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A Creative Writing Case Study of Gender-Based Violence in Coach Education: Stacey’s Story

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Creative nonfiction writing is the literary technique employed in this article to explore insights and assist our understanding of an “alleged” sexual assault in a sport coach education environment. Creative nonfiction employs various narrative tools: characters, setting, figurative language, sequences of events, plot, sub-plot, and dialogue, designed to render the sensitive and controversial elements of sexual assault significant. Readers are, therefore, invited to engage with Stacey’s Story and reflect on the actions of both the perpetrator(s) and the victim. While there are risks associated with the sharing of stories, especially those which are considered dangerous, it is envisaged that Stacey’s Story will be viewed as an opportunity to develop more critical responses and advance our understanding of gender-based violence in sport.

Keywords: sexual assault, abuse, controversial and sensitive issues, sport, coach education, narrative
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The terminology used by scholars when referring to various forms of sexual harassment, violence and assault in both the European Member States, and the United States of America (USA), in and beyond sport contexts, varies considerably (Mergaert, Arnaut, Vertommen, & Lang, 2016). In terms of consistency therefore, we accept the European Commission’s Proposal for Strategic Actions on Gender Equality in Sport’s position, by adopting “gender-based violence” as a proposition to capture any unwanted “sexual act” committed by a perpetrator. According to Mergaert et al. (2016) gender-based violence is defined in these terms:

Violence directed against a person because of that person’s gender (including gender identity/expression) or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionality…sexual violence (including rape, sexual assault, abuse and harassment) are considered a form of gender-based violence. (p. 2)

It is widely considered that gender-based violence occurs across all sports and at all levels, but deliberate and targeted behavior is especially prevalent at the elite/professional ranks (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2008; Caudwell, 2017, Fisher & Anders, 2019). In the USA for example, the sexual abuse\(^1\) of (mostly) female athletes, eventually lead to the prosecution and criminal conviction of medical professional Larry Nassar, at the time, the team doctor for USA gymnastics. The case of Larry Nassar acts as a stark illustration of both the physical and psychological suffering which can occur at the hands of a sexual predator (Fisher & Anders, 2019). It also reminds us that there is no “typical” profile of a sexual abuser, and sexual offenses

\(^1\) To trick, force or coerce a person into any sexual activity the person does not want, or is not sufficiently mature to consent to.
vitiated by force, or the fear of force, can be perpetrated by individuals who typically rely on upholding the highest levels of morality, trust and care (e.g., medical professionals). Similar to the medical profession, sporting environments are also distinctive, in the sense that legitimate physical touching can take place between the coach and the athlete, and there is no doubt, that the spaces in which sport coaches inhabit are nested by complex social, political, historical, cultural and gendered discourses (Fisher & Anders, 2019). Sporting environments, therefore, provide a unique sociocultural context that offers the potential for gender-based violence to take place (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

Theorization beyond sport reveals instances of gender-based violence occurring in both university education settings and the workplace (Everbach, 2018; Phipps & Young, 2015). For instance, gender-based violence is reported to permeate through universities’ sport and “lad” drinking cultures (Phipps & Young, 2015). Heavy drinking is considered an integral element of university life and concerns have been raised about the potential violence, threats, and associated risks that women face when entering historically hegemonic “masculine” domains (Rogan, Piacentini, & Szmigin, 2016). Online forums such as Uni Lad and the Lad Bible are reported to contribute to these sexual discourses and “raunch culture” (Rogan et al., 2016), with online content, such as the example below serving as a disturbing illustration:

If the girl you’ve taken for a drink … won’t ‘spread for your head’, think about this mathematical statistic: 85 per cent of rape cases go unreported. That seems to be fairly good odds. Uni Lad does not condone rape without saying ‘surprise’ (Cited in Phipps & Young 2015; and in Caudwell, 2017, p. 69).

With this in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that the #MeToo movement, which helps to support those who have suffered gender-based violence has been formed (MeToo, 2018).
(Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Owton, 2016). Nonetheless, achieving diversity in male-dominated industries remains an enduring challenge. It is well established that due to the ideological and cultural centrality of sport, not to mention the dominant masculine discourses and power relations which permeate their way across regulatory sporting bodies, any substantive shift in attitudes and inequalities towards women remains elusive (Fielding-Lloyd & Meán, 2016). Within the United Kingdom (UK) formal coach education is framed as a predominantly male-dominated preserve, where women continue to present and negotiate their gendered identities along a path of both acceptance and resistance (Norman, Rankin-Wright & Allison, 2018). More recently, coach education has been described as a harsh and uncaring environment for women (Lewis, Roberts & Andrews, 2017; 2018). However, it is not generally regarded as fertile terrain for gender-based violence to take place. Saying that, existing research does not portray the coaching profession (in the UK at least) as a particularly positive environment for underrepresented groups (i.e., women) with reported evidence of bullying, harassment and intimidation (Norman et al., 2018).

In the following pages of this article, we therefore draw on events that allegedly took place during a formal coach education course in the UK. In doing so, we offer a creative nonfiction short story, which aims to give voice to the voiceless and the underrepresented. As such, we are treating the process of research as an act of critical construction rather than discovery. Ontologically then, our reality is positioned within a political, cultural, historical and economic context (Mertens, 2008). Critical researchers have an agenda of change, and attempt to improve the lives and situations of the underrepresented or those of whose affairs are oppressed (Freire, 1996). To help inform this work we are drawn to the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity is a concept widely used to identify the
attitudes and practices among men who seek to propagate gender inequality, mostly involving the use of power as a way to dominate women (Jewkes, Flood & Lang, 2015). Hegemonic masculinity is thus described as:

A set of values, established by men in power that functions to include or exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women), and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 40).

It is outside the scope of this article to provide a detailed theoretical overview of hegemonic masculinity, for a review see Jewkes et al. (2015). However, in terms of positioning hegemonic masculinity in historical sporting terms, its application has been employed in representations of soccer “hooliganism” and assaultive violence in the USA (Newburn & Stanko, 1994). It has also been deployed to assist our understanding of the symbolic violence attributed to contact sports (Messner & Sabo, 1990) and risk-taking sexual behavior (Sabo & Gordon, 1995). So, while some have argued hegemonic masculinity is associated with negative characteristics of criminology (i.e., Collier, 1998), which has led to the continuation of men engaging in toxic practices and physical violence in particular settings, others have suggested that more than one hegemonic masculinity within a society exists (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, while we accept the masculine concept as a framework to understand gender-related norms, we reject the use of hegemonic masculinity as a fixed character type, or a collection of toxic traits. Instead we are framing masculinities as multiple, fluid and lithe and seen as positions held situationally, whereby practices and values espoused in one context may be different from those of another (Jewkes et al., 2015).
Our aim here is increased gender equity and violence prevention, by “breaking the link” between masculinity and violence, by challenging how social norms of masculinity can be understood and changed. It also contributes towards practice by providing scholars, policy-makers, coaches, and coach educators with a grounded, user-friendly account, designed to assist our understanding of hegemonic masculinity that might inform future coach education workshops.

Method

This research was granted full university ethical approval and formed part of a larger body of work, regarding how hegemonic masculinity was translated into practical gender equality in sport coach education contexts, some of which is published and archived elsewhere (i.e., blinded for anonymity purposes). The creative nonfiction story was developed using selected secondary sources (not revealed to protect individual identities) and a secondary synthesis of qualitative data captured during the project. These included: newspaper articles, written correspondences between an alleged victim of gender-based violence and a national sporting body, informal conversations with coaches regarding the case, conversations with women who were the alleged victims of sexual assault, and a copy of a written complaint alleging gender-based violence that was forwarded to a national sporting organization.

Like others, we had a moral and ethical duty to ensure the best possible use of the data and given the experiences recounted in the story, we offer a “cloak of anonymity” in order to protect both the worthy and the unworthy (Douglas & Carless, 2009). The writing process followed a multi-staged, iterative course of drafting, re-drafting, editing and story engineering (Vickers, 2014). Partial happenings, fragmented memories, and echoes of conversations were layered against conventional, creative literary writing techniques (Sparkes, 2007). For instance,
we make no assertions that scenes as described actually took place, or that the characters portrayed actually said what they are reported to have said. All events as described (i.e., physical spaces, plot, conflict and the composite characters) were captured in our data, however, we have simplified certain elements into a story telling narrative, designed to portray an alternative picture of hegemonic masculinity in coach education. Thus while certain encounters and character development in this story have been imagined, that events in this story occurred as described is not in doubt, the information presented is based on our own existing research (Finley & Finley, 1999). Significantly, we have deliberately chosen to adopt some creative license by mixing up the language features, metaphors, and embellishing or exaggerating the thread of our narrative (Bachelard, 1964; Vickers, 2014). Our aim here, was to not to retell “life as lived” (Finley & Finley, 1999, p. 318), but to create a story that was useful in raising important questions, and by weaving the empirical, historical, imaginative and reflective, create a text that allows us to know more about those who we choose to write about (Finley & Finley, 1999). In this sense, the use of narrative in scholarly work is not new. Academics have made important contributions to often complex and controversial topics by synthesizing existing works of fiction, by shaping their own, or by adopting the tradecraft of fictional writing to allow nonfiction to breath (e.g., Beames & Pike, 2008; Brackenbridge & Fasting, 2005; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Dzikus, 2012; Pelias, 2004). Researchers adopting this genre create vicarious versions of reality inviting the reader to inhabit the experiences of both the individual and the unique (Vickers, 2014). Creative nonfiction captures what Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) refer to as moments, offering instants obtained from countless techniques of fiction (e.g., contextualized vernacular language, composite characters, dialogue, metaphor, allusions, flashbacks and flash forwards,
tone shifts and so on) to communicate considerations, results and key findings in compelling and emotionally vibrant ways (Smith, 2013).

Ultimately, the implementation of creative nonfiction in academic terms is only warranted “when employed in the service of a legitimate research purpose. That purpose is the generation of a conversation about important educational questions” (Barone, 1997, p. 223), or, in our case, the pursuit of emotional truth or descriptions of unwanted sexual attention. More recently, Carless, Sparkes, Douglas and Cooke (2014) have offered the following criteria for judging the quality of creative literary fiction: is the topic under scrutiny timely, significant and interesting? Does it contribute practically and methodologically to our understanding of social life? Does the study achieve its primary goals? Does the work embody a sense of lived experience? Does the work generate new questions? Do the stories hang together? Do they invite an interpretive response from the reader? Are they credible and do they work? Does the work resonate at an intellectual and emotional level? With these thoughts in mind the primary goals of this article were to (a) show the emotional truth and effects of gender-based violence within a coach education setting, and (b) illustrate the potential for creative nonfiction as a literary tool to enable readers to understand an incident of gender-based violence from the perspective of the victim. What follows is Stacey’s story, however, we warn readers that the story does contain some explicit sexual language and a bar scene that some readers may find distressing.

**The Location**

The Academy for Coaching Leadership and Excellence (ACLE)

**The Time**

Several years ago
The Characters

Stacey—Female coach.

Tony—Ex-professional male athlete and coach.

Steve—Male coach and ex-police officer.

Gavin—Male coach education tutor.

Stacey’s Story

I didn’t open the letter, not straight away. Instead I placed it on the kitchen table and stared at the crisp, white looking envelope. I knew straight away who it was from. The distinctive logo, courtesy of the organization’s franking machine was immediately recognisable.

The cause of my hesitancy lies with the decision, hitherto unknown, buried deep inside the envelope. The unknown question: will I be good enough? The longer I stare, the more uncomfortable I feel. My stomach tightens, my heart is doing somersaults. It was as though the envelope was goading me, whispering to me:

Go on, open me…if you dare.

You see, I have been here before. My previous applications—all rejected—not good enough. In my own mind I had convinced myself that this would be the final time. Never again! I could do no more. I had put in all the necessary hard work: the endless hours of planning, coaching in the wind and the rain, the submission of the never-ending paperwork, attendance at preparation courses, the accumulation of evidence, the completion of formative assessments, and summative assessments. The tutor feedback though was always the same: Not enough…not working at a high enough level…perhaps in a two or three years.

All the characters names described below are pseudonyms.
If I’m honest, I think it had something to do with me being a woman. I know what you’re thinking. I didn’t want to use the gender card, you must believe me when I say that, but some of my male colleagues were accepted first-time, no questions asked, but then again, they were former professional athletes. A glance up at the clock that hangs above the kitchen door. I need to open this thing, otherwise I will be late for work. With my eyes closed and with a deep intake of breath, I tear open the envelope. I remember my hands were shaking. I don’t recall my reasons for this, but I started reading the letter from the bottom of the page. Beginning with the name of the signatory, I scanned through the document for information, clues, anything for some indication. It didn’t take long before the text started to filter its way through my senses sending messages to my brain:

*Congratulations*…

*Confirm your attendance*…

*We look forward to seeing you*…

At long last, I had done it. My hard work and efforts had been rewarded.

I had been accepted.

The journey to the ACLE was largely uneventful and the traffic on the road was kind for a change. It was the height of mid-summer and the sun was making an impromptu, but welcome appearance to what had been hitherto a very wet August. On arrival, I was in complete awe of the surroundings. The grounds were manicured with immaculate lawns as far as the eye could see; herbaceous borders were ablaze with an abundance of colour; further back, evergreens competed for space with the sycamores and the cherry blossoms; together their expansive canopies cascaded an intricate matrix of temporal patterns onto the lush green turf. The spectrum of organic colour was in contrast to the white facade belonging to the Georgian mansion style
hotel, which loomed impressively at the end of the expansive driveway. It was eerily quiet, the
only sound being the crunch of the gravel resonating against the tires of my car. I complied with
the speed limit and followed the signs to: guest parking.

After checking in, unpacking and a quick change of clothes, it was time for the first
meeting: welcome and general introduction. I found the meeting room with ease, and as I stood
in the doorway my initial impression was one of fear and trepidation. Professional athletes both
past and present were helping themselves to the complimentary coffee or mingling with
members of the tutor team. I seem to remember there was a lot of handshaking, back-slapping,
good humour and laughter. From a distance it appeared as though everyone knew one another;
familiar, comfortable, and at ease in one another’s company. In contrast, I felt like an imposter; it
looked as though a squad mentality was already forming. I felt like an outsider: *I looked like an
outsider.*

The room reeked of professionalism and superiority. On the walls large plasma screens
were projecting images of community coaches working with younger athletes followed by
professional coaches working with the National team. Classical music accompanied the video
montages creating a relaxed, sedate background atmosphere. Name badges, complimentary
training uniforms and resource materials were stacked neatly on a large wooden table. No
expense had been spared. I recognised some of the other coaches in the room. They looked lean
and athletic. Wearing training uniforms with their organizational logo or expensive designer
clothing, they appeared somewhat incongruous when compared to the other coaches or the
course tutors who cut a much fuller figure around the mid-riff. Thinking back, there were
probably more tutors on the course than actual coaches. Over the week, I think we had probably
15 or 20 tutors, all male. They clearly didn’t expect any women to apply, as all the pre-course literature adopted the pronoun: he.

The course itself was both physically and mentally challenging. Early starts, coupled with late finishes; in the classroom one minute, quickly followed by practical coaching sessions and then back in the classroom for reflection and analysis. The itinerary was very full on; some days we were in the classroom until late in the evening. I thought I coped pretty well with the coaching side of things, but I was a little disappointed to be constantly referred to as a fella or a lad and when it was my turn to coach the course tutors did nothing to stop some of the other coaches fooling around. I was made to look foolish on a number of occasions, and whilst I respected their status as former professional athletes, I did wonder whether they could show me a little more respect, especially Tony, who seemed to take great pleasure and satisfaction when he messed up parts of my coaching session. On one occasion during a technical practice I overheard him say: I’d love to give her one, and when I turned around he was mimicking a humping action with his hips. It was both juvenile and humiliating. This was in full view of Gavin the lead tutor but he just smiled and said nothing. There were other occasions where I could sense Tony had ‘crossed the line’ with the other coaches; pulling down other people’s shorts or crouching down behind someone in order for someone else to push them over. It started off quite jovial and playful but after a while, when some others were fatigued how it had the potential to develop into more destructive violence.

To say a drinking culture existed on the course is somewhat of an understatement. After the first few days it was apparent who the drinkers were. The absence of certain individuals at breakfast was the first clue. The red eyes, croaky voices, vacating the pitch to throw up or even in some cases, throwing up at the side of the pitch, was the other. It did leave me wondering how
they coped, especially when we entered the part of the course where we were required to conduct small episodic coaching sessions. Gavin however employed some creative license to the delivery timetable, especially when some of the group were so hungover they didn’t even show up. This did lead to some tension and frustration amongst the group. Thinking back, I guess I was lucky; as it didn’t affect me, but I did feel sorry for some of the guys who were required to deliver on the spot sessions with inadequate numbers, or attempt to motivate the make-believe athletes who were so ill, they could hardly move.

Tony was usually the orchestrator of a night out in town, or a late night drinking session in the hotel bar. To be fair, Gavin did or said nothing to discourage the drinking, and remained aloof from some of the antics and shenanigans which were going on. You know, the usual stuff: putting all the drinks on someone else’s room tab, playing drinking games, the odd forfeit here and there. In the evening it was round after round, and for those guys who didn’t drink or who were on a tight budget, it was a bit awkward. Plus, when they had consumed a few drinks the language tended to be of a sexual nature, and if I was in the vicinity I noticed how some of the group looked a little embarrassed, and so I would call it a night. In all honesty, I didn’t object to the early nights as there was enough work for me to get on with; preparation tasks for the following day, background reading that sort of thing.

For the final evening we were booked into the gourmet restaurant, for what was advertised as a gala dinner but in reality, it wasn’t. The pre-course material made reference to the event and reminded us to pack appropriate smart casual clothing including amongst other things: a shirt and tie. As a rule, I don’t normally wear business style clothes, being more content in a training uniform or a casual pair of jeans, but on this occasion, I was pleased to make an exception. I had packed my navy blue suit, normally reserved for weddings, interviews or a visit
to the bank manager! I had taken care with my hair and make-up, nothing over the top, but I was pleased with my appearance. A crisp white blouse and a pair of heeled shoes completed my attire for the evening. Following the meal, we all decamped into the various bars and lounge areas.

Tony was really going for it, ordering bottles of wine and beer on his American Express card. He had quite an audience and was seemingly enjoying the attention. He was reliving some anecdotes from his time as a former professional athlete. It was noticeable how his speech was beginning to slur and his eyes were becoming glazed. As the time approached eleven, we were asked by the hotel staff to move into another lounge. It was smaller and contained a number of regal looking leather chairs and sofas, together with the wooden panelling it looked more like a private gentleman’s club than a hotel lounge. Tony was now ordering another bottle of red wine, some of the group were calling it a night. He offered me a drink. I told him I would have one glass for the road. Steve and Gary were sitting opposite. I had enjoyed Steve’s company during the course, but Gary was a bit on the strange side. He was from London and he kept using cockney rhyming slang, which at first was funny, but after a while it started to sound immature and annoying. He was a bit awkward on the social side. He was a bit too sure of himself and was only happy when putting others down, making inappropriate lewd comments, or fooling around during my coaching sessions. When Tony reappeared he was carrying a tray of Jäger bombs, which he placed on the table before sitting next to me on the sofa. He offered one to me—I refused. He placed his arm on the back of the sofa, and not for the first time during the course I felt uneasy in his company. The topic of the conversation was beginning to become a little uncomfortable. References and innuendos of an explicit sexual nature were becoming more frequent. Tony laughed as he cracked another derogatory remark about one of his previous conquests, while staring at my breasts for longer than was necessary. He attempted to top up my drink, however,
this time I reached forward and placed my hand over my glass. He looked angry and offended. I
could tell by the expression etched across his face that he was not used to a woman turning him
down. I remember removing my glass from the table and placing it down by my feet to prevent
him trying again and caught him leaning forward leering at my legs. Steve and Gary who were
sat opposite were trying to send messages on their phones, but with little success. Gary kept
throwing his head back and would fall asleep for short periods, before sitting bolt upright as
though he had experienced an electric shock. Steve then stood up and excused himself, he made
some reference to a python! Which I didn’t understand. Gary now asleep was snoring softly. It
was well after midnight and the lounge bar which was now closed was otherwise empty. I had
finished my drink and was reaching for my jacket, which I had draped over the side-arm of the
sofa, when suddenly I felt a hand squeeze my breast. At first I wasn’t sure what was happening
but then I felt another hand, this time on the underside of my thigh. I was being pulled, forced
violently onto my back. It was Tony. He was pushing hard against me. My neck was jammed
between the intersections of the sofa, and he was trying to force himself on top of me. I could
feel his stubble rubbing against the nape of my neck, it was rough and coarse like sandpaper.
Even though I turned my face in the opposite direction, I could smell his alcohol fuelled breath.
He was trying to kiss me. He pulled my face towards him. His hand was pressing hard against
the inside of my thigh, lifting up my skirt. With his other hand he was trying to pull my legs
apart. My response was ineffective; I just wasn’t strong enough. His hand pushed further up my
thigh reaching for my underwear. I struggled. I really did. I tried punching his back, but it was
pointless, he was just too strong. He groped up my skirt and pulled at my underwear, he was
panting heavily, feral—out of control. His watch caught my pubic hair. He placed his fingers
inside me, he was beginning to hurt me…I asked him to stop. I wanted him to stop. Terrified, I begged for him to stop.

He refused. In the end I had no choice, and I give in to the inevitable.

The next thing I remember was shouting—lots of shouting. I glanced up and saw Steve dragging Tony across the room by the scruff of his neck. He threw him hard against the bar and started grabbing him by the throat. I didn’t know at the time, but Steve was an ex-policeman.

Gary now awake, had a look of confusion ingrained across his drunken face as he stared at my exposed thighs and torn underwear. I pulled my skirt down trying hard to ignore the red handprints branded onto my skin. I reached for my jacket and raced out of the bar. I rushed back to my room in a state of shock, confused, and unsure about what to do next. I slammed the door shut and collapsed to the floor, my body was shaking and I wanted to vomit. I sat with my back pressed up against the bed with my legs tucked tight into my chin and sobbed and sobbed. Tears rolled down my face in torrents. I was inconsolable, drowning in a sea of desperation, guilt and shame. I was a victim. That’s what they would call me. They would say I brought this on myself, that I encouraged him. For me though, this was not a scar showing competition. I was a victim.

Everyone’s a victim these days. It’s the only way to get your voice heard; use your gender card that’s what they would say, but I didn’t want that level of protection—I’m better than that. I want to feel protected. They would say, you can’t say anything to her because she is a victim.

A knock at the door.

I could hear my name being called, repeated over and over again. It took some time before I recognised Gavin’s voice. He asked if he could speak to me, I agreed. Steve had woken Gavin and told him what he had witnessed in the bar. Gavin was visibly shocked. I could tell by the manner in which his voice trembled and the confused expression on his face that he was out
of his depth. He was really apologetic; but he could barely look me in the eye. Steve then knocked on the door, and asked if I was okay. He said he wanted to stay and offer his support, but Gavin told him it was not necessary. Steve however was insistent, he got his way in the end, especially when he mentioned that he was a policeman in a former life. Steve was brilliant; calm, reassuring, but also pragmatic. He asked me if I wanted to press charges and picked up a notepad. Gavin’s face was a picture when he heard this, he was shitting himself! I told Steve I wasn’t sure, that I needed time to think. Then Gavin reminded both of us that Tony was married, with three young children. He looked straight at me when he reminded me that Tony was a well-known former professional athlete and that the press would have a field day if this ever leaked out. I became upset and angry, especially when Gavin concluded that: I leave the course and go home, for my own good. I started to cry again, I couldn’t understand why I was the one being asked to leave. By this time Steve was sitting next to me on the bed convincing me that I had done nothing wrong. He offered me an endless supply of tissues, from a box he had rescued from the bathroom. He challenged Gavin, again and again, asking him why it was not Tony being the one asked to go home. I recall he gave some pathetic excuse about him not being in a fit state to drive. I knew this was bullshit and so did Gavin.

The following morning, I woke early. I say woke. The truth is that I didn’t actually sleep. My body ached and my mind was racing. I was still reliving the events of the night before. I spent most of the night crying, staring at the ceiling, thinking about the consequences for both me and Tony. I blamed myself and I was angry for not putting up a stronger fight. I was angry because I should have done more. I am not the type of person to run away from things but I couldn’t face going to the restaurant for breakfast. I wasn’t hungry, plus I was worried, you know, just in case I bumped into Tony. The first person I spoke to that morning was Steve.
Thoughtfully he had brought me some pastries from the dining room and checked in to see if I was okay, but I had no appetite for food. It was his idea that I attend the last classroom session; a wrap-up before the final departure.

The classroom that morning was eerily quiet, the air full of tension. It was such a contrast to the welcome event only days earlier which was full of laughter and bonhomie. I don’t think it was paranoia on my part, but I got the feeling that word had leaked out, though I couldn’t determine whether the other coaches were supportive of me or not, not that it mattered. Steve was sitting alongside me; he was the only person who spoke to me that morning. The atmosphere in the room was awful, it was like a funeral. I was treated like a leper. Then, to my surprise, Tony suddenly got up out of his seat and casually strolled to the front of the classroom where he spoke briefly to Gavin who was busy sorting out the course evaluation forms. Deep in conversation, I remember Gavin turning his back on the group; presumably to mask his facial expression, but it was obvious from his incessant nodding that whatever was being discussed had his agreement. After a short discussion Gavin placed the evaluation forms back down on the table and turned off both his computer and projection screen, and cleared his throat.

“Listen everyone, can I please have your attention for a second. Last night there was bit of an incident in the bar, and Tony here would just like to say a few words,” he said.

I remember sitting with my head in my hands, in a state of disbelief and embarrassment. The discomfort was causing my skin to burn up. Heat was radiating from my cheeks, the trickle of cool, wet tears ineffective. Silently, I was thinking, oh no. Please, no. Not here. Not here, not in full view of everyone. I wanted to shout out: just leave it, its fine, but the words did not come, and anyway, it was too late: Tony was already speaking:
“Listen fellas, last night after most of you had gone to bed, there was a little misunderstanding in the bar involving myself and Stacey. I’ll be honest, I don’t remember much as I was pretty wasted, but it turns out I made a bit of a dick of myself. I’m not proud of what happened. I let myself down, and my family down, but above all, I let down the people sitting here in this room. The people who I have enjoyed working with over the past week. I acted like a right idiot and I hope you will accept my apology. I really didn’t mean to cause any offence or upset anyone.”

To my complete astonishment, the room then exploded into a round of spontaneous applause. To add to my sense of incredulity someone even managed a wolf-whistle. At first, Tony looked embarrassed and uneasy with the adulation, but then he started to receive the applause with acclaim, even managing a modest wave to his adoring audience, it was as though he had just been presented with an award. He even managed a nod and a subtle wink in my direction. I was flabbergasted, speechless, hurt and angry. He was being treated like a hero. He didn’t even admit to what he had done. Nobody apart from Steve spoke to me as we departed the room, not even Gavin. I felt like a pariah. I just wanted to get out. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops: I hate it here. But what was the point?

After all: I was the victim.

Discussion

Researchers working with alternative literary formats have argued that creative nonfiction such as the story presented here, can stand alone and requires no further forensic interrogation (Smith, 2013). This is an important consideration especially if stories and storytelling are to be used as a catalyst for dialogue and social change. Like others (i.e., Smith, 2013), we also share the value of allowing a story to speak for itself, empowering the reader to build connections in
the development and construction of knowledge. On this occasion however, we resist this temptation, and instead provide a theoretical discussion which we hope illustrates how creative nonfiction can contribute to furthering our understanding of hegemonic masculinity in sport. As the problem of gender-based violence in educational and workplace settings continues to increase (Hill & Silva, 2005), it is surprising to read that such topics remain on the periphery of the research community; presumably because researchers continue to grapple with the ethical and disseminator dilemmas associated with this form of discourse (Fasting & Sand, 2015).

Research surrounding sexual assault as defined by Fontes, (2004) is a sensitive topic, as those women who are victims may be reluctant to engage in the research process. As mentioned earlier, gender-based violence is a behavior where coercive power is used as a means of obtaining a desired outcome in return for a sexual favour, or a series of sex-related actions which lead to the victim feeling uncomfortable and the creation of a hostile environment (Fasting, Brackenridge & Borgen-Sundgot, 2003; Fasting & Sand, 2015; Hunt, Davidson, Fielden & Hoel, 2010). As Fasting and Sand (2015) remind us, pivotal to our understanding of gender-based violence is that the behavior experienced is not desired and instead is perceived as threatening, degrading, insulting and offensive. Thus gender-based violence is not only a violation of a person’s body, but of their mind as well, and can lead to a number of debilitating health outcomes. For instance, previous research has suggested that 31% of sexual assault victims will display posttraumatic symptoms (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992). Whereas others have reported that victims of sexual assault develop depressive symptoms (Kucharska, 2017). More worryingly, being a victim of gender-based violence is reported to be a strong predictor of future sexual assaults (Gidyeyz, Coble, Latham & Layman, 1993).
Stacey’s story reads similarly to findings in Fasting, Brackenridge and Walseth (2007) as it shows us how Stacey was subjected to a range of humiliating and degrading forms of behavior: sexual innuendo, jokes of a sexual nature, leering, and unwanted physical sexual attention that eventually leads to a penetrative sexual assault. Similarly, these actions help to illustrate how men are able to conform to hegemonic views of masculinity. Of interest here is that these behaviors occurred during times which could be defined as both formal and social situations. We know that gender-based violence can be prevalent in a range of settings and is not unique to sport (for example Rogan et al. (2016) observations about marketing drinking venues in the UK). By removing herself from the situation or laughing off the jokes rather than confronting or reporting the behavior, Stacey exhibits a common reaction to such a situation. As the scene in the bar escalates, Stacey is heard “asking…wanting…[and] begging for him to stop.” The story demonstrates how Tony appears to normalize his behavior and avoids taking responsibility for his own violence. He doesn’t go as far as blame the victim, but the lack of support provided by Gavin rationalizes a hegemonic masculine view that the event does not need to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, the gender-based violence entwined within the story is not unique to a sporting setting but is all too familiar within the wider contemporary society (Scott, Crompton & Lyonette, 2010).

Collinson and Collinson (1989) stated that “men’s sexuality and organizational power are inextricably linked” (p. 107), and unwanted conduct of a sexual nature often reflects an abuse of power and is primarily about men exercising their power over women (Wilson & Thompson, 2001). In Stacey’s story we show how Tony’s playful behavior during the practical coaching sessions (i.e., short pulling) has the potential to become violent. Here the story illustrates how men who do not use “serious violence” can be responsible for condoning less severe forms of
violence in order to avoid group exclusion without losing face. Men often provoke notions of hegemonic forms of masculinity by presenting notions of an entitlement to women’s bodies. For instance, when Tony was caught “leering at Stacey’s legs” and when he attempted to “grab her breasts.”

Also captured in the story are references to those individuals in a position of organizational authority (i.e., Gavin) who did not respond appropriately to the situation or the seriousness of what took place and acted as a bystander (Fisher & Anders, 2019). This is juxtaposed against the uncertainty demonstrated by Stacey as to whether to press charges against Tony or not. The decision of whether to report a sexual assault is a complex one (Hunt et al., 2010). For instance, it is well established that not all organizations have a transparent policy or procedure for dealing with potential sexual assault complaints (Hunt et al., 2010). The situation for Stacey was intensified by the sporting organization’s apparent concern that the alleged assault may get out and that as the alleged perpetrator was a former professional athlete that the “press would have a field day.” Readers are, we hope, intrigued by how Stacey was also made to become part of a conspiracy to protect the honour of the offender should the incident become publicly known (for an example of ideas of good character that arise in sexual assault cases see Inglis & MacKeogh, 2012). The position adopted by Gavin to offer immediate protection to Tony is a worryingly common occurrence in sexual assault cases and one which serves as an illustration of how sporting organizations may need to change and greatly consider training their workforce on gender-based violence.

Interestingly, Steve, who was an ex-policeman, was the only person who seemed to be aware of the serious nature of what had taken place and by shaping the story in this way may help to bridge the research-practice divide. Whether gender-based violence training is considered
important enough by organizations to include on coach education programs is debatable (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009). What is clear, is that in the UK at least, a recent number of high-profile sports have seen accusations of alleged gender-based violence appearing in the media (e.g., England women’s football, bobsleigh, cycling and canoeing teams) and with the evidence cited previously from the case of Larry Nassar in the USA, then perhaps further training is needed.

Despite the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Equality Act (2010) in the UK, there are still examples of inequality in which women still have to prove their worth compared to men (Lewis et al., 2017; 2018). Young (2010) also argued that the “aspects of a woman’s body most gazed at and discussed, and in terms of which she herself all too often measures her own worth, are those which least suggest action – breasts, buttocks, etc.” (p. 14). She goes on to comment that “contemporary film, advertising, popular literature and periodicals, and countless other media objectify the female body as sexy, passive flesh…making them desirable.” A point echoed by Rogan et al. (2016) in relation to marketing in the night time economy. Sport has often been seen as a functional and positive environment, and the darker side of sport (i.e., sexual exploitation), is often under researched (Owton, 2016), apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Fasting et al., 2007; Fisher & Anders, 2019; Owton, 2016). According to Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli and Tapp (2008), although the exact prevalence of sexual abuse in society is difficult to determine, “it is clear that it occurs across all classes of society and in any context where there is the opportunity for” (p. 387).

Stacey documents how she was “hurt” and felt “upset,” “angry” and as though she “was the victim.” Further on, she tells the reader that she felt like a “pariah” and “wanted to get out.” What is also important to note is that, our short story aside, is that although there are investigations into alleged gender-based violence, by those who may be described as well-known
or in positions of power, little is known about other cases in sport that get pursued which fall outside the radar of the media because they are not well-known. There appears to be a number of reasons for this, comprising of people feeling unable to share their stories through being suppressed or silenced and resistance to acknowledge that sport itself does in fact possess a dark side (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001).

Concluding Thoughts

Within this article, we attempt to provide an alternative picture of hegemonic masculinity in coach education, whilst also demonstrating how story-telling can be an effective pedagogical approach in providing a voice to the voiceless (Beames & Pike, 2008). A case is put forward that coach education and coaching is a unique sociocultural context that offers the potential for gender-based violence to take place (Owton, 2016). The story presented was designed to signify the sensitive and controversial elements of gender-based violence and assist our understanding of hegemonic masculinity in a coach education domain.

Stacey’s story, we hope, offers a powerful learning vehicle into how she was subjected to unwanted sexual attention that eventually lead to a sexual assault, before being cajoled to withhold her story. Stacey’s story is, therefore, an example of an attempt to cover up gender-based violence in addition to exposing a highly heteronormative and aggressively masculine environment. Due to recent sexual abuse scandals in the USA, we are even more aware of the potential impact of gender-based violence in sporting contexts (e.g., the Larry Nassar scandal).

In the context of advancing this debate, we recommend that there is a need to offer participants who are attending coach education the opportunity to learn more about the potential for gender-based violence to take place, in order to help keep both athletes and fellow coaches safe (see Fasting et al., 2007). We believe some exciting, creative opportunities to move this
work forward exist. First, gender transformative programs such as those described in The Macho Factory in Sweden offer exciting possibilities (Jewkes et al., 2015). It is outside the scope of this article to describe The Macho Factory in depth, but in short this educational program uses ethnomethodological material and two short films to illustrate men’s violence against women. 

Here the aims are to scrutinize accepted accounts of violence towards women and understand new ways to think and act. We endorse the idea of “forum theatre” as a potential vehicle to make this happen and will explore possibilities of shaping this work into what Denzin (2017) referred to as a “performance-centered pedagogy.” We are then, in the words of Denzin (2017, p. 14) pushing back against “racial, sexual, and class boundaries…” and by talking about these “…painful experiences…” we are framing them as a performance-centered pedagogy as a mode of developing our understanding of provocative and sensitive topics. From a Freirean perspective as pedagogues we are trained to respect the architecture and performance in the classroom, and actively work on opportunities for incorporating different forms of knowledge. What we are asking is whether this performance event can contribute to broader societal change in hegemonic masculine domains such as coach education? At the very least, at a discursive level, it offers a pragmatic, preliminary first step about how to raise issues surrounding gender equity and gender-based violence. As others have stated elsewhere (i.e., Jewkes et al., 2015), such changes will not happen in a vacuum or in isolation, and so we call on sporting organizations and governing bodies of sport to take a more comprehensive, longer term view by considering suitable interventions that lead to the eradication of gender-based violence in sport.

Declaration of Interests Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE


