharply and with greater resonance than I did before. One example of this is the way the story reveals the interplay and distinction between *sexual orientation* and *sexual identity*. A particular sexual orientation—'defined as predominant attraction to female or male partners [which] appears to be fairly stable across the adult life course, at least in males' (Hall, 2009, p. 54)—is evident at several points. In the story, this dimension of sexuality appears as relatively independent of social and cultural factors in that it *intrudes* on and *contravenes* the heterosexist culture of sport, rather than being a product of it. Sexuality in this sense seems to exist in some fashion 'in' the body rather than 'in' discourse because a living *body* (expressing physical attraction and desire) interrupts a dominant *story* (a heterosexual narrative).

By contrast, signs of a same-sex sexual *identity* (naming oneself as gay or bisexual, for example) are absent in the story and this absence has implications for long-term

well-being and development (see Harper *et al.*, 2009). In contrast to sexual orientation, sexual identity depends on narrative processes (Hall, 2009) and is, therefore, strongly influenced by the culture in which a person is immersed. In terms of narrative and identity, McLeod (1997, p. 27) writes, 'the task of being a person in a culture involves creating a satisfactory-enough alignment between individual experience and "the story of which I find myself a part"'. Using this theoretical position as a lens to view my story might help make sense of the difficulties that young same-sex attracted males in sport are likely to face. Because the kind of embodied same-sex *experiences* I recount differ markedly from the available (heterosexual) *stories* within sport, the task of developing a coherent and authentic sense of self within this cultural setting becomes difficult or impossible (see Carless, 2010). Rather than achieving a gay or bisexual identity that 'fits' personal experience, it seems likely that a young male—faced with a profound mismatch between embodied experience and available story options—will falter or stall in his identity development, perhaps assuming a heterosexual identity by default or remaining uncertain about his sexual identity. Put another way, in Rosenfeld's (2009, p. 431) terms, 'Experiencing same-sex desires, interests, and even encounters and relationships in the absence of a discourse through which to interpret them, then, precluded identification as homosexual'.

In this light, the absence of gay males' stories in sport and physical education can be appreciated as a significant obstacle to *other* same-sex attracted young males developing an authentic sexual identity. This realisation underscores the need for gay and bisexual stories to be shared and discussed in school sport contexts because physical education and school sport are key sites for the circulation of sexuality narratives (Barron & Bradford, 2007). Researchers who have used stories in educational settings suggest that storied forms of communication have great pedagogical potential, particularly when it comes to sensitive or otherwise silenced issues, such as sexuality (e.g. Sparkes, 1997; Douglas & Carless, 2008, 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2010b). This potential includes supporting embodied knowledge, offering emotional connection, stimulating informed reflection, encouraging personal action and/or transformation, facilitating ethical awareness and voicing alternative perspectives.

The preceding story might be seen to offer an alternative perspective on homosexuality than is typically circulated in contemporary culture. Kurtz (2009) notes how the focus within mainstream gay culture is often on physical/sexual experiences at the expense of emotional connection. As a result, Kurtz suggests, the young gay men he interviewed often separated sex from emotion. Re-reading the story, I see that it not only contravenes heterosexism, but also the separation of physical/sexual connection and emotional connection. While desire, attraction and bodies are certainly present, it is simultaneously an emotional story, a relational story, a love story (see Adams, 2006). I have found the experience of *love*, same-sex or otherwise, difficult (or impossible) to explore through a scientific or realist tale—it is only through artistic approaches (such as this story) that I have been able to voice and explore this kind of relational narrative (see Douglas, 2009). On this basis,

creative analytic practices such as storytelling are a necessary component of social science and educational research if human experience, in all its diversity and intensity, is to be included.

It is also through the story form—as opposed to other forms of writing—that I have found myself best able to address a set of complex, ambiguous and contradictory experiences from an acknowledged position of ‘not knowing’. McLeod (1997, p. 112) writes that, ‘in telling stories we are “telling more than we know”’. In the context of this research, I *needed* to do this—to tell more than I know—for the simple reason that I did *not* understand the meaning of events in the story at the time they unfolded, and I continue to struggle to make sense of some experiences to this day. Because there is much in the events themselves that I do not fully understand, I would be remiss to even attempt to offer a ‘water tight’ interpretation. Further, it is clear that in telling these stories I have privileged *my own* experiences—I do not wish to imply that *all* same-sex attracted males will share this story.

From this position of ‘not knowing’, what I *do* have to offer, however, is ‘body knowledge’ (Evans, 2009)—a form of knowing that stems from embodied, visceral experience rather than abstract, theoretical exposition. Like Diversi and Moreira (2009), I have tried to draw on this knowing, not by looking to theory to explain life, but by looking to life to intervene in theoretical writings. The storytelling approach I use is therefore guided by an ethos that differs from traditional social scientific methods. Like Leggo:

I am not trying to close anything down; I am not trying to understand everything; I am not seeking control. Instead, I am open to the world, open to process and mystery, open to fragmentariness, open to understanding as an archipelago of fragments. This does not mean I am not trying to make connections in understanding, but I am no longer pretending that I understand what I do not know. (Leggo, 2008, p. 168)

While acknowledging the need to speak—to voice a story about a silenced issue—I simultaneously recognise the need to retain a degree of openness that resists finalising the experiences of same-sex attracted young males. There is a need to say something, but I must resist the pretence of saying everything. *The* story is bigger than *this* story. Thus, I offer my story ‘not as proof, as with our conventional processes in social science, but as illumination and connection’ (Neilsen, 2008, p. 96) in the hope that it might increase understanding of other same-sex attracted young males in sport.

The observation that storytellers tell more than they know implies that meanings are likely to be embedded in stories in ways that are less than explicit. Stories, McLeod (1997) reminds us, carry meaning that the reader must work to unpack. The ways a story will affect a particular reader, therefore, cannot be known because, as ‘actors in relation to other actors, stories are always a bit out of control’ (Frank, 2006, p. 423). At the same time, as Evans (2009) notes, not all stories are ‘good’

stories—some stories serve only to reinforce prejudice and discrimination. I feel the combined implications of these two points as I write: How might readers react to *me*, having publicly shared an intimate tale such as this? How might readers, having read my story, respond to *other* same-sex attracted individuals? Will my story serve merely to reinforce prejudice and discrimination? I cannot know the answers to these questions, and the uncertainty troubles me. In committing to tell this story I am therefore taking a calculated risk: namely that, in the context of this topic, the overriding need at this time is to speak in order to resist continued silence. I choose to speak—to *act*—recognising that doing so will lead to consequences over which I have limited control.

In an effort to bring about positive rather than negative consequences, I have worked to the best of my ability to create a ‘good’ story. I have sought feedback from colleagues and friends as to the impact, coherence, insightfulness, authenticity, aesthetic merit, verisimilitude and plausibility of the story (see Sparkes, 2002). I have interrogated my own motives for sharing the story and considered the honesty and integrity of the representation I have offered. While these have been necessary steps, I have above all been swayed by Frank’s (2000) point that stories *do* things in the world and that, on this basis, a key way in which a story might be judged is on the basis of the ‘work’ that it does.

Reflecting on what makes a ‘good’ poem, Leggo (2008, p. 169) describes how he is often asked: *Is this a good poem?* as if he carries ‘some kind of standard measuring device for assessing the value of poems’. Yet, the important question, he suggests, is: *What is a poem good for?* The answer to this question, in the context of my work here, is to tell a story that ‘goes against the grain’, that troubles dominant and restrictive assumptions regarding male sexuality in sport. Given the complexity and ethical delicacy of exploring developing and often unresolved sexual identities among young males, I have put my faith in personal stories as the most appropriate (for me, at this point of time, in this context) approach. If my story is judged to be ‘good’ then it should be judged as such on the basis of its *usefulness*: because it illuminates experiences of same-sex attraction and developing sexual identity, reveals how the culture of sport makes these experiences ambiguous and problematic, and encourages understanding of—and identification with—individuals often portrayed as Other.

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