**Shifting Sands and Moving Goal Posts: Communicating Gender in Sport**

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It was a beautiful day and the walk to the park took barely five minutes. But well before we had reached the park gate, the sunshine had already begun to warm our bodies and conversation. And it was usually this way. We’d step outside for a walk or a surf, and in doing so, the ‘what we were going to write about’would begin to take shape.

As we came to the park gates, so intense and engaged were we in our conversation, neither of us really gave much attention to a group of footballers training. In fact, we might have almost failed to register the group as they ran past, but for a comment made by one of the men with COACH written in capital letters on the back of his tracksuit, who shouted, “C’mon girls, put your backs into it!”

And then they were gone, as quickly as they’d appeared. The dregs of the sexist message, in contrast, hung in the air. I looked at David, he looked back, each wondering what we could have said that would make a difference.

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Take the most prestigious tournament

to a golf course with no women members

Put flowers in the urinals

A screen down the middle of the locker room

Men on the left-Ladies to the right

And finally, hammer a “Championship” marker on the men’s tees

And make out everything is OK

We let them play!

“Jeremy, we can’t play today,” said a young male returning to the open trunk of a car in the car park, “there’s some *l-a-d-i-e-s* event on.”

“Bloody women!” his mate replied, slamming the door.[[1]](#endnote-1)

(Adapted from Douglas & Carless, 2008)

**A Call to Stories**

Like many qualitative researchers we have often found traditional research methods are not well suited to exploring and/or representing emotional connection, empathic understanding or embodied knowledge. [[2]](#endnote-2) [[3]](#endnote-3) [[4]](#endnote-4) [[5]](#endnote-5) Yet, sport is renowned for displays of emotion and passion; its axis is physical, sensual, and fleshy. We have thus been challenged to find ways to preserve the corporeality of sport without diminishing, devaluing or diluting its complexity during the research process. Arts-based methodologies, and particularly storytelling, has provided us one route forward. It is not our intention to describe here all the benefits storytelling *per se*, but given we began this chapter with two short stories and will later use dialogical and storied representations, we feel some background to narrative, stories and storytelling would be useful.

**Narrative Theory and Stories**

Underscoring our use of storytelling is narrative theory, of which the central tenet is that communication through stories is a basic human activity.[[6]](#endnote-6) [[7]](#endnote-7) [[8]](#endnote-8) In order to make sense, bring meaning and create order, people create and share stories. Through creating and sharing stories an individual is able to create an identity, a sense of place, belonging and community. Narrative theory provides an understanding about the ‘work’ that these stories ‘do’ making clear how stories are implicated in their influence on human behaviour, action, and relationships. An important concept underpinning narrative theory is that stories can only be created through the narrative resources that are available to an individual. This being the case, we learn a great deal about a culture or ‘people’ by exploring the stories that are told and/or silenced within that culture.

Important to our narrative research in sport has been recognising the way stories cluster together and give rise to recognisable plots. *Dominant narratives* are clusters of stories that have moral force so that some actions and behaviours are justified over others. The dominant narrative in sport has been called the *performance narrative*,*[[9]](#endnote-9)* a hegemonically masculine type of story,[[10]](#endnote-10) where winning is the only accepted outcome and being tough, strong and powerful are the only routes to success. If stories about emotional engagement, loss, weakness, shame, empathic awareness or sensitivity do surface, they are often subsequently silenced, hidden, devalued and/or rendered taboo. One consequence is that there is a dearth of stories to validate alternative ways of living and being in sport, yet these alternatives are needed to help people negotiate their lives in sport. For example, when the performance narrative fails to fit or align with individual experience. At these times, *counter narratives* are needed tooppose, resist or undermine the authority of a dominant narrative, bringing to light morally relevant details that have been missed or misrepresented by the dominant narrative. [[11]](#endnote-11) [[12]](#endnote-12)

Under these circumstances, storytelling methodologies do work that moves beyond analysing stories. A story can be created by a researcher in order interrogate a scene, to better understand behaviour, and/or to communicate research findings. A well-told story, for example, includes physicality and emotions. In recent years, we have found reading or performing stories to students evokes a very different response compared with traditional types of [rep]presentation.[[13]](#endnote-13)

From an ethical and moral standpoint, stories also have the potential to remove artificial boundaries while preserving and revealing the intimacy we develop with a participant that is usually obscured in research findings. Stories also allow us to stand with participants on the page and in the unfolding action, thus showing the philosophy underpinning our research. Before providing some examples, we first revisit some of the issues that are relevant to understanding how hegemonic masculinity has been constructed and maintained in sport.

**Constructing Hegemonic Masculinity through Sport**

In 1989, when Australian feminist, activist and scholar Lois Bryson wrote that sport is a powerful institution through which male hegemony is constructed and maintained,[[14]](#endnote-14) she may possibly have hoped that by 2020 things might have changed. So too might have Bennett, Whitaker, Wooley Smith and Sablove (1987), who said of sport:

Sport perpetuates domination and submission. Sport is built on a capitalistic model of competition and survival of the fittest. Sport uses people and discards them. The very language of sport is the language of assault and dehumanization. One team penetrates the other’s defences; seeks another’s weakness; wipes out the opponent. Men who err are sissies (women). Men who perform well are studs. The recruitment pool is a meat market; injured players are put out to pasture. (p. 372).

In the intervening years, the number of women and girls participating in sport and the types of activities now accessible to women have increased.[[15]](#footnote-1) In numerous professional sports women can earn sizeable incomes through prize money, salaries and endorsements.[[16]](#footnote-2) There are now more women coaching sport, more women taking up leadership roles in sport and more opportunities for women to work in sport media and television. These types of outcomes often lead people to assume that there is equity and equality in sport.

Against this, it is important to note, women in sport are still being subjected to unwarranted ‘gender verification’ testing, which is invasive and infringes on their human rights, dignity, and privacy. There remains a perception that women’s sport requires rule and regulation changes to make up for a lack of strength, stamina and power or to reduce risk of injury.[[17]](#footnote-3) In professional sports, women play for lower prize money compared to their male counterparts, are given less media and TV coverage and have fewer endorsements.[[18]](#endnote-15) Added to this, for women who move into coaching and leadership roles, their progression is blocked by a ceiling made of concrete.[[19]](#endnote-16) [[20]](#endnote-17)

While there have been changes in sport, the culture that underpins sport and the ideology that sustains it has been – and can still be – a bastion of sexism, heterosexism, heteronormativity and homophobia. [[21]](#endnote-18) [[22]](#endnote-19) [[23]](#endnote-20) [[24]](#endnote-21) [[25]](#endnote-22) [[26]](#endnote-23) There are, of course, many reasons for this. Anderson describes sport culture as a ‘closed-loop system’[[27]](#endnote-24) – that is, athletes, coaches and officials are likely to have grown up within a sporting culture. As such, sensitivities around gender issues along with an exclusive focus on winning means it becomes difficult to recognise, let alone challenge, oppression, homophobia and sexism. These processes can particularly affect diversity and inclusion around gender and gender identities, as well as sexuality and sexual identities. Thus, sport continues to resemble the world of sport that Bennett et al described.

In 1978, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization published the ‘International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport,’ the first rights-based document establishing physical education and sport as a fundamental right for all. The document was widely criticised for failing to represent women and girls. In response, ‘The Berlin Declaration’ made amendments in an attempt to include women and girls’ physical activity, as did a revised version of the International Charter. Following these revisions, the Women’s Sport Foundation noted:

Unfortunately, despite these well-written and comprehensive documents, it is plain to see that inequalities in sport persist unaddressed even though nearly all the countries of the world have promised otherwise. Just as we see with [Title IX](https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/advocate/title-ix-issues/) in the United States, without vigorous monitoring and accountability, pretty words on paper do not produce changes — people do. (Oglesby, 2017)

In saying “pretty words on paper” do not bring about change, whereas “people do” the Women’s Sports Foundation brings into sharp focus the necessity for individual accountability. That is, we all share a responsibility to understand what constitutes sexist, racist, abusive, and homophobic behaviours - it cannot be left to a change of policy or to well-intentioned charters alone. In order to bring about change within society, it is important that each of us begin to contest oppressive forces within abusive power systems.[[28]](#endnote-25) But how do we recognise those forces that oppress us if, as Anderson suggests, the closed loop systems in sport means we may be blind to those forces and if they are the sea within which we swim? [[29]](#endnote-26) And, if we do recognise oppression and subjugation, by what means might it be challenged so it results in social change?

**Moral Accountability**

A useful starting place is with an example of sexism and abuse that took place in 2016 and involved Donald Trump in the run-up to the US presidential election. After making abusive and predatory comments about women, he stated that his comments were ‘locker room talk.’ [[30]](#endnote-27) It was the use of this particular context, the male changing room, that brought it into the horizon of us in sport. However, what made this incident particularly interesting was the ideological challenge to Trump’s suggestion that such talk is typical and not unusual in locker rooms. The following, published in the Telegraph online[[31]](#endnote-28) provides some of the responses:

"As an athlete, I've been in locker rooms my entire adult life and uh, that's not

locker room talk," Baseball, All Star pitcher Sean Doolittle of the Oakland Athletics on Twitter 10th October 2016

“Don't throw us in there-we have nothing to do with it…that ain’t our locker room talk. I don’t know what locker room he’s been in.” NBA’s Miami Heat Udonis Haslem.

"Claiming Trump's comments are 'locker room banter’…is to suggest they are somehow acceptable. They aren't." Dahntay Jones of the Cleveland Cavaliers Twitter 9th October 2016

“I'm offended as an athlete that [@realDonaldTrump](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump) keeps using this ‘locker room talk’ as an excuse.” Soccer’s Robbie Rogers of LA Galaxy, the first openly gay athlete to play in a top North American sport league, Twitter, 10th October 2016,

There are a number of processes at play in the above that seem important to consider more closely. From a narrative theoretical position, dominant narratives can damage an individual’s moral agency through hiding, naturalising and normalising processes. They *naturalise* (the oppression and abuse of women by men) through suggestions that these actions are part of male biology or in other words, a masculine trait where ‘boys will be boys.’ By identifying himself within such a narrative script, Trump uses the narrative to deflect attention away from his personal accountability toward a male biology, hormones, and DNA, and sport culture allows or even encourages it. Secondly, dominant narratives *normalise* sexist behaviour, presenting the story as if all male athletes talk like this in a locker room. This also deflects attention away from the behaviour so that, ‘nothing morally objectionable appears to be going on.’[[32]](#endnote-29) In doing so, sexist and homophobic comments and behaviour hide the way such talk subjugates people: in this case, men (because all men are implicated if it is natural and normal) as well as women (because it condones such behaviour and talk towards women) are subjugated. These types of actions and behaviour also keep alive myths about how men in sport behave, and what is acceptable in a sport context or between men. It is no wonder the general public often misunderstands athletes.

A problem for male athletes, therefore, are those clusters of stories that fan the ‘boys will be boys’ flame also recognise narratives like, ‘there is no smoke without fire’. In other words, although perhaps few people believed that all men are as abusive and predatory as Trump, these types of stories ‘are notoriously evidence-resistant’[[33]](#endnote-30) and leave a question mark in some people’s minds. Our identities are created around the aspects of our lives and relationships that matter to us, yet they are also constituted by the stories other people create about us.[[34]](#endnote-31) Thus, the ‘boys will be boys’ type of narrative omit problematic information or evidence (as illustrated previously) that undermines the truth of their claims and, at the same time, ‘undermines the cognitive authority of people who are in a position to point out those inconvenient facts.’[[35]](#endnote-32)

Hilde Lindemann Nelson provides some theoretical background insights that shed light on this issue. She suggests that if an identity has been morally damaged, one route towards repair is through acts of purposeful self definition, such as developing or creating a counterstory.

Counterstories, which root out the master narratives in the tissue of stories that constitute an oppressive identity and replace them with stories that depict the person as morally worthy, supply the necessary means of resistance. Here, resistance amounts to *repair*: the damaged identity is made whole. Through their function of narrative repair, counterstories thus open up the possibility that the person could attain, regain, or extend her freedom of moral agency.[[36]](#endnote-33)

By publicly distancing themselves through comments like: “That's not locker room talk,” “Don't throw us in there,” and “Bragging about getting away with sexually assaulting women because you're famous is not locker room talk!”these athletes help create a reservoir of counterstories that set out to cause a shift [[37]](#endnote-34) in cultural understanding. Their actions make a clear and public statement about individual moral identities, about accountability towards women and sport, and about what is acceptable. While these acts help reinstate the moral agency of these athletes, they also show solidarity and advocacy for women, which are equally important in terms of challenging sexist behaviour and attitudes.

While this is a very public example, sexist and homophobic behaviour also exists under the radar, in more covert messages, and through signs and signals that are more difficult to decode and identify as sexism or homophobia. For example, the coach who said “C’mon girls” to a group of males might believe the comment is just a bit of ribbing and not recognise that the roots of the comment (and arguably why it motivates some men) are embedded deeply within a much larger narrative. Thus, many people – who do not see themselves as sexist and or homophobic – may be unaware of their sexist and homophobic comments and behaviour.

As researchers, we have a responsibility not just to point out or document what is happening. While this task has arguably been necessary, perhaps the priority now is to make more explicit and understandable how and in what ways people need to become more aware, and more sensitive and behave differently. Along with this, we also need to imagine and envisage better alternatives.

**Using Stories in Sport**

In what follows, we draw on dialogue and stories to explore how stories might challenge hegemonic masculinity, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia in sport. Our dialogical approach takes the form of a conversation around particular stories we have written from researching three different sport contexts. These are same sex attraction in school sport; high performance sport; and sport and adventurous training for wounded/injured soldiers.

**Example One: Researching Same Sex Attraction in School Sport**

Kitrina:David**,** the stories you often write seem to go beyond talking about or showing narrative theory. Why is this?

David Denzin makes the point that the ‘performance tale is a utopian tale of self and social redemption, a tale that brings a moral compass back into the reader’s (and the writer’s) life.’ [[38]](#endnote-35) Performance texts *act on the world in order to change it,* so stories, vignettes and other arts-based methods provide a way for people to think and understand the world differently. Along with that there is so much of the human experience that lies at the borders of what can be said; [[39]](#endnote-36) [[40]](#endnote-37) [[41]](#endnote-38) [[42]](#endnote-39) [[43]](#endnote-40) we can’t just leave it out because it’s difficult to communicate. Creating a story (or at times a song, poem, or ethnodrama) helps us to communicate emotionally significant information and some of the things that go unsaid, or can’t be put into words. It also makes it possible to take the reader into unfamiliar scenes, or make the familiar seem strange, and that helps make more obvious how people are hurt by what, on the surface, might seem innocuous comments. The following extract is from a story I wrote based on school experiences of same sex attraction.

**Adapted From “A Story in Ten Fragments” [[44]](#endnote-41)**

‘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 girls, 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.’

Kitrina: I’ve never been into a male changing room, nor been in the shower at a boys school, or travelled on a coach to a rugby match, but your stories allowed me to get a feel of what it may have been like to be a young man attracted to another young man in a culture that is hegemonically masculine and homophobic. It helped me to understand things in an emotional and connected way, and also see how gender is policed through verbal abuse. The story made it clear how hegemonic masculinity silences gay and bisexual men, while and at the same time, it degrades and devalues women.

David: Storytelling makes it possible for the reader to feel and experience with the characters in the story what is emotionally significant for them and why. If it’s done well, the writer gains new insights, as well as the reader, so there is potential to develop a much more sophisticated level of ethical and moral reflection. [[45]](#endnote-42)

**Example two: Researching high performance sport**

Kitrina: I have only learned through the process of writing storiesthat it is possible, as a writer, to learn, be surprised, or even shocked, when interrogating a scene and characters/dialogue as I write. At these moments it becomes possible to find connections between a throw-away comment like ‘turn around girls, don’t be shy!’ and an ideology that damages women and men. In the following story, where I was attempting to take the reader into my world of professional golf, I drew on my experiences and observations as well as research interviews with female tour players. The story is a fiction based on fact; there are no people called Bernard, Ken, or Monica, but these types of behaviours unfold each week. The story is based on the contractual event that occurs before each tournament, the pro-am, in which women professional golfers have to play. The main character is Bernard, a type of powerful and successful businessman you are likely to find at women’s golf tournaments. The following extract picks up the story after Monica has hit her tee shot.

**“The Pro-am”[[46]](#endnote-43)**

“On the tee Bernard Brasco!” The starter announced, but Bernard wasn’t ready. He was still looking down the fairway to where Monica’s ball lay…then it dawned on him, as he looked again towards her ball in the middle of the fairway, a long, long way away, that he must hit it further than this girl.

A bead of sweat formed on his brow, it gained weight and size before dripping onto his shaky grip. He stood in the hitting position, muscles tense, stance too wide, and going for the big shot, he swung too quickly – it was all over in a flash. A huge divot flew up in the air and the ball squirted off into bushes 50 yards away. Bernard didn’t look up.

“Nice one Mary!” came a voice from the crowd along with muffled chuckles, “Does your husband play? I think you forgot your makeup and yellow handbag!”

Paul, the third member of the group recognised the voice and nodded toward Julian, a slightly inebriated client of theirs. Bernard piped up.

“It’s this Italian Julian – she’s got me in a fluster!”

“Oooh! Now I see why you hit in the bushes! Maybe she’ll help you look for it!” Julian and Bernard both laughed loudly.

Monica smiled. The other professionals rolled their eyes; they’d heard it all before.

David: Even from the short extract above, I get a sense of the ways women can be infantilised by using the term *girl*, and the way some men feel shame by not being able to hit the ball further than a woman. Then they can be mocked by others, as Julian does by calling Bernard by a Mary, a traditionally female name*,* and through other abusive comments that question the hegemonically masculine gender order. Both men then attempt to restore a hegemonic, heterosexist gender order by making predatory sexual innuendos - that Bernard hit into the bushes on purpose in order to lure Monica to look for his lost ball, and then, he would have sex with her which would provide evidence of his manhood and allow him to save face. When women are thus disempowered publically, perhaps the only dignified thing to do is stay silent. The Pro-am is an entertaining story, as opposed to “That Night,”, another story from your research which I continue to find difficult to listen to.

**Example Three: Researching Taboo Issues in High Performance Sport**

Kitrina: I hate the “That Night” story, but I hate even more that people get raped, and

how often I hear some men say, “She was asking for it,” without any idea about the person, the circumstances or how being raped can bring a level of trauma that can change a person’s life forever.

David: Why did you choose to write about rape through a story about rape?

Kitrina: The most honest answer is a participant I’d been interviewing for six years as part of my PhD contacted me for help. She’d recently retired from professional sport and the process had provoked a lot of emotional distress and triggers to trauma. She’d never told her Mum she had been sexually assaulted when she was a child, nor had she felt able to recount her experience of rape. She lived with these in silence, feeling shame. Well, in fact she was only able to tell me a few facts. I spent the whole day just witnessing her distress and handing her tissues. I wasn’t researching rape, I didn’t invite this story and I felt inadequate. I didn’t know what to do, but I also felt a responsibility to do something. When I decided to try and write the story, there was a lot I didn’t know, but through drawing on my imagination and experiences on tour as a container for her story, I was able to use the facts that I had and set them into motion through a story plot that I was familiar with*,* thinking *this is how it might go down*. The story begins with a group of pro golfers and caddies watching football on TV one evening in one of the player’s hotel rooms; nothing unusual about that. The game ends and people disperse, two are left. This happens all the time, again, nothing unusual. One of them, Graham, is a horny male and wants sex, the participant didn’t tell me who this person was. She would say, he was just one of the “boys.” The character in the story, Val, is the participant. While confident and resourceful on a golf course, she was extremely vulnerable off the golf course due to her childhood experiences. She wants love, affection, a relationship, and acceptance (don’t we all?), but she was struggling with her sexuality. Because the culture is heterosexist and she wants to fit in, she doesn’t want to be labelled a lesbian. But nor does she want her experience of being sexually assaulted as a child to keep ruining and impinging on her life. Slowly, through emotional and psychological coercion, Graham has sex with her.

David: I don’t think it is possible to communicate the horrors of rape, or the emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological harm that is done, or how this is such a taboo subject in sport, as powerfully, by just reporting the occurrence, or presenting ‘data’ and stats. We need to create, from our research, accounts that are visceral, evocative, compelling and unflinching. Stories can do that, and we also need to share stories that resist cleaning up, sterilising, or diminishing the brutal realities of discrimination, misogyny, abuse and trauma. I remember film director Steve McQueen said something similar on his Oscar winning film *12 Years A Slave*. He said; “I didn’t want to censor myself on anything. I decided I’m going to show everything … How can I make a movie about slavery and not show some aspects of it? I cannot. For my sisters, and for other people, it would be a travesty … It was a very costly, emotionally charged story to tell on everybody’s part.” [[47]](#endnote-44) Likewise with your story, the final scene is especially damning and depressing. In the following extract, we take up the story as Graham leaves Val’s room.

***“That Night”* [[48]](#endnote-45)**

Val wanted to curl up into a ball and die, but she needed to vomit and so she staggered awkwardly to the bathroom where she threw up immediately, grabbing the toilet bowl to steady herself as she wretched out her guts, her pain, her stupidity, her worthless-ness, her hopelessness, and then, she collapsed on the floor and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

Meanwhile, Graham ran into Dino and Phil in the lobby.

“Ah, Graham,” Phil said putting his arm around his friend’s shoulder as much to steady himself as it was to get close to his mate. “What you been up to? Coming for a game of pool?”

Graham’s hand, in an obvious fashion, went directly to his crotch where he massaged his genitals. Simultaneously, his facial expression produced a huge smile and raised eyebrows.

“You bastard, you haven’t?” asked Dino.

“Nahhh, course not,” he said, laughing and raising both hands in mock surrender.

“What? With Val?” Phil laughed, and joined the others in their walk to the snooker room, “You fucker!”

“Yeah, I know,” Graham chuckled, “and you owe me ten euros Phil.”

“What, is she?” Phil asked setting the balls up on the table.

“Yeaaah,” Graham replied laughing while sorting a snooker cue from the rack and quickly chalking its tip, “Definitely a member of the finger in the wall club.” He bent over the table, steadied the cue in his left hand, pulled it back and hammered its tip into the white ball. As balls exploded in all directions, he turned to his mates.

“She’s a dyke gentlemen, a lesbo, and not a very good shag.”

Kitrina: So much for stories helping us to imagine a better world eh?! But, I

imagine for every person who has been raped, male or female, and for those

who have been sexually abused, it *is* bleak. And sadly, I have heard some

men talk like Graham, in a predatory and abusive ways.

David: But, in terms of this type of research it is needed. When you

performed the story in lectures and conferences, often to sport science students, and then invited group discussions and written feedback, it’s made it very clear how important these types of stories are. 46 Class discussions provoked students to think about their ethical behaviour, for example, when the male students publicly sided with Val. On the feedback sheets from female students, many noted how they found the responses of their male colleagues to be empowering and generated feelings of solidarity. But secondly, in group conversations after you read the story, the male students distanced themselves from Graham. By making their remarks (that Graham was wrong, and that he had no right), ‘in public’ in front of both their male and female peers, the male students’ declarations become a moral act. This is much like the athletes who publicly challenged Trump’s ‘locker room’ remarks, sending a clear message that this type of talk/behaviour is wrong, and not how they behave.

Kitrina: And as opposed to rape and sexual abuses being ‘taboo’ and a woman being silenced, the story and discussion brought these issues and the behaviour of men into the open in a way that allowed sport students (many of whom will go into high level sport teams) to claim a moral identity and understanding in a deeper way about how some types of ‘talk’ or ‘banter’ are part of a dominant and damaging narrative. Several students also wrote in their feedback that before the lecture, if they had read in the news media that a star athlete had been accused of rape they would have thought it was the woman’s fault, but following the story and the discussion, they had changed their minds.

**Example Four: Researching a Sport Intervention for Soldiers Returning from War**

David: Researching injured soldiers returning from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq during a sport and outdoor programme has been a completely different environment. For these guys, ‘sport’ is playing an important role in their recovery. The following story, based on ethnographic field research, gives a glimpse of what this sport recovery means to the soldiers who participate in wheel chair basketball.

***Wheelchair Basketball* [[49]](#endnote-46)**

Have you ever seen a man in a wheelchair perform a pirouette? Spin on the spot, 360-degrees, at speed and then stop, as they say, on a dime. Then, roll backward, tip the front up, and balance on two wheels, laugh, and spin again. Now, give him a ball, and put him on a basketball court.

Imagine that same man—dirt in his mouth, his eyes, his teeth and hands bloody, legs missing, genitals exposed through torn fatigues, broken skin, lying motionless on an Arab desert floor, thousands of miles from his home, unable to move—when the thought flashes across his mind: “I CAN’T FUCKING MOVE!” Fast forward. Through the months of rehab, pain, lies, humiliation, lost hope, fear. Sat at home, alone, drugged up, angry, lost. And no one comes to visit. A month passes, 2 months, 3 months, 4, a year . . . apathy . . . another year.

The clash of iron, the noise, the exhilaration, the possibility, fun, laughter, blokes ribbing each other, speed down the court. Lungs bursting, perspiration flooding, adrenaline pumping, a body that recognizes, remembers, the feelings, they were good, weren’t they? They were lost, weren’t they? And here they are—again. Dare a man . . . believe again?

Kitrina: We both found that individually soldiers were really respectful and valued an opportunity to talk, both about their experiences of war and life changing injuries, but also how this particular sport project was helping them. That said, we both found military culture sexist and homophobic. The following story, “How do you take it?” is one example, and one way we have attempted to challenge sexism.

***How Do You Take It? (Based on field notes, May 2015)***

Needing to backup my interviews I bypassed the refreshments trolley, sat down and opened my laptop. Alan and Norman, two of the civilian coaches came in, sat nearby and passed the time joking and exchanging stories while watching YouTube clips on Norm’s phone. Slowly, one-by-one, the soldiers trickled in; most went straight for the coffee and cake.

“Have you been to Northern Spain then?” Alan asked, picking up on a conversation we’d been having earlier.

“Yes, a few times,” I said looking up as he stood and walked towards the coffee.

“Where was that?” he continued.

“Oh, Santander, Somo, Bilbao.” I watched him pour his coffee.

“Do you want a coffee, Norm?” He asked.

“Oh-yes, thanks,” Norm replied, not looking up from his phone.

“Kitrina?” he asked, smiling and holding up another cup.

“Yes, thanks.” I shut my laptop and walked over, glad to be asked, glad to be included. I was dying for a coffee.

“How do you take your coffee?” he asked.

I thought Alan’s question was aimed at me, but before I could answer, Norm spoke up: “I like mine 18 inches,” he said laughing and then, “Are we talking about the same thing?”

I wished I hadn’t heard, and didn’t laugh. I felt everyone’s gaze. Whatever I had been going to say to Alan about Spain was now lost to me, not knowing what to say to Norm, I just answered Alan.

“I don’t need milk or sugar thanks.”

Alan passed me the coffee. He wasn’t smiling now but carried on pouring coffees, unwrapping the cake, and offering pieces round. Everyone in the room seemed to be suddenly quieter than before the comment. Perhaps they were waiting to see what happened next.

A moment later, not looking up from his phone, Norm carried on.

“We have this joke don’t we, Alan?” there was a pause while his fingers danced over the phone again, then, “Sorry Kitrina, I shouldn’t say that” he laughed.

“No!” I said, in an off hand way, trying not to make too much of it. “You shouldn’t have.”

“But it’s the army in me coming out, I’ve only been out a couple of years.”

“It doesn’t matter, you shouldn’t say that.” I repeated, putting my coffee by the chair, and getting on with my work. Alan passed Norman a coffee.

“Thanks, mate,” he said, without taking his eyes off of his phone, “That’s great.”

In a whirl of high energy and enthusiasm the head coach burst into the room. “Right everybody,” he announced in a loud voice, rubbing his hands and smiling. Any remaining tension was lost. I was lost in thought, remembering the stories some of the female soldiers had told me that week. Stories of sexual abuse and rape, and I wondered if Norm or the other coaches had any idea what it was like being a female in this type of culture, one where, to get on, a woman feels she has to become ‘one of the boys.’ I hated that I was the one who noticed, hated it had to be me who spoke out and that, alongside all the very excellent coaching, there were moments like *this*.

David: The previous story illustrates how difficult, or impossible, it can be, to

“call out” sexist, homophobic behaviour/talk when no one else in the group will stand with you. Norm knows his comment, which refers to the size of his penis, is wrong, and offers a (lame) apology. But, in the same way that Trump did, he attempts to deflect attention away from personal accountability by including another male coach, “We have this joke don’t we Alan?” and then, to garner further support he suggests this is normal behaviour in the army. Unlike the athletes, none of the other soldiers or Alan choose to distance themselves from the comment. Your strategy, saying, “No, you shouldn’t*,”* marks his behaviour as wrong, but that is the end of it. There is no counterstory, no acts or behaviour that reinstate the moral agency of Alan, or other soldiers – thus they are all tarnished with the same brush. There is no show of solidarity and advocacy for you and/or other women.

Kitrina: Ultimately, there is little change from this approach. In our final story

however, you explore a different strategy. This story is also based on ethnographic field research during the sport/adventure course for soldiers.[[50]](#endnote-47) Here you (David) narrate the story, while Billy (pseudonym) is the civilian coach/course leader. In contrast to the above story, ‘Three Seconds Flat’ shows how storytelling can provoke moral understanding along with behaviour change.

**“Dining Room, Day 3” Adapted from “Three Seconds Flat”**

It’s a demanding job, being course leader, and one that I can see Billy takes seriously. I imagine he would rather be spending the evening preparing for tomorrow’s sessions, so I appreciate him making time for me to interview him.

I’ve brought along drafts of two stories I’ve written which foreground moments of sexism and homophobia this week. I want to talk with him about these, but don’t feel comfortable just bringing them up in general conversation. I suppose I want him to have a chance to feel what I’ve felt being here. So I begin our interview by asking if he would read the stories as a way to kick-start our dialogue. He agrees and begins to read while I switch on my recorder, and wait.

Billy finished reading, looks up and sits back in his chair. “Good

piece of writing that,” he says as we both laugh, a little nervously. He rubs his hands together, pausing again.

I’m finding the silence uncomfortable, so begin to speak, “Well, it’s trying to get …” then force myself to stop, and remind myself, *leave space for him*. “No, I should let you speak.” The seconds tick over one by one on the recorder’s digital display. Fifteen seconds pass. Billy leans forward, places his elbows on the table. Twenty seconds. Billy shifts back in his chair. Thirty seconds. I’m drawn to fill the silence, but hold off.

Eventually, Billy continues. “That,” he pauses again, “is a good piece of writing, a fly on the wall.” He halts. “Fly on the wall is the device used by” I feel that he is filling time again, searching for words, “…And it probably takes a person like you who is outside of the main.” He hesitates again, leaning forward once more, elbows on knees.

*Where is he going with this?* *Is he working towards positioning me as an outsider, just the researcher?*

He begins to speak again: “Um, errrr, I …” then halts, stumbles. “It does make me think, actually, because I still use inappropriate things sometimes. But I’m aware of…I’m hoping to get a laugh. But I’m not including...” He stops again, sits back in the chair, rubs the back of his head.

“Women in the Services are an interesting thing…”

*Now where is he going with THIS?*

He stops. Thinks some more. “They can either sacrifice all of their femininity to fit in, or … But it’s not just women – could be all sorts of things.”

I sense Billy filling time again, trying to decide what is okay to say.

“It does make me think we need to be more ... One of us might be cracking a joke about picking up soap in the shower or whatever, which is referring to homosexuality, and of course we may have a … We’re not going to get feedback on that are we?”

“Well,” I begin, “my partner is male. I think that’s one of the reasons I’ve often felt like an outsider, particularly in sport.” Billy is listening – intently. “I’m sensitive to exclusion because of sexuality. But I don’t want to just state in a report or article that the culture of the course is homophobicor sexist*.* The reason I am recounting these events as stories is to engage with the complexities behind that, explore how it unfolds, how it came to be that way, ask questions, invite dialogue about how it could be different.”

Billy nods. “I think that’s really valuable. I would never want to be in a situation where I was hurting or excluding anybody. Perhaps I should have said, ‘Are you a gay guy?’ I almost don’t even know how to approach that. I know quite a few people who are gay but I’m still …” He pauses again, rubbing the back of his neck, again, before continuing: “I’m as nervous about sexuality. I need to be careful because if what we do offends people then the course is not doing what it’s supposed to do. It’s as applicable if the guy is disabled, gay, black, you know, we may be giving him a hard time without even knowing it. We need to be more careful.”

***Sports Hall, the Next Afternoon***

Billy, Paul and I are laying out the mats for a seated volleyball session that will begin shortly. We haven’t got long to cover the floor with the simple geometric arrangement of mats that will provide the court for the two teams. The phrase ‘military precision’ might be a cliché, but right now it’s appropriate: three men swiftly manoeuvring 40-odd gym mats from the storage room into a tight arrangement on the sports hall floor. We’re chatting, joking and calling to each other as we work.

“I got this one Billy,” Paul shouts.

“Speed m-a-c-h-i-n-e!” Billy echoes.

“This one’s stuck, gimmie me a hand Paul?” I ask.

“Sure thing,” Paul replies, giving the other end of the mat a kick.

“I’ve got the left side covered,” Billy says to us both.

“OK, I’m coming in behind you Billy,” I reply.

“Uh oh! Better watch out Billy!” Paul shouts, laughing.

*Did he just say that? Was that an anal sex ‘joke’? My heart jumps, I feel an impulse to freeze, but keep on working. Maybe I’m being hypersensitive?*

Before there’s time to decide, Billy drops his mat, turns to Paul and says:“Hey, mate. Come on. We don’t need any of that kind of chat around here.”

Then I know right away. Billy is on it. He gets it. Advocacy. Solidarity.

**Concluding Thoughts: Shifting Sands and Moving Goal Posts**

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[[51]](#endnote-48).

The shifting sands which support gender discussion and awareness are changing, and that's a good thing. But there is a great need to reflect on these changes, both how we understand them, as well how we document and communicate them.

Historically, sport culture has made it easy for misogyny, homophobia and abuse not only to take place, but often, to flourish. At the same time, the consequences were often disregarded or hidden. Those who experienced abuse, along with those who perhaps wanted to advocate for social justice, had no vocabulary or narrative maps to challenge the dominant narrative or chart a better an alternative course. However, the frame through which we now view such behaviour and talk has changed.

While it is still difficult to weed out and link a comment or action that is presented as “just a bit of fun,” or “just my nature” with the underpinning ideology of hegemonic masculinity, we now have more accessible strategies and devices to make sexism and homophobia visible, one of these being through using stories. Stories help people find their identities within a storyline with which they are familiar. Such stories make clear the ‘roots’ of hegemonic masculinity that are still hidden in the *tissues of stories,[[52]](#endnote-49)* at a micro level. As a pedagogical tool, as well as a strategy for transformative learning, stories therefore help reorient our moral compass while also having the potential to narratively repair damage. To this end we hope examples used here provide some insights into how such devices might help change the goal post in the world of sport.

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16. For example basketball, Nascar, football, cricket, golf, tennis, badminton, & surfing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
17. Examples include Olympic level female boxers, who compete over two-minute rounds, as opposed to three minute rounds for male competitors. In swimming, there is no women’s 1500m freestyle. In gymnastics there are six disciplines for male competitors and four for women - who do not perform on the pommel horse or hoops and neither do male gymnasts compete to music on the floor exercise. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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