

Transgender Netballers: Ethical Issues and Lived Realities

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Transgender people are increasingly tolerated, and sometimes even actively celebrated, within contemporary Western popular culture. However, despite the broader political movement against gender-based discrimination, transgender people's participation in elite sport remains contentious. Although American transgender professional tennis player Renee Richards drew attention to transgender athletes as early as the mid-1970s, even major sports organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) struggle to formulate fair and consistent gender policies. This article discusses the specific case of transgender players in men's netball in New Zealand, a somewhat uniquely gendered sport, as a means of understanding emerging issues surrounding transgender athletes' participation in sport more broadly.

Les personnes transgenres sont de plus en plus tolérées et sont parfois même activement célébrées dans la culture populaire contemporaine occidentale. Toutefois, en dépit du large mouvement politique contre la discrimination fondée sur le genre, la participation des personnes transgenres dans le sport d'élite reste controversée. Bien que la joueuse états-unienne de tennis professionnel Renee Richards ait attiré l'attention des athlètes transgenres dès le début des années 1970, même les grandes organisations sportives telles que le Comité international olympique peinent à formuler des politiques genrées justes et cohérentes. Cet article traite du cas spécifique de joueurs transgenres impliqués au netball masculin en Nouvelle-Zélande. L'article constitue un moyen de comprendre les nouveaux enjeux entourant plus généralement la participation des athlètes transgenres en sport.

While rugby union is typically considered the national sport in New Zealand, netball is very popular among women. Originally invented by two English women in Massachusetts to modify basketball for "ladies" (Broomhall, 1993, p. 2), netball has gained significant media visibility in New Zealand through a series of women's semiprofessional leagues. However, while netball is primarily considered a "feminine sport,"¹ it is also played by New Zealand men. The current umbrella organization for men's and mixed-gender netball, the New Zealand Men's and Mixed Netball Association (NZMMNA) runs an annual national championship which in 2010 included fourteen men's teams and two mixed-gender teams. Both the NZMMNA and the men's-only New Zealand Men's Netball Association

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(NZMNA), which the NZMMNA replaced in 2004, have served as a route toward national teams that compete internationally.

Men's netball, as a minority sport with less strictly codified regulations, has provided a safe space for transgender players to network and find social support. Increasing immigration to New Zealand from the Pacific Islands from the 1970s drew groups of predominantly Māori and Pacific Island transgender and fa'afafine women to the sport (fa'afafine are people in Samoan culture who are biologically male but who express a range of stereotypically feminine gender identities; see Schmidt, 2001). Because 1970s New Zealand law defined transgender and fa'afafine women as male these players were prevented from playing women's netball and typically entered into men's competitions. Ethnicity and sexual politics were, thus, also intricately connected with the NZMNA: although there were some White and some heterosexual men playing in the early 1980s, many competitions were dominated by Māori and Polynesian gay and transgendered people. Actually, men's netball primarily involved Polynesian and Māori men in New Zealand's North Island.²

The purpose of this article is to examine the lived experiences of two such retired (male-to) female gender-conforming transgender netballers. To do this, I will first discuss the ethical issues surrounding transgender athletes' participation within mainstream competitive sport, in particular debates about "fairness," and the distinction between gender conforming and gender transforming transgender athletes. I will then outline key ethical issues and methodological perspectives I adopted in my research before providing the narratives of two retired (male-to-) female Māori gender-conforming transgender netballers. Finally, I will review these perspectives in relation to the future of transgender netballers as both players and umpires in men's and women's netball.

Transgender Athletes: Ethical Issues

Before discussing specific issues faced by transgender men's netballers, it is useful to examine current feminist literature relating to transgender athletes generally. Implicit within many of these analyses is the recognition of the queer feminist view that the two sex system is socially constructed and hence ideological. They further aim to demonstrate that despite significant efforts, people simply cannot be divided into two neat biological sexes, let alone two genders. My discussion here focuses first, on the ethical issues surrounding transgender athletes' participation in elite sport and second, on the idea that transgender athletes do not constitute a uniform group.

Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole (1990) provided an early feminist critique of transgender tennis player Renee Richards' inclusion into women's professional tennis. Birrell and Cole argued that the media representations of Richards were "clearly embedded in ideological frames of liberalism and sexual essentialism" (p. 7) when they focused on determining either the fairness of Richards' involvement in professional women's tennis or whether Richards was male or female. In addition, these texts engaged "a familiar cultural discourse of heroic narrative" exhibiting Richards as valiantly fighting a tyrannical system (p. 7). They contrasted this narrative with the sparse consideration given to other female players:

... sport in North America has developed as an activity that privileges males; the meaning of the sex test ordered by the USTA; the meaning of the anti-

feminist sentiment that was packaged as pro-Richards rhetoric; and the wider implications of the Richards controversy, including the cultural meaning of transsexualism, sex, and gender, and the power of the male-dominated medical and legal professions to construct and legitimate the female. (p. 7)

Birrell and Cole (1990) also argued that the media focused exclusively on the physical definitions of sex and gender such as testosterone levels and muscle tone but ignored such socially constructed relations that surrounded gender as Richards' privileged access to men's sport. In this context already characterized by anxiety about women's growing involvement in competitive sport Richards "simultaneously cast suspicion on or discredited the women players" (pp. 13–14) who "were ridiculed as poor sports, anti-civil libertarians, or cowards who feared they couldn't win" (p. 14). In addition, Birrell and Cole argued that while Richards defined herself as a role model for all minority groups, from African-Americans to people with disabilities, she contradicted this broad stance through her failure "to recognize *women* as an historically oppressed group whose interests should be protected, or who interests might, indeed *do*, interfere with his/her own" (p. 11).

Birrell and Cole (1990) concluded that transgenderism reinforces the erroneous supposition of two mutually exclusive sexes and "suggests that radically reconfiguring the body through the removal and construction of sex signifiers is easier than living in a culture in which rigid gender ideologies do not permit men to act in stereotypically feminine ways" (1990, p. 4). They also noted how, despite the problematic nature of this two sex system ideology, male to female transsexuals must typically impress (predominantly male) medical doctors and psychiatrists with stereotypical female behavior and attitudes simply because the medical establishment has the "power to decide what is and what is not a woman" (1990, p. 6).

More recent literature continues to debate the ideological constructions surrounding the discussions of fairness of transgender athletes' entrance to women's sport. Nevertheless, these studies tend to advocate transgender *inclusion* within competitive sport by arguing that male-to-female transgender athletes have no biological advantage over female athletes. Sarah Teetzel (2006), for example, argued that transgendered athletes may in fact have no significant athletic advantage over nontransgender athletes as many endocrinologists take the view that "sex-reassignment surgery and hormone therapy negate any advantages" (p. 237). More specifically, even if transgender females, on average, are likely to have larger hands, feet, hearts, and lungs when compared with biological females, Teetzel pointed out that there was no evidence that this actually improved performance. For example, Canadian mountain biker Michelle Dumaresq (quoted in Cavanagh and Sykes, 2006, p. 95) suggested that her sex change actually "made things harder because ... I no longer had the muscle mass to support my bones."

Several researchers critique the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Stockholm Consensus policy on transgender athletes. Teetzel (2006) pointed out that although IOC allows postoperative transgender people to compete once they have completed two years' hormonal treatment, it still excludes intersex people and those who have had no medical intervention. The policy is, therefore, problematic both theoretically, because not all transgender and intersexual athletes clearly identify as either "male" or "female" and want surgery and hormone therapy, and practically, because not every country recognizes sex-reassignment surgery (Teetzel, 2006).

Rejecting a purely biological premise of fairness, Sheila Cavanagh and Heather Sykes (2006) critiqued IOC's failure to clearly define who is and who is not female:

If male and female bodies are not natural (but social, culturally specific and thus mutable) the IOC is faced with the problematic of having to police (through medical and visual technologies) a categorical gender binary that cannot be shown to exist. (p. 77)

Consequently, they list other key arguments that make a categorical definition of gender binary more than a biological problem:

...the disadvantages associated with transsexuality in a transphobic culture; the paucity of transsexual athletes in Olympic competition; the impossibility of testing or determining sex; the long history of gender-based discrimination and exclusion in the Olympic Games; and because the Olympics should be accessible to all. (p. 95).

Heather Sykes (2006) described further important cultural, religious, financial, and legal issues that impact on a person's desire and ability to undergo sex-reassignment surgery and hormone therapy. For example, "some gender liminal Māori people maintain cultural traditions by not identifying with a Westernized medical discourses [sic] about bodily transition while others pursue sex reassignment surgery" (p. 9). Furthermore, many transgender people are "economically and culturally disenfranchised ... [and cannot] meet the universalized, medicalised criteria" (p. 11). As Kutte Jönsson (2007, p. 239) summarized, perhaps "the problem is not the individuals who (for one reason or another) transcend certain gender categories, but the categories in themselves." In her critique of the IOC policy on transgender athletes, Ann Travers (2006) argued that in an effort to support the two sex system ideology, the policy privileges certain types of transgender athletes.

Travers (2006) highlighted diversity within the transgender liberation movement by noting the distinction between *gender conformers* "who do not challenge the gender binary but rather attempt to alter their assigned location within it" and *gender transformers* who "call into question the fundamental binary sex categories under which western social, political, legal and economic life is organised" (p. 434). She argued that the IOC policy privileges the needs of gender conformers over those of gender transformers and fails to meet the needs of those who have "insisted on the need for and value of women-only space based on traditional understandings of gender difference" (2006, p. 436). Travers further noted that some feminists resist such fluid definitions of gender because of the threat to feminist politics: "if the category 'woman' is meaningless then ... the corresponding oppression seem not to really exist" (p. 434). Travers (2008, p. 80) later highlighted the problematic nature of the two sex system ideology by pointing out the way that it "plays a significant cultural and economic role in the attendant devaluation of women, gays and lesbians, and transgender people."

These feminist studies of transgender athletes focus on revealing the ideological construction of the two-sex categorization. Their research draws from media readings of transgender athletes' participation and the subsequent media frenzy or they critique the recent IOC Stockholm Consensus policy as limited to the biological definitions of sex. This research provided a useful theoretical framework

for this article and helped me identify key themes for the interview (such as issues surrounding sexual identity and playing women's or men's netball) and potential issues that may be of concern to future transgender people (such as how these players came to be first included, and later excluded from men's netball, and their motivations for playing the game in the first instance). My research, nevertheless, was an ethnography through which I collected the narratives of transgender athletes' experiences. This study further contributes to the previous literature because of its specific focus on transgender athletes in the Pacific Islands-influenced New Zealand context in the uniquely female-dominated sport of netball.

Instead of media narratives, my research in this paper draws from lived experiences of two gender conforming transgender athletes. I combined an interpretive theoretical framework with the critical feminist tradition of the previous feminist research on transgender athletes. My research is loosely based upon the hermeneutic tradition within the interpretive theoretical framework. Within this framework the researcher derives concepts from everyday language in a bottom-up manner and thus, "social actors have to teach the researcher how they understand their world" (Blakie, 2001, p. 138). As everyday language use constructs participants' social reality, individuals' subjective opinions and lay descriptions are meaningful. The participants' own language most accurately reflects their ways of seeing and relating to issues in society.

In addition, I considered Steven Harvey's (1999) work on hegemonic masculinity to locate the participants' reflection within the larger issues of New Zealand society. Harvey (1999, p. 91) characterized male friendships as built upon "a foundation of destructive competition, homophobia, and emotional impoverishment [and] ... predicated more on external activities through which men can share the same emotional experience without having to reveal any details about their personal lives." His ethnographic research also offered a useful framework for contextualizing team environments in terms of "the impact of the social arena of sport on the construction of hegemonic masculinity among adult, non-professional athletes" (Harvey, 1999, p. 92). I identified key themes surrounding hegemonic masculine constructions of both "legitimate" and "illegitimate" sports participation within the local contexts and how these understandings impacted on men's netball players' participation. This perspective helped delineate wider understanding of men's netball stereotypes within the popular imagination. However, to examine how hegemonic masculinity might construct transgender netballers' reality, I conducted interviews as a part of a larger project of netball and transgender athletes.

Methods

This project comprised a small part of a larger research project which involved three years of participant observation as a member of the Otago provincial men's netball team (which is based in the South Island town of Dunedin) and interviews with a range of current and former national-level administrators and players. The data presented within this article is based on the interviews with two female transgender former netballers. However the argument as a whole has been greatly informed by the full range of data sources from my research.

I collected primary data through several series of in-depth semistructured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005) including the transgender participants discussed

in this article. The interview framework was not designed as a rigid list of questions but rather a guide to direct my research. One particularly effective strategy was to ask the participants to respond to three quite different media representations of men's netball: one satirical representation showing a larrikin university student dressing in drag in a nonsanctioned social game, one representation of two hegemonic masculine elite players aggressively tussling for possession of the ball, and an New Zealand Aids Foundation / Human Rights Council antihomophobia campaign poster featuring a teenage boy's story of being harassed for wanting to play netball (see Tagg, 2008b).

To locate these two participants, I used a single stage nonprobability (purposeful) sampling method, or, more specifically, "snowball sampling" and "purposive sampling" (Blakie, 2001). Beginning with informal discussions with players from the local regional men's netball team, I located other senior players and administrators from other parts of the country, and they in turn directed me to these two female transgender men's netball players. Given the limitations of this sampling method (in "snowball sampling", in particular, further participants sometimes share a similar point of view to those they recommend), it was encouraging to see some of these participants vehemently criticize the very people that just happened to have recommended them to me. One of my early interviews was with a senior player from my own provincial men's netball association who had previously played against some of the early transgender players; he referred me to a former New Zealand men's netball administrator who knew many of the early transgender players very well. In turn, this participant referred me to another former national administrator who was able to negotiate this particular interview for me. The interview was conducted in one of the participant's house in Auckland (New Zealand's largest city).

While excluding some of the participants' demographic characteristics to protect their anonymity (few early transgender netball players are still alive), Amy (a pseudonym) grew up in and around a second-tier North Island city and as a teenager moved back and forth between that city and Auckland several times. She appeared to be in her mid thirties at the time of the interview, and said she was first introduced to indoor netball (a for-profit indoor version of netball) in the late 1980s. Brenda (a pseudonym) grew up in a very small town in northern New Zealand, appeared at least a decade older than Amy and said she was introduced to netball by a family member in the 1970s as an alternative recreational activity to "sitting in here [a pub] drinking." Neither spoke about playing sports other than netball, about partners, or about their work experience. However, Brenda explained that many early Auckland transgender players "came from the street"—one of the early transgender-based teams was called the "Night Owls" because the players worked as street-based prostitutes in central Auckland. An early men's netball administrator, otherwise unconnected to Amy and Brenda, confirmed that the Night Owls (Rurus in Māori, or Morepork) were essentially "sex workers ... so the girls would all be out on K[arangahape] Road earning their fares to national tournament, basically."

Following Travers (2006), I made a distinction between gender transforming transgender men's netballers (i.e., biological males who identify as transgender, but subvert gender binaries as they play men's netball) and gender conforming female transgender men's netballers (biological males who identify as female but neverthe-

less play's men's netball). Although sometimes awkward, certainly compared with "MtF men's netballers", the terminology described above reflects the participants' general desire to be seen as female first and foremost, and as transgender only as a matter of necessity, or perhaps as a subgroup of women. In this sense, it could be considered similar to the preference for the people-first term "people with disabilities" instead of the more concise "disabled" (e.g., Snow, 1998).

Being an established men's netball player and previous national championship participant helped me reflect on the participants' experiences. As an insider, I shifted between being a player (with specific knowledge and shared experiences) and a researcher. Conversely, fellow players might not have talked to me in the same way as they would to a nonplaying researcher. The interviews with transgender participants demanded special mention, and the power relations associated with researching with marginalized members of society needed to be carefully considered. This inherent power imbalance between researcher and research participant was somewhat mitigated by the participants specifically asking to be interviewed together, rather than individually, which also suggests that they felt empowered enough to negotiate the terms of the interview to protect their interests. Because the two participants supported each other throughout, the process felt relaxed, enjoyable, and at nearly 138 min long, very informative. Finally, because the second interview participant happened to be a social science student, potential issues of power and misunderstanding never became overtly problematic. By speaking the language of social science, this additional participant essentially provided an "insider" perspective on transgender men's netball and was able to help guide the conversation toward the critical issues and reassure the other participant that I took my ethical obligations seriously.

My analysis is loosely based around a framework developed by Mason (2002) which involves (1) deciding what counts as data, (2) scrutinizing and categorizing data, (3) separately recording each item's location, and (4) using the indexes to locate common themes across data sources "just as you would thumb through the index of a book and then flick to the appropriate pages" (2002, p. 122). The data were first coded within Microsoft Word files and the analysis was shaped by the themes emerged from literature review and the data. The remainder of this article expands key themes identified in an interview with two "gender conforming" former transgender female men's netballers.

Men's Netball and Transgender Netballers

In contrast to gender transformers (see Travers, 2006), the two interviewees in this study, Amy and Brenda expected their friends to relate to them as women. As Brenda said, for example, they "weren't dressed up *as* women, because we *are* women." Amy added that in the past fa'afafine players have also been selected for the New Zealand men's netball team, but they also had to tolerate derogatory comments from the NZMNA executive members.

The Changing Face of Transphobia

Both Amy and Brenda were principally concerned about what the latter described as "vehement" transphobia within the national association since the 1990s³. They

compared this to the 1970s and 1980s where, despite overt transphobia on the court, female transgender players could nonetheless play in formal competitions freely. The first decade of the twenty-first century, in which this interview took place, was characterized by an almost total absence of transgender participation in men's netball and a steady increase in more static, muscular styles of play.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the transgender-based "Night Owls" team attracted crowds of enthusiastic supporters, apparently because their players were both skillful and flamboyant. Although transgender players were an integral part of the early men's netball scene (see also Tagg, 2008a) they were often harassed. While there is now less overt transphobia, Amy explained that this may partly be because transgender players have now been virtually excluded from formal men's netball competitions. The transition from a more "gritty" netball culture (where everyone was welcome because there was little oversight) to a "cleaner" and more tightly regulated format involved a messy transition period. During this time there was not only open hostility toward transgender players but also the forced removal of transgender players from netball courts and a subsequent standoff between the national association's administration and radical (i.e., gender transforming) transgender netballers.

All this, both women argued, was ironic given the increasing sexual liberation across wider New Zealand society. Since 1986, the year when homosexuality was first legalized in New Zealand, the opportunities for transgender men's netballers seem to have dramatically declined. More specifically, around the same time that transgender netballers were pushed out of men's netball, "queer culture" internationally made a rapid transition from being underground and illegal to being overt and sometimes almost even corporatist. For example, recent Sydney Mardi Gras has been sponsored by both the City of Sydney and major transnational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Ikea and Virgin Blue airlines (see New Mardi Gras, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras website). The increasing challenges facing transgender netballers in New Zealand are also despite wider public recognition of transgender issues in popular culture.

In many cases Amy and Brenda seemed to view their identity and politics as tightly interwoven. Amy said that if she were to describe gay members of the association as "the bulls" then transgender players would be "the red flags." Furthermore, both Amy and Brenda said they hated being confused with gender transforming transgender people and resented the way that all the obviously transgender people were banned from men's netball simply because some of the most outrageous gender transforming transgender people drew negative media attention. My conversations with current and former NZMMNA netball administrators supported this view; given that men's netball is now governed by a "men's and mixed" organization they have little problem with nontransgender female netball players playing netball within their organization. However, this new organization structure does also allow, at least in theory, for transgender women to play as women in mixed-gender teams, provided they follow procedures roughly equivalent to the controversial Stockholm consensus protocol.

While Brenda had expected derogation from heterosexual men's netballers within the association, she argued that gay men's netballers actually exhibited the greatest transphobia. Brenda specifically resented the view that "it's all about are you a man or are you not? And if you are then you've got to learn how to play like

one and behave like one.” She said that was ironic given that much of the national association’s executive were gay (although not necessarily very overtly gay because of the way they police their gender performances) and would have probably experienced significant discrimination themselves. She suggested that many promising young transgender players, coaches and managers “would easily come back to the netball arena if they weren’t treated like men ... [but that] they [the national association] don’t want anything to do with it.” She added that while the individual actors have changed since the early 1990s, the general attitude remains the same. She particularly detested the heteronormativity of contemporary men’s netball and the way that female transgender netballers are now only welcome if they dress as a man (see Tagg, 2008a). In other words, she wished “everything wasn’t he, he, he” and lamented that female transgender players are no longer “running around looking more glamorous than the fella’s supposed wives—you know?”

Gender Policy and Heterosexual Credentialism

While Brenda generally seemed more accommodating of the national association’s policies than Amy, her views hardened as she heard Amy speak. While Brenda accepted that all players should dress as men on the courts, she opposed the association’s attempts to control *off-court* behavior, for two key reasons. First, she thought it was unreasonable for the association “to govern us 24 hours when we’re on tournaments”, including the national championships’ social function. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, she said such regulations failed to recognize that female transgender people’s “way of looking at things is totally different ... [and] why should that life [have to] be hidden just [for men’s netball] to be a professional sport?” She also said:

You know, for example, they say that we cannot dress up [as women] ... when we go to the socials; I made sure that we did. Because that was part of us [*sic*]. It’s not that we can dress up and back into butch, no, that was a 24 hour plus thing for us. ... And if you don’t like it, don’t expel me from the game, you know? Because I’m a better player than some of the players you see out there.

Amy also criticized the organization for abandoning its own umpiring qualifications and deferring umpire accreditation to Netball New Zealand (NNZ), which administers (women’s) netball in New Zealand. The New Zealand Men’s Netball Association (NZMNA) apparently believed such a move might lead to direct funding from NNZ, and indeed the newly-established NZMMNA has recently been made an affiliate member of NNZ. Amy said she personally preferred the NNZ-accredited umpiring qualifications as required by the NZMNA (see Netball New Zealand MyNetball, 2010) but thought it was strange that people needed to qualify as a women’s (NNZ) netball umpire before they could volunteer at the significantly less professionalized men’s national championships. Brenda said that as a result of this process she went from being “in the top lot for men’s umpires ... [to being] null and void” because although apparently a highly regarded volunteer umpire, she was uncomfortable operating within the increasingly youthful, professional and heteronormative women’s netball environment. Brenda added, however, that this more structured process also cleared away NZMNA umpires who “were past their ‘due by’ dates”. As some of these umpires had aged, it seems they may have

lost the necessary physical strength and fitness to be able to keep up with younger and fitter players.

Brenda and Amy thought it was unfair for the NZMNA to exclude transgender players by defining themselves as a men's-only organization only to then redefine itself as the NZMMNA (a mixed-gender association) just a few years later. Given that females were permitted to play within the NZMMNA, and have always been involved as administrators, coaches, and umpires, it appears that only *transgender* women's involvement seems contentious. Although the association appears to have been concerned about "outrageous" transgender players influencing their membership base, image, and ability to attract corporate sponsorship, Amy noted that many New Zealand representatives in the 1980s were "outrageously loud drag queens, or very gay poofers as we would call them in those days." Furthermore, many of the early gay men's netball players who taunted her would themselves sometimes act as drag queens; one apparently even "turned up to a men's social [event] in a wedding dress!" This seems, in some ways, to reflect Cahn's (1994) description of the link between social class and ideas of "vulgar" womanhood.

Nontransgender female players were welcomed into the organization through mixed-gender competitions to further bolster the association's hetero-centric image. Although Amy said that although transgender players' "psychological advantage" over paranoid heterosexual players has dissipated, very few transgender players (and no visible postoperative transgender players) currently compete at the national level. She also added that although "heterosexual men in the world of men's netball these days are a lot more understanding", this has been at the cost of overt gay pride or transgender pride. Given that females have joined this mixed-gender association (and women have always been involved in administrative and support roles), only *transgender* women and overtly gay men are seen as contentious. While the policy changes were apparently made for financial reasons (transgender players were purportedly scaring away both sponsors and heterosexual players), it is important to note the "gender wars" between certain gay men and transgender players.

Amy suggested that sexual diversity (e.g., being queer or heterosexual) has been a more important marker of difference and source of tension within men's netball than gender diversity (e.g., being transgender, female or male). Although she said the relationship between heterosexual, gay and the few remaining transgender players has improved in recent years, it had been at the cost of the removal of all gender transforming transgender netballers and all gender conforming transgender netballers who do not like being treated as a man. While Brenda said that in the past, being transgender "actually worked to our advantage because while we had a psychological advantage over them ... [most current heterosexual players] don't really care that they're playing with a whole lot of gay guys or queens." Overall, Amy suggested that most players now afford greater understanding toward each other and many teams include both heterosexual and gay players. Interestingly, whether accurate or fabricated, the transgender players' "street credibility" on matters of sexual orientation seems to work as a form of power over both heterosexual and closeted gay men. When discussing a player I had previously assumed was heterosexual, Brenda joked that she "wouldn't go as far as saying [he was] 'straight', but he's happy ... always had a swinger or two ... [it was] people like him that made gay men sluts!" And when I mentioned the name of an (almost

undoubtedly) heterosexual player, Amy joked that in the past “there was a bit of speculation about [him] ... we don’t know if he’s Arthur or Martha!”

Transgenderisms

Both Brenda and Amy noted a shift toward greater understanding of nonheterosexual sexualities within many South Island-based teams. Although this trend certainly parallels falling transgender participation in men’s netball, increasing transgender awareness in wider society seems a more plausible explanation. While Brenda joked that the transgender players in the early days “had fun with ... [the] very staunch [i.e. transphobic] white guys from Canterbury”, Amy acknowledged the current significance of Christchurch’s (Canterbury’s) strong “street population” and said that there are now “shitloads” of transgender people in Invercargill (in the far south). It is important not to overstate this view, though; outside men’s netball circles Amy did not “know a hell of a lot of queens in the South Island ... it’s still very redneck down there for us.” Indeed, many deeply conservative people remain in small towns and in large parts of the rural South Island.

While Amy laughed that she “always liked ‘scarfie’ ways” (i.e., University of Otago student culture; located in Dunedin, further south from Christchurch), she also commented that at certain times “you just stay the hell out of the way” in the city’s central plaza; alcohol-fueled street violence is often seen as a problem. While Amy knew a couple of transgender people who lived in a small town in the province of Otago, these people were simply “hiding under cover” rather than openly participating in transgender-friendly activities. Both agreed that many of their early encounters with the Canterbury team were overwhelmingly physical, but Brenda noted that all the major South Island men’s netball teams (Canterbury, Otago, Wakatipu, and Southland) played a slower and more physical game than most North Island teams. Amy’s joke that the Canterbury players had “better thump me good” because, as Brenda explained, “queens in those days, she had *techniques*” may actually reflect both regional and gendered differences. While the more machismo early South Island netballers played a largely static and physical game, transgender North Island players employed a more strategic and energetic style that also exploited opposition players’ transphobia.

Amy also suggested that ethnic and cultural factors are significant when considering the relative social acceptability of both men’s netball and of transgender players. Participation in men’s netball generally seems less problematic for some Māori and Pacific Island people when compared with New Zealanders of other ethnic groups. Many early regional men’s netball associations in the North Island were founded around extended Pacific Island family networks in which it was considered acceptable and even normal for boys and men to play netball. Second, she explained, Pacific Island netballers who defined themselves as fa’afafine were more frequently accepted by their family than other players who could only identify as transgender. While Amy clarified that “being transgender doesn’t make you fa’afafine ... [she said that] it definitely helps coming from a Polynesian/Māori background to be different in a hetero-normative society.” Brenda suggested that these two factors probably contributed to the large proportion of the early men’s netball players being Māori and Pacific Islanders. However, she also said that there were a “handful” of (predominantly gay) White players in Auckland, but that these players typically “didn’t want to branch out.”

Most of the Ponsonby Men's Netball Club's (an Auckland netball club) four teams were recruited through *Staircase*, a prominent queer nightclub.

Both Amy and Brenda contrasted their own gender politics to what they called radical transgender netballers who deliberately acted "camp" to protest against transphobia within the national association (this closely matches Travers' (2006) idea of gender transformers). There seemed to be a split within the transgender men's netball community. Amy, for example, loved being mistaken for a nontransgender woman and disliked people jeering at her "they're bloody trannies or trans, there they go!" Similarly, Brenda loved being "acknowledged for the way we played ... whether you were transgender or straight or gay or whatever". Ironically, however, Amy said she was not offended by nontransgender people dressing in drag for fun, or, for that matter, "people doing anything when it comes to the world of netball ... as long as it's (a) not going to impede on other players and [(b)] as long as it's not affecting your game." She added:

I just hope that you can play as well as you look. So I mean that's how I feel it should be judged but then again, [sigh] we're a long way away from that. It's like you can look at someone and go "oh fantastic player, but oh my god what is he/she wearing?"

Similarly, Amy was not offended by an *Otago Daily Times* photograph of a university student throwing a netball while dressed in satirical drag at a social sports day (see Gibb, 2005, p. 15; Tagg, 2008b, p. 415). Doubting whether the student was even mocking transgender people, she said it was "quite hilarious that a man's going to *risk* that at university and run around having people jeer at him and having him called all these names". She also asked, with an ironic sense of humor, how such people have "got the cheek to call me queer?"

But Amy did argue that transgender people should stick to either a male or a female gender identity because there is little point "turning up to a netball game in your skirt, with your tits on and looking gorgeous and with a face full of hair." Brenda agreed, saying that she was "dead-set against" transgender players who arrived "looking all pretty, you've got tits and 'Johnny' is hanging out." Amy found such behavior insulting precisely because both she and Brenda saw themselves *as* female and wanted to be accepted as such. Brenda said she avoided dressing "all the way 'out' ... [because] if you're going to be flamboyant then people are going to talk about you".

Amy and Brenda drew attention to sensitive issues surrounding gender performativity, although mainstream conversations about the place of female transgender players are typically framed around whether they should play in men's or women's leagues. Both arguments, however, fail to address the most difficult question regarding the broader challenge that all gender transforming individuals (including both overtly "camp" gay men and gender transforming transgender players) pose to the two sex system ideology. Amy and Brenda defended gender-conforming heterosexual and gay men's right to dress in drag "just for a laugh" (satirical challenges to the two sex system ideology appear less provocative) while simultaneously criticizing genuine gender transforming transgender players' "antics" (which overtly challenge the two sex system ideology). While Amy and Brenda framed the gay-transgender tension in terms of transgender players being the "minority inside the minority," perhaps the idea of a gender-conforming—gender-transforming divide is also useful.

Even though many overtly “camp” gay men were prepared to act more “straight” in public during competitions, transgender players simply could not do this because they identified as either female (gender conforming) or transgender (gender transforming) (Tagg, 2008a). Perhaps due to the relaxation of the dress code rules in men’s netball in recent years (hair ties are now permitted and some men wear their hair in pigtails) very few young transgender players do compromise their gender performances by donning shorts to compete at the national championships. These players presumably associate less closely with men’s netball’s radical transgender roots and benefit from liberal attitudes toward both transgender people and appropriate women’s sporting attire. At one recent men’s netball national championship social event, for example, a feminine young transgender player wore a pair of short black shorts that looked just like a short skirt. Although on court she dressed as a man, her actions at the social function left little doubt about her gender identity. It remains unclear, however, to what extent younger transgender netball players engage with earlier generations and to what extent they share similar concerns about their place in the “world of netball.”

Transgender Netballers and Women’s Netball

Interestingly, Amy said transgender players had sometimes participated in early *women’s* netball. However, their involvement was always “very covert” because although some would pass (Goffman, 1963) as natural females there was still the risk that if “someone identifies you as being transgender then there’s going to be a protest because ‘why’s a man playing in this court?’” While Brenda said she feared having her gender (literally) exposed, she noted that—at least in women’s netball—now “you’ve had a sex change [and have medical verification] then you can go right ahead and do it because you’re a legal woman.” In addition to the issue of having to “out” themselves through medical verification, however, Amy said that “physicality issues” needed to be negotiated within women’s netball since men “can throw faster and throw harder”. This contradicts Dumaresq’s argument (quoted in Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006, p. 95) although it is unclear to what degree such differences actually play a role in netball.

Although Brenda had only “a bit of a chat here and a chat there” with NNZ representatives during the 1990s, she said that in recent years women’s netball administrators have accepted transgender *umpires*. She suggested this may be partly because of growing ties between NNZ and the NZMMNA but also because one senior NNZ administrator appeared “very open towards homosexuality and gay people and trans people.” Although Amy said that NNZ might not have “an *exact* idea of what a trans person is”, they seemed willing to discuss her concerns about sexuality issues and phobias within netball umpiring. As an umpire, Amy even considered herself lucky to be “absorbed into the women’s world” noting that her local Catholic schoolgirl netball competition embraced her as an umpire on the tacit understanding that she dresses respectably and not as “a raving drag queen ... trying to flash it every time I’ve got the chance.”

Yet as an umpire Amy seemed unconcerned about being “outed” and discriminated against within women’s netball as people there already knew “she’s a ‘tranny’ and a happy one.” In this sense she only seemed concerned that overt gender-transforming behavior may tarnish her professional reputation. She still had “little

paranoias when you're running around in a little white skirt" but realized that she needed to present those insecurities "in a way like girls do [for example,] 'oh, look my bum's showing!' and not 'oh my god my 'tuck's' showing!'" But while females playing aggressive sports, or playing sports aggressively, may no longer be widely considered "unseemly", she suggested that it is still considered "vulgar" for female netballers to have stubble and their "tuck" showing, and in a sense this reflects Cahn's (1994, p. 15) description of the link between social class and ideas of "vulgar" womanhood.

It seems that for transgender people to be accepted, they must clearly identify as either male or female and thereby actively avoid the gender-transforming drag queen stereotype. As Amy said:

If you can behave professionally, look professionally, then you've actually got a good future with the sport. But if you're going to carry on behaving like what you seen in the news and what you hear in the papers and things like that then expect ramifications. And one of those ramifications is discrimination; transphobia. All those things compiled because certain gay men decided that they're going to make an issue about playing in dresses.

Even as NNZ seemed to accept transgender umpires, it remains less clear how easily transgender *players* might be accommodated within elite women's netball. Amy noted that "there hasn't been a lot of transgender people being willing to put themselves through the rankings and actually go through the selection process to get into top-level netball in New Zealand." She added that this was partly because elite women's netballers tend to be identified at a young age and few teenage transgender netballers would "out" themselves simply to gain access to age group representative teams, especially considering that even the top international women's netballers receive relatively little financial remuneration (see Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006). Amy also added that "when it comes to being full-on players, that's where we've had problems with women's netball, because what competition do you play in?"

Although both men's and transgender netball competitions lack the player base needed to sustain regular national leagues, there remains a persistent perception that both male and transgender players possess a size and strength advantage over even elite women's players. These comments can be contrasted to the literature that critiques medicalized arguments about fairness (e.g., Birrell & Cole, 1990, Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006). Men's netballers, including female transgender men's netballers, typically assert that men's netballers (including female transgender men's netballers) have an unfair physical advantage over women's netball players. While in some cases there may be a valid argument regarding players' height, which is often very important in netball, it is unclear to what degree this potential advantage would be offset by both Dumaresq's point about muscle mass/bone mass ratios and, of course, the significant social challenges a female transgender netballer would face should she play women's netball at the highest levels.

Conclusion

In this article, I described some of the key issues surrounding female transgender netballers within the New Zealand context. I discussed specifically how female transgender netballers related to both male and female netball players, umpires, and

administrators and how this can be understood within the broader historical context of both netball and men's netball in New Zealand. Framed within a critical feminist critique of the two sex system ideology and ideological constructions considering fairness, this article examined the changing face of transphobia within men's netball in New Zealand. While the early NZMNA was characterized by extremely overt homophobia compared with the later NZMNA and the NZMMNA, this has largely been at the cost of overt transgender participation in men's netball. Transgender people may still play men's netball, but they must do so as a man (under the NZMNA) or as either a man or as a woman (under the NZMMNA). Following the controversial Stockholm Consensus guidelines, and as a result of the increasing "professionalization" of men's netball, spaces for gender-transforming transgender netballers have evaporated.

Despite the extreme difficulties faced by transgender netballers over the last two decades, gender-conforming female transgender players, at least in theory, now have a *wider* range of choices about how they engage in competitive netball. However, this has come at the cost of medicalization of gender (Birrell and Cole, 1990). Transgender players must now prove that their gender identity confirms to their biological sex, if for example, they wish to compete as women. In some ways the new mixed-gender netball competitions allow many female transgender netballers a greater range of choice. Postoperative female transgender netballers can enter the NZMMNA competitions as legally-defined female players provided they follow a procedure similar to the controversial Stockholm Consensus (Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006; Teetzel, 2006; Travers, 2006). Preoperative female transgender players can now enter the NZMMNA as legally-defined male players provided they adhere to the dress code that requires male players to wear shorts, not skirts.

Although in some ways these changes may seem progressive, they have actually achieved little in terms of promoting universal transgender inclusion within competitive sport (see Teetzel, 2006). While now possible, at least technically, for female transgender players to enter NNZ women's netball competitions, in reality there remain enormous practical barriers, and no such cases appear to have occurred. Finally, those netballers who are truly the "minority inside the minority" emphasized that the gender categories themselves that are at fault, not those who happen to transcend the categories (Jönsson, 2007). Despite the growing social acceptability of transgender people throughout New Zealand society, there appears no possibility for gender-transforming transgender players to openly participate anywhere. By so overtly challenging the whole basis of the two sex system ideology, these participants strike a nerve at the heart of transphobia and subsequently fail to attract meaningful political solidarity.

All of this serves to support the manifestation of both hegemonic masculinity and the two sex system ideology because of the way that truly "queer" identities were subjugated by the emerging mainstream heterosexist subculture. While the most outrageous gender-transforming transgender netballers were clearly prevented from engagement in NZMMNA and late-NZMNA activities, relatively tame displays of masculine affection also came under the administration's watchful eye. The fact that in recent years the rules have become relatively relaxed is not a sign of increasing tolerance, but rather the acknowledgment from the sport's administration that the threat posed by gender transforming transgender netballers has been vanquished. Although many gay men and a few semiclosed transgender women continue to

play men's (and mixed) netball in New Zealand, the future of this sport appears decidedly heterocentric.

The study of men's netball, both in New Zealand and elsewhere, is in its early stages, and there is much scope for further investigation. One key limitation of this particular study, for example, is the reliance on the narratives of only two gender-conforming transgender netball players. This limitation is also an open invitation for future research: it could be extremely fruitful to explore the experiences of any remaining early "radical" (gender-transforming) transgender netball players, as well as the experiences of the emerging generation of transgender netball players. There is also plenty of scope to investigate whether transgender netball players exist outside of the New Zealand context. In the ultraconservative context of Terengganu, Malaysia, where I currently reside, it is encouraging to witness both a surprisingly wide range of masculinities as well as openly advertised men's netball games. Finally, further work needs to be carried out to further delineate the complex relationships between gender, social class, and race/ethnicity in men's netball, both in New Zealand and elsewhere.

Notes

1. The way that netball was played in the first quarter of the twentieth century, as much as any other women's sport, highlights the assumptions associated with the choice of appropriate physical activity for women at the time. John Nauright, for example, cited an *Otago Daily Times* article from the 1920s describing netball as a "game eminently suitable for every girl, especially the business and industrial girl, who get practically no exercise during the week" (1996, p. 14). Netball thrived in New Zealand because it was perceived to be a gentle sport that supported socially-sanctioned ideas of emphasized femininity (Nauright, 1996).
2. Although difficult, at least from a Western perspective, to imagine openly gay and transgender people being embraced into such a "family sport," an administrator in my previous research (Tagg, 2008a, 2008b) actually suggested that there was little overt tension between Māori and Pacific Island family groups and the large proportion of gay and transgender players. This may in part be related to the complex, but generally more tolerant attitudes toward nonheterosexual gender identities within aspects of some traditional Pacific cultures (for example, see Alexeyeff, 2009, p. 118).
3. Female transgender players were forced out of the NZMNA and the NZMNA was replaced by the mixed-gender NZMMNA for three key reasons: (1) "outrageous" transgender players drew negative media attention, (2) to attract a wider, more heterosexual, player base, and (3) to formulate closer ties with NNZ. These changes, however, resulted in gender policing of not only transgender players, but also gay and heterosexual players. While this posed relatively little problem for heterosexual men and for gay men (who could relatively easily pass as heterosexual by acting straight in public), it forced transgender players (who could not simultaneously pass as male and dress as female) to make a very difficult decision between their gender identity and the sport and social network they loved and depended on (see Tagg, 2008a and Tagg, 2008c).

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