All part of the hetero-normative? Women football fans’ voices on players’ sexual (mis)conduct

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Abstract:
From interviews conducted in Victoria with women fans of Australian Rules Football, this paper examines their perceptions and rationalisations of alleged sexual misconduct by players. The paper is situated in the seeming contradiction of women avidly supporting male dominated sports despite players being implicated in misconduct against their gender. Women fans’ voices about the reported misconduct are explored. These fall into two main categories that are referred to as the ‘predatory female’ and the ‘rogue male’ narratives. The former suggests that the sexual assertiveness of some women – the ‘groupies’ – unlocks men’s primal sexuality. The latter points to footballers being immersed in a hyper-masculine sub-culture that predisposes them to treat women in an arbitrary, demeaning manner. The fans’ voices, while condemning players’ misconduct, suggest that predatory females, by actively seeking out footballers, become victims because they trigger testosterone driven male responses. Rogue male behaviour is deprecated, but understood as stemming from masculine ways, accentuated by team bonding, that leads some individuals into misconduct, possibly as a means of emphasising their masculinity within their group. Explaining player misconduct in these ways enables fans to distance themselves from it and continue their passionate support of football.

The 2004 Australian Football League (AFL) and National Rugby League season started amidst serious allegations of sexual misconduct by players. Bad behaviour by sportsmen, sexual and otherwise, has been widely reported and they are said to be over-represented
among the perpetrators of sexual assault: the 2004 season merely brought these transgressions to public attention (Yallop 2004). Bonding among men in team sports may contribute to a ‘hyper-masculinity’ that underpins displays of aggressive behaviour against both genders (Messner 1992; Messner and Sabo 1990; Welch 1997). Sportsmen may exhibit exaggerated displays of gender legitimacy that perpetuate offensive illegal acts against others (Pappas et al 2004). Pappas et al (2004: 304) report that the socialisation of ice hockey players promotes ‘a culture of aggression and violence’. Coaches, fans and team-mates encourage aggressive behaviours that players take into off-field situations. Demeaning women is an expression of the ‘togetherness’ among players evident in team sports (Pappas et al 2004: 306).

Are players to blame? Do women chase footballers with the intention of having sex with them? Whereas the hyper-masculinity of male ‘jock’ culture has been held responsible for the objectification of women (Safai 2002), the perspectives of women closely involved with these sports have been ignored. To date, the investigations of sexual misconduct by sportsmen focus exclusively on the perpetrators. Female fans’ perspectives on player sexual misconduct has not been investigated. From semi-structured interviews with female AFL fans between 20 and 57 years old in Victoria, we present women’s views by introducing their explanations of players’ sexual encounters and conduct. We show that these fans do not have a united stance, but voiced two perspectives: one that accuses the promiscuous, predatory activities of some women and the other which blames players’ hyper-masculinity. Although we deal with apparently contrary voices we demonstrate that both the ‘predatory female’ and the ‘rogue male’ perspectives explain sexual misconduct in terms of individual actions and are predicated on a discourse of hetero-normative male sexuality.

Women’s support of football is significant and important for the sport. Women comprise about a half of AFL at-the-ground spectators (ABS 2002). All levels of Australian rules football require the continuing support of women as fans, club members and volunteers (Lyon 2004). As our interviews with female fans show, women are just as passionate in their support and just as knowledgeable about football as their male counterparts, despite stereotyped perceptions that women lack competence and credibility when discussing sport (Ordman and Zillmann 1994).
While we appreciate that the issue is considerably more complex, for the purposes of this paper we consider consensual sex, whether initiated by player or woman, to be unproblematic. Nevertheless, it is necessary to separate the issue of women who actively seek out footballers with the intention of having consensual sex with them, from the misconduct of players against women. At issue here is footballers’ objectification of women, which ranges from verbal abuse to alleged rape: there is a clear difference between a woman wanting and seeking out sex and her being abused and possibly raped (Cleary 2004). Yet in both popular media accounts and in our data, these two positions are conflated, resulting in ‘victim blaming’ explanations of player misconduct.

McCabe (2004), a woman journalist, cites the presence of women who are aggressive sexual predators, claiming that they have become more numerous and forceful in recent decades (see also Shehan 2004; Watson 2004). This narrative of sexually predatory women is taken up by our respondents. Broadly termed ‘groupies’, Topaz told us that she knew of women who chased footballers in nightclubs, ‘so that they can tell other people that, you know, if they did score with any of them’. Having sex with footballers was, Topaz thought, used by these women to gain standing in their groups. Sapphire recounted a scene that she witnessed when a group of players from an AFL team entered a nightclub:

…girls ran at them – literally – like they’ve sat down at their seats and these girls just appeared out of nowhere and started dancing basically right on their laps… When you see that happening, you see what they [players] have to deal with. (Sapphire)

Lapis considered the outcome from how some women make themselves available to footballers,

You just think, well, if you put yourself in [the place of] a male who is 21, 20 years old with some blonde little giddy [girl] chasing after them, what are they going to do? … the girls are the ones that put themselves in a position. They are the ones that are flirting all over them and then the guys go “ah, okay” and at the end of the night just go home with them because they are like “ah” whatever, she’s just there (Lapis)
Some women, Lapis continued, will sleep with footballers because they are footballers and because they seek to build their reputation with other women.

Sapphire’s father, a former player, told her that some women ‘just want to be with a footballer and … and they follow the players and find out where they are going and things like that.’ Amethyst, a middle-aged woman, confirms that groupie behaviour is not a new phenomenon: ‘My sister can tell stories from years back. She knew girls who were very involved with different players.’

Our respondents articulate a sexual script where women are accorded agency in a way that contests normative constructions of female sexuality as passive. However, female assertiveness is not perceived as a desirable characteristic. Rather, when women ‘hang around’, ‘follow the players’, and are ‘not giving them any space’ they are perceived as encroaching on men’s freedom. ‘The women just get embarrassing!’, Amber claimed.

Such actions contravene a sexual script when men are ‘free’ to, and indeed expected to, assert their sexual agency by making the first move. Our informants sought to distance themselves from the actions of the predatory women who they stereotype as ‘dangerous’ because of their public expressions of eroticism and sexuality. The critique of the predatory female implied in women’s accounts nevertheless rests on these fans articulating gender stereotypes that posit the players as biological beings who, once their sexual urge is triggered, have to consummate the sexual act irrespective of whether the woman continues to consent. Our respondents all condemned sexual violence, but some reasoned that it could be an outcome of moves initiated by the victims.

Although football players are acknowledged to be sexually aggressive by our informants, justifying reasons are deployed in which the female fans’ descriptions of player behaviour reveals often conflicting narratives whereby players can be both ‘obnoxious’ and ‘nice guys’. Speaking about her encounters with footballers, Lapis refuses to ‘date a footballer … I’ve been hit on by [AFL club] footballers and I’m like “you’re a footballer, see you later” and I walk off. … I don’t want any of them’, Lapis explained, because, ‘I just don’t trust them because of their nature in general and the way they treat women.’

While Lapis’ strong family association with football means she socialises with footballer friends who she calls ‘nice guys’, she will not accept a drink from a player she does not
know because she has no doubts that to do so would mean ‘that you’re going to sleep with them, I’m assuming. That’s why I say no every time’. She added that footballers can be very direct, ‘like I’ve had a guy come up to me and say “you, me and him are having a threesome.”’ Footballers’ attempts to have sex with Lapis have been limited to verbal statements, she has not suffered physical force.

The respondents’ awareness that footballers do act in a pointedly forward way with women and often expect casual sex from them present a different narrative from that of players as ‘victims’ of aggressive females but it remains, nevertheless, naturalised through a perception of male sexuality as driven by primal, hence uncontrollable, urges. From discussions with her brother Sapphire was told that, ‘if a girl’s seriously throwing themselves at them [footballers], what do you expect them to do?’ Getting ‘the other side of the story’ from her brother, Sapphire did not outrightly condemn the accused AFL footballers. Players explained to Sapphire that allegations of misconduct come from misunderstood, confusing circumstances that may arise following approaches by girls ‘cracking onto them’. Testosterone, it is reasoned, drives the male primal sexual urge especially when, according to Lapis, they are in a group: ‘If they were by themselves maybe they would be completely different’.

Here testosterone-driven heterosexual desire figures as a ‘natural’ component of the biological male beyond individual control. Indeed, a footballer might be considered abnormal (possibly homosexual in a trenchantly hetero-normative masculine sporting culture) if he declined a woman’s transparent advances. So footballers can remain ‘nice guys’ when biology is seen to drive their actions. Sapphire, in equating footballers’ behaviour with that of men generally – ‘I think that’s just boys’ – explains their action in terms of the biological male. Amber points to players’ ‘higher level of testosterone’ to explain their seeming over-representation among perpetrators of sexual misconduct. Otherwise she thought them no different from other men of the same age – all will accept offers of sex with attractive women, ‘They’re men, of course they’re going to, you know. … Just because they are footballers, doesn’t mean that they stop being human.’

Biological and socio-cultural arguments are entwined in explanations of footballers’ actions. For Lapis, footballers’ attitudes towards and treatment of women comes from
them thinking that is the way that footballers should act towards women. They think that being footballers means that they must derogate women. This performance of masculinity manifests not only in physical actions, but also in footballers’ discussions about women. Lapis said that players talk about a woman as ‘more than just “she’s good-looking” or, yeah, “I’m going to sleep with her tonight”, but in a different language’. This ‘language’ frames footballers’ perspectives about women. The players’ talk goes beyond general ‘male-speak’ about a woman:

…footballers [do not] sit there and say “she’s got a great arse” or “she’s got a great set of boobs”. They will be like “she’s a dirty, filthy slut and she’ll come home with me”. When I mean derogatory, it is not just about their physical appearance, it’s very, you know. (Lapis)

She feels that a footballer’s idea of getting sex is that they are getting it from a ‘slut’, so women are subject to arbitrary and demeaning treatment from them. Lapis claims an insight to footballers’ perspectives from her family and, because players know that she is not ‘available’, they will talk to her about women: ‘they talk to me … about … the way that … they talk about females’. In comparison with other men, a player’s ‘confidence level is … quite different, very different, and every footballer thinks that they are the bee’s knees’. Sapphire likes footballers, ‘but at times they can be a bit up themselves’, especially when they are together ‘and out on the drink a bit, they get a bit interesting’.

Team culture seemingly enhances players’ views that women are for their picking (Benedict 1998). Team bonding, an ethos of hegemonic masculinity, alcohol and the preparedness of some clubs to cover their players’ misconduct all contribute to abuse of women, Yallop (2004) was informed. Perhaps only a small number of players are culpable of sexual misconduct, but many, it seems, subscribe to the derogatory attitudes and talk about women. Moreover, team mentality has promoted a cover-up of the miscreants’ deeds, with innocent players colluding in the silence surrounding the misconduct of their colleagues (Papps and Cunningham 2004). These conspiracies of silence, naturalising masculine bonding, are legitimated through hetero-normative discourse. However, our respondents’ narratives also point to women’s agency in the valorisation of players and in their encounters with them.
Rather than subscribing to the argument that those subject to player misconduct are ‘victims’, our respondents’ narratives construct them as women who, after enticing the footballers, were unable to avoid sex once the players’ biological urges took over. Women can choose to ‘put themselves in a position’ (Lapis) or not; those that do must accept the risk of men’s potentially uncontrollable sexual behaviour. But the male actions are normalised rather than being questioned: when men are offered sexual favours by women, the hetero-normative discourse dictates that they should accept. Social pressures and power relations between men, such as occurs in team contexts, means that declining the offer could lead to a loss in standing. For Lapis, the sexual forwardness of footballers and their talk about women are about establishing their standing among their friends and team-mates; it is more about the standing between men, of male bonding, than about relationships with women. Moreover, if they do not talk about women disparagingly and do not attempt to pick them up, the footballers may lose face in the eyes of their mates.

It’s a thing that males think that they have to do ... because they are a footballer, they think that a part of being a footballer is that “I’ve got to have the women all over me and they are going to be all over me”. (Lapis)

These accounts suggest that women become objects used in a male points scoring competition. Both women and men use the hetero-normative discourse to comprehend sexual behaviour: women to understand – and, perhaps, excuse – male sexual (mis)conduct, male footballers to inform how women are used to achieve standing among themselves. As Lapis noted, ‘It would take a very strong man to turn around to a group of males and say “don’t say that about a female”‘. Complicating the issue even more, is that some women seemingly employ their ‘conquests’ of football players to achieve prestige among their female friends. Lapis claims that some women may have not wanted to have sex with a footballer ‘but then they think they are good because they have … they talk about it in a way that they are happy with it’.

McCabe (2004) opines that some women are responsible for encouraging footballers to behave in sexually aggressive ways to all women. This view is reflected in our respondents’ narratives, which suggest that predatory women unlock a primal, biologically driven male sexuality among players. According to this view, women are responsible for encouraging (the predatory female) or controlling (the ‘respectable’
female) this rampant sexuality. While the narratives also explicitly mention the forceful approaches of footballers and their demeaning language and actions, this is underpinned by a hetero-normative discourse which points the finger at predatory females, who open the door to rogue males, to the detriment of all women.

The predatory woman narrative is a powerful argument when considered from the perspective of normative, essentialist views about male behaviour, namely, that when encouraged, men are naturally incapable of holding their biological sexual drive in check. Hence the contradictory views about footballers held by some women: the same men could be rogues who they would have nothing to do with, yet they also could be ‘nice guys’. Our informants suggest that hyper-masculinity may be accentuated by team-bonding, serving to bring men closer to a ‘tipping-point’ where they believe that cultural sensitivities are lost and men’s biological urges take over. By ascribing biological primacy to men’s sexual behaviour, our respondents simultaneously draw from and construct a hetero-normative discourse which posits all men as potential miscreants, but predatory women provide the trigger that turns the nice guy into the rogue male. Our informants’ narratives point to men’s sexual conduct being predicated on this potent mixture of biology and women’s behaviour.

Our research, still in its early phase, has highlighted the complexity of women fans’ perceptions of players’ off-field sexual misconduct. We do not seek to ‘explain’ why this sexual misconduct occurs: rather our intention is to explore women’s fans’ understandings of its reported occurrences and how their narratives served to rationalise their continuing support of a male dominated sport. None of our informants condoned players’ misconduct, but each narrative mapped out explanations for footballers’ actions and attitudes towards women that rejected their malfeasances as simply ‘male’ behaviour. Rather, our informants, informed by a discourse of hetero-normative male sexuality, voiced two narratives – the predatory female and the rogue male – to explain footballers’ sexual (mis)conduct. Each narrative, however, by individualising instances of abuse, directs attention away from underlying systemic factors, which facilitates women fans’ continuing support of male sports.
Footnotes

1 Pseudonyms are used to refer to the women that we have interviewed. All interviews reported in this paper were audio-recorded.

References


