

Fear and loathing on the sport field: Masculinities, social transformation and creative teaching strategies.

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Author's Biography

Richard Pringle is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sport and Leisure Studies at the University of Waikato. His main areas of research lie in the sociology of sport and include gender relations, pain, pleasure and governmentality. He is the co-author (with Pirkko Markula) of *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*.

Abstract

The apparent links between sport and masculinities have generated critical concern from a number of educationalists, feminists and sport sociologists. These concerns have inspired the development of various pedagogical strategies for transforming understandings and practices of gender within educational settings. This paper reviews the connections between sport and masculinities, and contributes to the development of a critical pedagogy by illustrating how the creative arts can be used within tertiary educational settings to raise awareness of the gendering influence of sport. I detail how I drew on Foucauldian theorizing and the work of Laurel Richardson to develop a teaching strategy, involving the use of dance and a 'collective story', to promote marginalised knowledge and stir political emotions. I present a shortened version of the collective story and discuss its impact on tertiary students. I conclude by encouraging other educators to draw on the creative arts as tools for promoting discussion, legitimating the voice of the 'other' and to encourage an empathetic response.

In a research project that examined the links between rugby and masculinities (Pringle, 2003; Pringle & Markula, 2005) I interviewed two men who were in their last year of training to be physical education (PE)

teachers. I had previously taught these men in an undergraduate sport sociology subject and was aware of their passionate involvement in rugby. Both men (aged 21 and 28 years) revealed themselves as seemingly violent, sexist and homophobic and I was worried about their suitability for the teaching profession. The 21-year-old celebrated violence while recounting his rugby experiences:

He went really low to tackle me and I kned him in the head and he got knocked out and the ambulance had to come and take him off the field. And I scored a try from that move and when I was running back from the try line, he was on the ground knocked out and I pointed at him and raised a fist in the air to our sideline. And they ... clapped ... and the other side was going "boo" and the whole thing just made me feel good.... In my last team we had this real scrappy hooker and he'd always start a fight and I'd coming running in from the backs to join in ... wherever there was a fight we would always jump in ... and keep punchin' 'til someone's down.

The 28 year-old interviewee had similarly told me about his violent exploits on-and-off the field, "I just came into the ruck and laid one on him, broke his nose and he was off ... I didn't have a problem with it, he asked for it...". He also revealed that he thought female rugby players were "dykes and butch" and they should not play rugby, as "it's a man's game". With respect to my concerns about the future influence these two men might have on younger males and females, I was inspired to reflect on strategies for raising critical awareness about sport, violence and gender amongst trainee PE teachers.

In this paper I begin by reviewing research that raises concerns with the links between schools, sport and the construction of masculinities and gender relations.¹ I then discuss strategies that have been used in schools

to transform understandings and practices of gender by promoting critical awareness. To promote an alternative strategy, I then illustrate how I drew on Foucauldian theorising and the work of Richardson (1997) to develop and trial a pedagogical approach that uses the creative arts for resurrecting marginalised knowledge and allows for transformative possibilities. I conclude by reflecting on the impact of this teaching strategy on the tertiary students' awareness of the connections between sport and masculinities.

Schools, sport and gender troubles

The examination of the links between gender and relations of power has been one of the most researched topics within sociological studies of sport. Although this topic has been examined from numerous theoretical perspectives, there is general agreement that sport has long been valued as a masculinising practice (Hickey, Fitzclarence & Matthews, 1998; Messner, 1992). The historic assumption that sport can transform 'boys into men' has been drawn upon to explain why the sporting field is far from an even playing field for males and females. Researchers suggest that this masculinising discourse helps explain why youthful males are typically encouraged to play sport, and why those who display skills and competitiveness, particularly within the winter football codes, are often rewarded for their participation, whereas teenage males who show little interest in sport or are unskilled can be prone to marginalisation and even abuse (Light & Kirk, 2000; Messner, 1992; Parker, 1996). Giulianotti (2005) also suggests that this masculinizing discourse accounts for why the history of female participation in sport has been one of ongoing struggle for legitimacy and equity. Indeed, in spite of the recent and quite dramatic growth in women's sport, contemporary researchers have illustrated an assortment of gender inequities, including the

marginalisation and trivialisation of female performances, and the sexualisation of their athletic bodies in the media (Caudwell, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). Many sport sociologists have extrapolated from these gender inequities to suggest that sport helps to affirm and produce a popular form of masculinity that acts to marginalise other masculinities and subordinates females.

Critical commentators have also illustrated that sport problematically links aggression, bodily force, competition, and physical skill with a dominant form of masculinity (e.g. Hickey & Fitzclarence, 1999, 2000; Messner, 1990; Miller, 1998; Phillips, 1996; Skelton, 1996, 2000). Hickey and Fitzclarence (1999) warned, for example, that the primary messages that boys receive about 'appropriate' masculinity through sports are grounded in traditional notions of masculinity, so that boys "in intensely 'male' ways... are supposed to learn how to get back up after being knocked down, how to express themselves physically, how to impose themselves forcefully, how to mask pain and how to release anxiety" (p. 52). Sport has also been viewed as a "crucial site for the 'legitimate' training in, and expression of, male violence, both on and off the field" (Miller, 1998; p. 194). Messner (1990), for example, stated:

It seems reasonable to simply begin with the assumption that in many of our most popular sports, the achievement of goals (scoring and winning) is predicated on the successful utilization of violence – that is, these are activities in which the human body is routinely turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies, resulting in pain, serious injury, and even death. (p. 203)

The concerns about the possible connections surrounding sport and the production of a dominant but problematic form of masculinity has encouraged researchers to examine the role of educational institutions in

promoting sport. The subsequent research result has raised further concerns. Parker (1996) illustrated that school sport and physical education was influential in shaping gendered notions of boys and girls, and in determining hierarchical peer group positions that favour boys who excel in sport. Skelton (2000) similarly concluded that sport “defined relationships between males and females in the classroom and (even) took a central place in the classroom management strategies of the male teachers” (p. 5). More specifically, Edley and Wetherell (1997) reported that a consensus view of the staff and pupils at the UK secondary school they examined was that the most powerful group in the senior school was made up largely of the school’s rugby players. They observed that a key aspect of the rugby players’ domination was physical:

During breaktime, for instance, they would literally take over the common room with their boisterous games, forcing everyone else out on to the peripheries. Moreover, these games, like rugby, served to underline the players’ ability to give and take physical punishment; a core aspect of the traditional definition of masculinity and a constant reminder of the threat posed to anyone wishing to challenge their dominant position. (p. 207)

The overriding conclusion from this school-based research is that schools are implicated in the construction of a gender regime that acts to empower the sporting boys at the expense of girls and other boys. Yet researchers also widely recognise that schools can play an important role in transforming understandings and practices of gender. Indeed, policies to address gender reform in schools have existed since the 1960s (Wright, 1999). These policies have typically aimed to provide equal opportunities for females. In more recent years, a number of researchers have examined pedagogical approaches to enhance a critical gender awareness concerning masculinities (e.g. Denborough, 1996; Jordan,

1995; Kenway, 1997; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Wright, 2000). These strategies are often similar to the premises that underpin narrative therapy (see White, 1994) and, therefore, typically revolve around the provision of alternative narrative or discursive resources to enable “individuals and groups a means for remaking the dominant story-lines which have governed their lives” (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; p. 129). Fitzclarence and Hickey (1998), for example, suggest that coaches of boys’ sport are in a position of responsibility to help develop counternarratives to the dominant ones that surround sporting masculinities.

Although many university lecturers present critical forms of knowledge to students, few researchers have examined specific strategies for transforming understandings and practices of gender by teaching critical thinking skills to *tertiary* students (e.g. Clayton & Humberstone, 2007; Kenway, 1997; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Wright, Macdonald & Burrows, 2004). Clayton and Humberstone (2007), as one such example, examined how a feminist-inspired module associated with sport and gender shaped a cohort of tertiary male football students’ views on sexism and masculinities. Their results suggested that the male students did not appear to value the module, perceived it as intended for female students and were somewhat resistant to its prime aims. These findings are perhaps not surprising given that the male ‘footballers’ are likely to have much invested in their sporting identities. These students, accordingly, might perceive a critical reading of sport as a personal threat. Kenway and Bullen (2001) further warn that school pupils often interpret the delivery of a critically informed pedagogy as authoritarian and consequently “do not tend to appreciate teachers who make them feel ashamed about their choices and lifestyles all in the name of helping them” (p. 155). Clayton and Humberstone (2007) similarly concluded that “creating the

environment for sensitive, respectful critique is problematic within an HE (Health Education) culture and particularly sports-related studies which are steeped in masculinist and positivistic discourses, thus making it difficult to legitimate the voice of the ‘other’” (pp. 529-530). A pedagogical issue, accordingly, relates to devising effective strategies for raising critical awareness without fuelling resentment or risking an anti-feminist backlash amongst (male) tertiary students studying sport.

In the following section, I present a pedagogical strategy that I have implemented with third-year sport degree students that draws on the arts and appears to have had modest success in raising awareness of gender issues associated with sport involvement. The strategy does not directly aim to challenge sporting identities but to enhance an understanding of potential problems concerning the connections between sport, hierarchical peer group positionings and masculinities.

A Foucauldian and arts inspired critical pedagogical approach

My pedagogical approach for raising awareness was based on Foucault’s ideas associated with social transformation and a ‘creative arts’ based approach for raising empathy. In the following I briefly sketch Foucault’s political aims and illustrate how I adapted them for use in the lecture theatre.

Foucault (1978) argued that people’s ideas are shaped by their experiences as connected to the workings of discourse and power that operate within specific historic contexts. He did not believe that there was a ‘right or wrong way’ of viewing the world or social issues. In assuming that there were no overarching social truths, Foucault (1989) argued that the “role of the intellectual does not consist in telling others what they

must do. By what right would he (sic) do so?" (p. 305). In spite of his anti-essentialist and postmodern views of truth, Foucault was politically concerned with minimising the problems associated with inequitable relations of power. Foucault (1987) stated that it was unrealistic to think of a world without power relations but it is important to develop a "...practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination" (p. 18). To help alleviate social problems, Foucault provided erudite studies of the workings of power, within specific institutions (e.g. hospitals, asylums and jails) and with respect to specific identities (e.g. the 'sick, mad and debauched') to enhance critical awareness. More specifically, he believed that many social problems – such as associated with sexism, homophobia, nationalism and terrorism – stem from how people know themselves and others. He was therefore interested with promoting new forms of subjectivity as a strategy to alleviate power problems. To allow opportunities for people to develop new ways of thinking about themselves, Foucault (1988) argued that it is important to reveal the history of ideas (or discourses) to "show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes, which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed" (p. 10). Associated with attempts to encourage people to think 'differently', Foucault was interested in promoting marginalised knowledges, as these knowledges could challenge people to analyse taken-for-granted assumptions associated with, as examples, sexuality, madness and disciplinary practices.

Drawing from Foucault's ideas on the role of the academic and social transformation, I decided it would be inappropriate to present knowledge of sport or 'rugby masculinities' as inherently problematic. In contrast, I

thought it suitable to present students with marginalised ways of knowing sport and gender to provide opportunities for students to reflect on possibly ingrained assumptions and allow them opportunities to develop new ways of thinking. In thinking of how to present students with marginalised knowledge, I turned to Foucault once again.

Foucault's (1977) work may often be thought of as dense and difficult to read. Yet he recognised the power effect of emotive prose and, at times, aimed for his written work to emotionally stir readers to engender political action. He hoped that his books would allow readers to have an 'experience' that could transform how they think: "what is essential is not found in a series of historically verifiable proofs; it lies rather in the experience which the books permits us to have" (Foucault, 1997; p. 36). He, accordingly, presented some of his work in an evocative manner to emotionally provoke readers out of their comfort zones. The beginning of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), for example, describes the excruciating account of the botched execution of "Damiens the regicide" (p. 3). The account is horrific and difficult to read, yet it works in pushing readers to an emotional edge and allows possibilities for inducing "an alteration, a transformation ... with our knowledge" (Foucault, 1997; p. 37). Foucault's (1965) first book *Madness and Civilisation* similarly challenges readers' understandings about madness and psychiatric practices by presenting a history of madness in a somewhat lyrical fashion that, at times, appears to blur fact and fiction. The writing style works to draw readers in and paint a picture of 'strange times and practices' that still haunt us today. Foucault found that stirring emotions within a critical context was a useful political strategy. His work on madness, discipline and sexuality, for example, have played respective roles in promoting political awareness associated with psychiatric practices, capital

punishment and gay rights. And this political awareness has promoted social changes.

In a related sense, I wanted to stir my students' emotions to help engender political awareness concerned with links between sport and gender. To help do this I drew from the creative arts (drama and narratives) to develop a pedagogical strategy for enhancing critical awareness and allowing students to 'experience' social problems within sport. My pedagogical approach did not aim to tell students what to think but provided an opportunity for them to develop an empathetic understanding of issues associated with sport and gender through an experiential approach based on the creative arts. I now describe my teaching approach.

Teaching sport students critically and creatively

I have used my approach for stirring emotions over successive years with final year students studying towards a Bachelor of Sport Studies. I begin with a so-called 'ice-breaker activity'. I ask the students to sit quietly for 30 seconds and listen to the sounds surrounding them. I then ask them to draw the sounds that they have heard. This is, of course, a seemingly strange task to undertake within a sport sociology class yet they all duly oblige. Once their art works are completed, I ask them to get into small groups to reveal and discuss their compositions. I am aware that for some this might be potentially embarrassing. After a short discussion, which typically involves a degree of levity, I ask them to select the most artistic piece. This selection task helps create a competitive motivational climate (similar to sport). After a work is selected, I then tell the students that they have 15 minutes to create a dance to represent the art piece. I also inform that each group will perform the dance in front of the class and it will be

judged on its artistic merit and a prize will be offered. The students, with remarkably little protest, set about planning and practicing their dances. The tone of the class has changed and a sense of nervous excitement pervades. Some students are energized by the task whereas others take a very low-key role. Immediately after each dance has been performed I provide feedback on their creativeness and ability. At times, I single out individuals and offer praise or critique. I then provide a score marked out of 10 to each group. At the awards 'ceremony' I announce the winning group and ask them to come to down to the front of the class to receive their prizes (chocolate) and I warmly shake their hands.

I then invite the students to talk about the similarities between their art/dance performances and sport. The students typically offer many ideas, as related to: physical movement, competition, excitement, the need for practice, the influence of skill and working as a team. The sports students tend not to mention that both movement forms are performed under a public gaze that allows others opportunity to judge the quality of their bodily performance. To draw their attention to this factor, I ask the students how they felt about performing the dance in front of the class. Some students report that the public performance made it more exciting and helped get them focused. Others, however, suggest that the public performance made the experience *embarrassing, threatening and frightful*. With further discussion there is agreement that the competitive motivational climate, critical feedback and public performance was detrimental for some of the students. I point out that sport is also typically performed so that bodies and skill level are readily observable. The 'marginalised knowledge' that I seek to resurrect is that sport is performed under a panoptic gaze, and that this gaze influences emotional responses amongst participants in sport. More specifically, I

suggest that for some individuals, the visibility of their performances on the sporting field can make the experience *embarrassing, threatening and frightful*. As such the students agree that the competitive element in sport, as combined with the visibility of embodied performance, can enhance or destroy enjoyment and motivation for different individuals.

This artistic *experience* and subsequent discussion has allowed an opportunity for some of the students to gain a different way of viewing sport, and I aim to encourage feelings of empathy for those who do not enjoy playing sport. An empathetic response, as Sparkes (1994) argues, is an important first step for promoting transformative possibilities. To help encourage an empathetic response, I turn to research literature to provide information about the place of sport in schools and its impact on peer groups (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Parker, 1996; Skelton, 2000). By illustrating that sporting ability and performances are influential in shaping hierarchical peer group positions that favour boys who excel in sport, I aim to raise the issue of whether this is unfair.

While examining the literature, I ask the students to reflect back on their school experiences with respect to sport and peer group hierarchies. Wright (1999), for example, argues that to help students view their social worlds differently they “need to become ‘active researchers in their worlds’ (and) interrogators of the taken-for-granted” (p. 187). I therefore raise a discussion by asking: Which students were popular at their schools? Who got marginalized? How were the boys and girls who did not enjoy sport treated? The answers reveal a general trend suggesting that the more popular boys (and to a lesser extent girls) were those who were good at sport and that the boys who found sport embarrassing,

threatening or frightful were often unpopular and, at times, even subject to abuse.

To further engender an empathetic response for the boys who did not enjoy the public context of sport, I ask the students to read a rugby narrative. I had crafted the narrative after collecting 14 different men's accounts of their youthful rugby experiences during my doctoral studies (Pringle, 2003). Although many of the interviewees' reflections were somewhat nostalgic about the 'good old days' of school rugby I focused the narrative in relation to eight of the interviewees' recollections. These interviewees revealed that school rugby was a dividing practice that made them feel inadequate and somewhat abnormal. Rather than representing just one of the men's stories of rugby, I produced a 'collective story'. The concept of a collective story stems from the work of Richardson (1997) who explains that the aim is to give voice to groups that are silenced or stigmatized by dominant narratives. The eight interviewees revealed that they had not talked about their rugby experiences previously as it was somehow inappropriate to disclose they were fearful of making mistakes on the field or of getting hurt. In this manner I considered the eight interviewees as a 'group' silenced by dominating discourses surrounding rugby and masculinities. Richardson's political task was to understand the private stories of members of 'silenced' groups in relation to broader social forces, to discern the workings of power that act formidably against them, and then to represent their stories as a collective, unified, chronological narrative to engender opportunities for social change.

With similar political intentions, Sparkes (1994) has argued in favour of publicising previously marginalised stories as they "can provide powerful

insights into the lived experiences of 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” (p. 178). Although Sparkes (1994) cautioned that there are paternalistic notions concerned with ‘giving voice’ to a group, he also states that until we live in a social world that celebrates diversity and allows individuals to publicly tell their own stories without threat of marginalisation or retribution, then the “connecting of individual stories to wide socio-political and economic issues via life histories has an important role to play in assisting change” (p. 180). In writing and presenting the collective story to my students I hoped that it would generate what Max Weber (1964) referred to as ‘verstehen’ or an empathetic understanding. In the next section, I present excerpts from the collective story, *Fear and loathing on the rugby field* (Pringle, in press).

Fear and loathing on the rugby field

I would have been about aged ten when I was required to pick a winter sport to play for our primary school. I had to decide between rugby and soccer. But there really wasn't much choice and most of the boys lined up in rugby. Yet, I wasn't ready to play rugby. I thought I might play when I was older, so I decided to line up in the soccer line. And that's when the rugby coach came up to me and asked: "Aren't you Mike Harrison's little brother?" "Yes", I replied proudly, thinking about his sporting exploits. "Well, you are in the wrong line" he said, and he physically shifted me into the rugby line.

That is how I started playing rugby. Yet I only played for two seasons ... I was the weakest link in the team. I was tall but always felt weak and weedy. I was very thin and I couldn't run fast. I don't know if I was more afraid of getting hurt or doing the wrong thing. I couldn't really tackle to stop somebody. The best I could do was delay people until somebody else got there. And if somebody wanted to run around me, they could – not a problem – I certainly didn't have the speed. It was embarrassing at times. And I knew that as soon as I got on the field there were going to be some

occasional moments of terror but I also knew that it was just the way things were....

I definitely couldn't have talked to the other boys at school about this; it just wasn't the done thing to say you didn't like rugby, or worse that you were scared of playing. Yet, playing rugby sort of destroyed me, it made me feel like I wasn't quite good enough, I felt soft. Looking back now I can remember it well, it's quite clear; it made me feel soft.

Anyhow, by the time I got to secondary school there was no compulsion to play rugby, so I quit. I still had friends that played but I had done my bit and was pleased to get out. Rugby was still a big thing at the school though.... If there was a big game on, where another school visited to play rugby, classes were cancelled and we'd all go to the main field and watch these guys play rugby and clap and so forth. And stand there for the presentations at the end and listen to the rugby boys congratulate each other on how they all played a great game. It was very much a rugby school.

The First XV players were looked at as heroes I guess I was a little envious of the rugby players. They were bigger, more powerful people ... but I had no desire to play rugby again At lunch times I hung out in a little group and we'd often go to the library. I didn't know what else to do at lunchtimes but there were enough of us so it didn't really matter. There were four or five of us as a close group that frequented the library and that number was enough to have validation that you weren't entirely screwed up. Yet we knew that we were different. By the time that I was fifteen or sixteen years old I hung out with a group that had a lot of girls in it, which was a little unusual. We were the nerds of the school. There was no doubt about it; kids used to call us that. I guess I felt a bit of a failure....

In my last years at school I began to quietly resent all the attention that the rugby boys got. There were a lot of people that deserved attention from the school and they never got it. I'm thinking of people who played different sport codes, like the hockey players, and girls' teams. I mean I wasn't even really aware of girls' teams until I had a girlfriend playing netball. But there were other people as well, good artists, musicians, people involved in dance and drama. Looking back, and I hope it has changed, it was a mistake to give so much attention to rugby.

Response to the story

The tertiary students appear interested in the story and read it silently. When they are finished, I simply ask what they thought about the story. The students often comment that compared to other class readings the story was easy to read, somewhat eye-opening and provocative. Some add that they felt sorry for the main character (many nod in agreement) and were annoyed with the difficulties he faced in school. Others wanted to know more information about the character, for example, did he play other sports, what does he do now and does he like watching the All Blacks? I then tell the students how the story was crafted from eight different men's accounts and ask – given that a range of men had similar experiences of sporting 'fear' which left them feeling somewhat inadequate – what we as future PE teachers could do to help change this situation? The ensuing discussions suggest that the majority of the class took the sport issue seriously. Their answers tend to focus on pedagogical rather than sociological strategies in offering ideas, such as: not forcing anyone to play particular sports, providing 'equal' rewards for other leisure activities, providing a greater range of sporting activities during PE, deemphasizing the competitive aspects of school sport and giving less status to rugby players. These suggestions indicate that they do not blame individuals for being fearful of rugby. These answers, however, indirectly reveal that they had not problematised the 'heavy-contact' aspect of rugby (something they appear to take for granted) and did not identify the story as related to a masculinity issue.

To help identify the story as a sport and masculinity issue I raise further questions, for example: why did 'failing' in rugby cause so much angst? What sorts of names might he have been called for being fearful of rugby? Why did the story have little reference to females? The answers

to these questions indicated that the students could grasp, with prompting, the story as a sport and gender issue and as worthy of critical reflection. Moreover, the tones of the discussions suggest that the (male) students do not appear threatened by the topic under analysis. Importantly, no one is tempted to suggest (at least publicly) that the character in the story is somehow at fault or flawed. The discussion, in contrast, hinges around social factors connected with the construction of masculinities and the popularity of rugby. I am accordingly aware that some of the students' social imaginations have been stirred. At this point the two-hour lecture finishes and we are in a position to examine more 'traditional' forms of knowledge concerning sport and masculinities in the next class.

Some concluding thoughts

Schooling processes associated with sport and PE have been implicated in the production of a dominant form of masculinity that acts to marginalize other ways of performing masculinity and femininity. It is, accordingly, important that future sport coaches and PE teachers are critically aware of practices that are linked with gender troubles. Yet an issue arises with respect to how to critically educate individuals whose identities are closely linked to the subject of critique – without inspiring resentment or risking a backlash. In this paper, I presented a pedagogical strategy for this issue that appears to have had a degree of success with my final year students in a sport/PE based degree. The strategy drew on use of the creative arts and Foucauldian theorizing to problematise taken-for-granted knowledge concerned with rugby and masculinities. The strategy did not rest on an assumption that sport is inherently problematic, nor did it attempt to tell others what to think. In contrast, through use of dance and narrative inquiry students were able

to gain understanding about why some individuals are fearful of participating in sport and, for some, this encouraged an empathetic response. This approach, more specifically, helped legitimate the 'voice of the other' and was useful for encouraging discussion within a respectful climate about a potentially provocative issue.

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