

# Taking Comfort in the Binary: Examining Language, Gender and Sexuality in a Sports Organisation

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## Abstract

Sport, like any social institution, plays a key role in shaping society. It has thus been a focus across many disciplines, including sociology and linguistics amongst others. Previous findings indicate a noticeable exclusion of the Rainbow community, with instances of homophobia, sexism and transphobia reported as widespread in most sporting contexts. To redress these recognised issues, sports organisations, as institutional guides in their respective codes, are increasingly expected to promote social inclusion by creating and enforcing diversity and inclusion policies and through leading by example in their own practices. As a sociolinguistic researcher, I investigate these everyday organisational practices through the lens of language, gender and sexuality. Using approaches from linguistic ethnography, in particular those developed by the Language in the Workplace Project, this research examines how wider social discourses are reproduced in a sports organisation. Working with a regional sports organisation in New Zealand over a period of five months, the analysis draws on a data set comprised of ethnographic field notes, workplace documents, and around 25 hours of audio-visual recordings of naturally occurring workplace interactions (e.g., office small talk and team meetings) alongside follow-up interviews with participants. By analysing talk in this setting, and by investigating interaction between society and language more broadly, we gain deeper understanding of how, and potentially why, discourses of transphobia, homophobia and sexism remain prevalent. The findings suggest that while the cooperating organisation makes a public commitment to inclusion in sport (e.g., by developing policies, publishing guidelines that emphasise inclusion, and investing in various inclusion initiatives), in their daily work practices they often revert to binary thinking in regard to gender, sex and sexuality identities. This leads to recurring discourses of exclusion and repeated microaggressions within the workplace, such as presupposing heterosexual relationship structures and using assumed pronouns. Despite talking the talk, this particular organisation is taking a few stumbles when trying to walk the walk.

**Keywords:** language, gender and sexuality; workplace discourse analysis; sports organisations; interactional sociolinguistics; ethnographic approach; Rainbow inclusion

## Introduction

Throughout the history of sport, there has been noticeable inequalities (e.g., opportunities, funding, development) between male and female athletes (English, 1978; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014) and an exclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) sportspeople (Krane, 2016). Much of the research into sport settings has found instances of homophobia (Brackenridge et al., 2008), sexism (Fink, 2016; Goldman & Gervis, 2021), and transphobia (Smith et al., 2012). The findings demonstrate that such instances are not isolated but are widespread within sporting contexts and are not confined to one sport or level (Spaaij et al., 2014). There has been a focused attempt to redress these issues with numerous sports organisations creating policies and guidelines to support LGBT athletes (Kelley, 2020; Lawley, 2019). However, despite these interventions, instances of transphobia, homophobia and sexism within sport remain (see Denison et al., 2021). In a study by Menzel et al. (2019), 82% of participants had witnessed homophobic or transphobic language in sport in the previous six months and transgender women were

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most likely to report that they had been the victim of direct discrimination. Moreover, 90% believed that homophobia and transphobia was a current problem in sport settings.

In this article and the wider project on which it reports, I bring together existing knowledge from the areas of language, gender and sexuality, language in the workplace, and the growing field of sports linguistics, to study the prevalence of heteronormativity within sports organisations. Aligning with queer theory, as operationalised through discourse analysis and adopting the goal of examining the pervasiveness of cisheteronormativity within these organisations, I explore the use of language and the (re)negotiation of gender, sex and sexual identities by individuals within sports organisations. It is important that we investigate discourse within this context to gain a deeper understanding of how, and potentially why, transphobia, homophobia and sexism are still prevalent within sport settings. Sports organisations play a key role in creating and enforcing policies for the inclusion, or in some cases the exclusion, of Rainbow athletes (Stewart et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup>

## Theoretical framework

Queer theory has been a valuable tool to critically debate sport and the gender and sexuality issues within it (Caudwell, 2006). Queer theory aims to not only examine ‘queer’ behaviour but also “increase understanding of human behaviour and to question exclusionary theoretical assumptions across academic disciplines” (Barrett, 2002, p. 25), with theorists analysing gender and sexuality as socially and culturally constructed concepts (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). The field evolved from feminist cultural studies and gay and lesbian (now, LGBT or Queer) studies and has a primary aim of combating social inequality (Morland & Willox, 2017). In addition to being used as an analytical tool for research into gender and sexuality issues in sport, queer theory played a key role in shaping the direction of research into language, gender and sexuality and a shared aim of redressing gender disparities within society that are echoed in, and reinforced by, language use (Meyerhoff & Ehrlich, 2019).

As a discourse analyst in the critical sociolinguistic tradition, in my exploration of language, gender and sexuality, I subscribe to the principles of social constructionism, taking the stance that meaning exists in the interactions between people, each other and the world (Bo, 2015). This is best demonstrated in Gee’s (1990, 2015) concept of Big ‘D’, little ‘d’ discourses. *Discourse* (with a capital ‘D’) is institutionalised ‘traditional’ ways of interacting and doing things, and *discourse* (with a small ‘d’) is the everyday talk through which these Discourses are expressed, and in turn created and sustained. That is, interactions between people create Discourses, which over time are regarded as ‘common sense’ and are accepted and normalised as a means of expression. In this way, Discourses regarding gender, sex and sexuality impact on the construction of gender, sex and sexual identities which are understood as negotiated with others in interaction. To explain this complex connection between identities, discourse and Discourse, I offer the following example in Table 1. Discourses around sport have created a fixed view of what it is to be a man and a woman and have also categorised various sports based on their ‘appropriate’ gender.

Table 1: Examples of Discourse regarding masculinised and feminised sports

| Gender | Sport      | Stereotype            |
|--------|------------|-----------------------|
| Male   | Football   | Heterosexual/straight |
| Female | Football   | Lesbian/gay           |
| Male   | Gymnastics | Gay                   |
| Female | Gymnastics | Heterosexual          |

Source: Adapted from Englefield (2012).

<sup>1</sup> Rainbow is used throughout this article and refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, takatāpui, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTIQIA+).

These Discourses uphold the traditional view of sport but also enforce the stereotypes of sportspeople who both align or step outside these ideas. As seen in Table 1, a sportsperson who participates in their 'gender appropriate' sport is assumed to be heterosexual. Thus, constructing a female gender identity as a gymnast or a male identity as a footballer simultaneously presupposes an expectation of heterosexuality. Discourses surrounding this have in turn promoted the notion of heteronormativity within sport (Kauer, 2005). Cameron (2005, p. 489) defines *heteronormativity* as “the system which prescribes, enjoins, rewards, and naturalises a particular kind of heterosexuality – monogamous, reproductive, and based on conventionally complementary gender roles – as the norm on which social arrangements should be based”. It constructs (cis) men and women as opposite (Auran et al., 2024). In a similar vein, *cisnormativity* applies “the belief that gender is a binary category that naturally flows from one’s sex assigned at birth” (Frohard-Dourlent, 2016, p.4). Cisheteronormative standards are prevalent in most social institutions, like education, religion, the media and the law. For example, members of the Rainbow community are often erased from sexual health education and are often underrepresented in the media or are presented stereotypically (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Magrath, 2020). Athletes who do not fit within hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity, such as effeminate men and masculine women, are often stigmatised within sport settings (Eng, 2008).

## Literature review

Research on gender and sexuality issues in sport has focused on, for example, homophobia (Sherwood et al., 2020), the phenomena of homo-negativism (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021), and the experiences of Rainbow athletes (Caudwell, 2014; Phipps, 2021; Tanimoto & Miwa, 2021). As outlined by Shaw and Cunningham (2021), to improve the experiences of Rainbow sportspeople and spearhead change, research into the experience of the Rainbow community is key. Furthermore, within the New Zealand context, researchers have analysed discursive practices surrounding work on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in sport (Turconi et al., 2022) in addition to examining anti-homophobia policy development in national sports organisations (Shaw, 2019). Other studies have focused on the prevalence of heteronormativity (Herrick et al., 2020; Semerjian, 2018) and there are some that have aimed to outline possible ways to deconstruct heteronormative principles as a way of correcting homophobia and heterosexism in sport; for example, by forming gay/lesbian sports clubs and communities (Caudwell, 2003; Elling et al., 2003). While this can be viewed as a queer alternative to mainstream sport, it is unclear whether this would have a lasting impact on dominant heteronormative discourses on sex, gender and sexuality in sport in general (Eng, 2008).

Within linguistics, studies regarding gender and sexuality have examined how individuals construct identity in and through discourse and have challenged the homogenous and dichotomous nature of the categories that were the foundation for earlier research (Baker, 2008; Lazar, 2017; Zimman et al., 2014). Researchers now recognise that there are diverse expressions of gender (and sexuality), and identity is viewed as fluid, situated and dynamic (Angouri, 2015, 2021). Moreover, research in this field has become more intersectional, multiracial, multilingual and queer- and trans-inclusive (see Calder, 2020). There is a growing body of linguists who view gender, sex and sexual identities as being connected by the ideology of heteronormativity (Dawson, 2019; Pollitt et al., 2021). Sexuality is coupled with gender and/or sex and this is influenced by the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm (Mills & Mullany, 2011). Consequently, the construction of gender and sexuality relies on the same discursive resources (Morrish & Sauntson, 2007, p.13).

The wider political goal of gender equality within linguistics is an explicit motivator for researchers who examine language, gender and sexuality in the workplace (Baxter, 2010; Holmes, 2006; Mullany, 2007). Gender inequality in workplace settings can take many forms—like wage inequity, incidents of sexual

harassment, and disparity in promotions—and yet, despite decades of study and developments in workplace policies, little appears to have changed (Holmes, 2020). Recent research by Thomas et al. (2021) found that Rainbow women are more likely to experience microaggressions in the workplace, such as having their judgement questioned, being interrupted or spoken over, and being expected to speak on behalf of all people who share their identity category. Moreover, it was found that they are more likely to hear negative feedback related to how they present themselves at work. Similar findings were echoed in research carried out by Dashper (2012), who found evidence of increased visibility, and tolerance towards, gay men within equestrian sport. However, constructions of femininity, be it from male or female competitors, were devalued, suggesting that a decrease in homophobia does not automatically lead to a decrease in instances of sexism.

While the workplace has become a dominant setting for exploring issues of language, gender and sexuality, sport is increasingly finding its own space (Wilson, 2021). The publication of Special Issues, such as *Te Reo 64(2)*, and edited collections on this topic (Caldwell et al., 2017; Schnurr & File, 2024) is evidence that sport settings are being used as a context for sociolinguistic research. Often termed ‘sports linguistics’, research in this area has looked at sport in the media (Chovanec, 2021; Gillen, 2018), social identity construction within sport (Hugman, 2021; O’Dwyer, 2021; Sauntson & Morrish, 2012; Wolfers et al., 2017) and the discourses surrounding specific sports, such as football (Adams et al., 2010; Caudwell, 2003; File, 2018), rugby (File, 2022; Kuiper & Leaper, 2021; Wilson, 2009), and hockey (Whitehouse, 2019). The construction and (re)negotiation of gender, sex and sexual identities have been the focus of study in various sport settings, such as university football and community ice hockey. Sauntson and Morrish (2012) examined the construction of sexual identities within a university women’s football team and found that these identities were often viewed as temporary, and this temporality was discursively signalled in many ways. DiCarlo (2016) examined the negotiation of gender and sexual identities among female ice hockey athletes on male teams, finding that many of the women (re)produced hegemonic ideas about gender, sex and sexuality.

Just as this represents an overlap between sports linguistics and researchers of language, gender and sexuality, there is a notable intersection between those who investigate sports linguistics and researchers of workplace discourse. For example, Schnurr et al. (2021) investigated the emergence of leadership within a netball team and found that leadership is dynamically constructed and negotiated; File (2018) focused on the construction of professional identities within sport settings and analysed the identity performance of professional football managers in media interviews; and Wilson (2018) examined the construction of team in a semi-professional rugby club.

Across the research outlined above, a consistent finding is that cisheteronormativity is prevalent within sport settings and this in turn impacts upon the number of instances of homophobia, transphobia, sexism and other forms of exclusion/stigmatisation. My research sits at the crossroads of the various fields of workplace discourse analysis, gender and sexuality, and sports linguistics, allowing me to address the very real and ongoing societal issues around gender, sexuality and inequality.

## Methodology and data collection

Understanding language use involves an understanding of the context. Building on the well-established methodological framework for conducting discourse analytic research in the workplace that the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) has developed (Holmes et al., 2020; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Vine & Marra, 2017), I took a participant-centred ethnographic approach,<sup>2</sup> working in collaboration with a sports organisation to collect data over a period of five months.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about ethnographic approaches as used in linguistics, see Rampton et al. (2015).

<sup>3</sup> A full timeline of the data collection process is presented in Appendix 2.

Upon receiving ethical approval from my home institution, I began observing the daily interactions of the participants. During this time, and throughout the data collection process, detailed ethnographic field notes were recorded. After the first three weeks of observations, I asked volunteers (referred to as focus participants) to record samples of their normal everyday workplace interactions over a period of eight weeks. This was followed by debriefing interviews to collect comments and reflections on the process. At the request of the organisation, team meetings were video recorded. For this, I used small cameras which were fixed in place, switched on and left running for the whole meeting. The subsequent data set consists of ethnographic field notes, workplace documents and approximately 25 hours of audio-visual recordings of naturally occurring workplace interactions alongside follow-up debrief interviews with the participants. As noted by Holmes et al. (2020, p. 6), LWP's policy "is to minimise our intrusion as researchers into the work environment, all the while paying attention to the practices of the workplace community in which we are working and adjusting our methods in culturally sensitive ways". Consequently, the data set includes examples of workplace interactions which are as close to 'natural' as possible.

For data analysis, I take an interactional sociolinguistics approach. This approach to discourse analysis looks at authentic interactional data while also considering the wider context (Vine, 2023, p. 98). Ethnographic observations, field notes and follow-up interviews are used to provide contextual information. For example, the participants were asked about their interactions during the interviews. This helped gain greater insight into the data and uncovered different perspectives which deepened the analysis.

### *Participants*

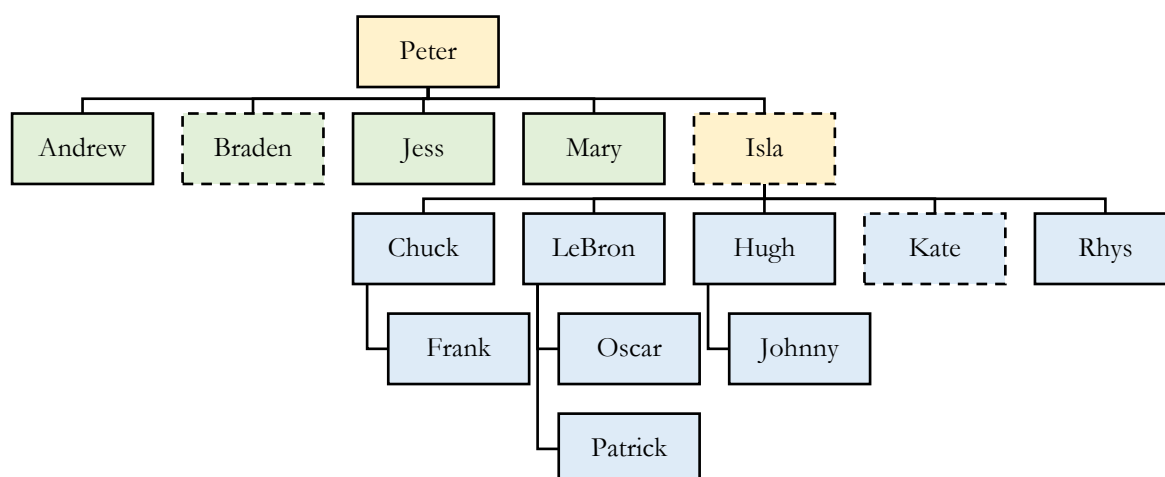
The co-operating sports organisation (a regional sports organisation; hereafter, referred to as the RSO) focuses on all community- and performance-level participation in a specific sport at a regional level. It has a strategic aim of increasing community participation and has a dedicated community department, in which most of the participants work. Typically, employees in this department focus on encouraging participation in sport as well as promoting equality and diversity. As such, they are often present during discussions about Rainbow athletes, and they also lead on the creation and implementation of participation guidelines. Moreover, working on EDI themselves, the staff in this department were actively interested in being part of a research project and eager to contribute to work improving EDI in a sports context.

Fifteen participants were recruited to participate in the research (see Figure 1). Peter and Isla (highlighted in yellow) were part of the Senior Leadership team of the organisation; Andrew, Braden, Mary, and Jess (highlighted in green) were part of the Support team; and the remaining participants (Hugh, Chuck, LeBron, Frank, Johnny, Oscar, Patrick, Rhys and Kate) were part of the Community team.<sup>4</sup> Three participants (Kate, Isla and Braden; in the boxes with the dashed lines) volunteered to be focus participants (FPs). As previously discussed, the FPs played an integral role in the data collection process. They became my co-researchers, controlling when and where we recorded the team interacting (Holmes & Hazen, 2013). This approach not only helped to establish a strong working relationship between me (as the researcher) and the team (as the participants), but also ensured that participants were recorded when they felt most comfortable.

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<sup>4</sup> In keeping with my participant-centred ethnographic approach, the participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Figure 1: The organisational structure of the regional sports organisation involved in this research



Note: The three people in the dashed boxes volunteered to also be focus participants.

### *Positionality statement*

I considered my own position within this research setting before and during the research process. As someone who has previously volunteered and worked for different sports organisations, I draw upon my knowledge of sport governance and sport management. Additionally, as a queer person who regularly participates in social and competitive sport, I also draw upon my knowledge of various sports and my experiences of taking part. Sadly (although not unsurprisingly) I have witnessed and experienced homophobia and sexism while existing in sport spaces. Moreover, like many others, I have noticed the stark increase in transphobia in sport over recent years. My research is inspired by my experiences, and I intend to use it as catalyst for change, to improve the experiences of Rainbow sportspeople.

## **Data analysis**

### *Commitment to inclusion*

At an organisational level, the RSO makes a public commitment to EDI in its sport. It acknowledges religious and cultural holidays through its various social media channels, has invested in multi-faith prayer rooms within its facilities, is developing a pathway for Māori athletes, and has partnered with national charities to deliver disability sport festivals within the region.

Regarding Rainbow inclusion, the RSO publicly states that they aspire to be an inclusive and welcoming community for all Rainbow staff, players, coaches, administrators and fans. They acknowledge that they are on a journey to achieve this goal and are reviewing their policies, processes and procedures. To achieve its aspirations, the RSO engages in various Rainbow initiatives, such as an online learning series for employees focused on Rainbow awareness and inclusion, as well as participating in educational workshops run by local charities and consulting with national charities that specialise in the inclusion of Rainbow communities in the workplace. Engagement in such initiatives were noted during ethnographic observations, as demonstrated in Extract 1.

### Extract 1

*Observation field notes [230717MM]*

Team members gather in main office before heading to weekly team meeting (to be held in meeting room). Kate, LeBron, Johnny and Chuck talk about homework from last week's inclusion workshop, run by [national organisation]. Hugh states that he's already completed the homework. Kate teases him that he must have done it wrong. Further discussion in group about how to complete the homework task.

The workshop mentioned in the extract was part of a series of workshops run by a national sports organisation. It was mandatory for all members of the Community team to attend, and each workshop focused on a different aspect of inclusion. Last week's inclusion workshop specifically focused on Rainbow inclusion and the homework the team discussed required them to reflect on their own individual and team practices. By taking the time to attend these educational workshops, members of the Community team aim to understand why the Rainbow community might struggle to engage in community sport. Ostensibly they can then adapt their practices, both in the community and within their workplace, to be more considerate of these challenges and be more inclusive as a result. However, this is often easier said than done. While efforts are being made to be more inclusive, within the data set there is evidence of repeated microaggressions and regular reproduction of cisheteronormative ideologies. This results in recurring discourses of exclusion, which I illustrate below.

### *Transgender athletes*

In their quest to be an inclusive and welcoming community for all the Rainbow community, the Community team often works with Rainbow athletes to ensure that they're playing in a division/league that best suits them, and also to check that they are being well-treated by their club and teammates. As an example of this work in action, Extract 2 is taken from an interaction that took place in the office.<sup>5</sup>

### Extract 2

1 Kate: I'm not sure what her pronouns are  
2 Hugh: I dunno  
3 Johnny: [across the room]: I think they use either they them  
4 or he him pronouns:  
5 Kate: ah right!  
6 LeBron: [across the room]: yeah that's right + they he:

Within this extract, Kate and Hugh are talking about a transgender athlete who wishes to participate in community sport. As evidenced in the earlier example, the team are improving their understanding of Rainbow issues. But growth is not always linear. In the first line of Extract 2, while stating her uncertainty ("I'm not sure what her pronouns are"), Kate uses assumed pronouns when referring to the player; i.e. "her". Johnny and LeBron provide assistance (lines 3 and 6), telling Kate the correct pronouns to use ("either they/them or he/him pronouns"). The extract demonstrates how there is a shared understanding of the importance of using the correct pronouns when addressing or, in this case, talking about transgender people—Johnny and LeBron engage in the conversation from across the room to ensure that the correct pronouns are used. Within the data, other instances of using assumed pronouns were found in both the ethnographic field notes and other recordings of interactions, and in these instances, colleagues would typically correct one another. This further illustrates how the team have created a space where colleagues

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<sup>5</sup> Transcription conventions adapted from Vine et al. (2002); see Appendix 1.

can challenge one another: correct each other's mistakes, call out everyday microaggressions, like a colleague's sexist comment or joke, and question cisheteronormative discourses.

This suggests that the RSO's public commitment to inclusion is filtering through to everyday team practices and individual discourses. While there are external pressures for sports organisations, like the RSO, to improve EDI policies and practices (Stewart et al., 2021), the success of these initiatives is dependent on individual 'buy in'. As illustrated in Extracts 1 and 2, most of the team's individual values align with the organisation's public commitment. If we subscribe to the view that organisational values "are both individual and collective structures" (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013, p. 510), then this is what we might expect. However, the examples described above are typically instances that relate to the community on which the team is focused, and not necessarily on their own practices within the team, which may go under the radar.

### *Putting in the "hard yards"*

In seemingly off-topic group discussions, attitudes towards gender roles are typically shared by many of the men in the team. These are sometimes challenged by their female colleagues. For example, in Extract 3, heteronormative ideas regarding childcare responsibilities are challenged by Isla (line 7). In this interaction, Kate asks whether Hugh is available to attend an evening meeting with key stakeholders. Hugh explains that he would have to check his availability with his wife (line 2). He suggests that because he spent time looking after his child the previous evening, he should be able to attend.

#### Extract 3

- 1 Kate: and did you want to come and talk about pre-season?  
2 Hugh: [elongated]: yeah: + I'll have to check with the missus  
3 +++ but I put in some HARD YARDS the other day  
4 Kate: oh yeah? for bragging rights?  
5 Hugh: yeah + I did a [elongated]: lot: of //babysitting\  
6 Kate: /[elongated]: right:\\  
7 Isla: y'know that's also called um looking after your child  
8 right?  
9 Kate: [laughs]

This interaction shows how some in the team expect that childcare responsibilities, within heterosexual families, should fall upon women/mothers, rather than men/fathers. While research suggests that there has been an increase in men becoming involved in childcare over recent decades (Sayer, 2016), those who strongly adhere to traditional masculine values are less involved in the care of children (Offer & Kaplan, 2021). These traditional masculine values centre on emotional restraint, fear of femininity, achievement and status (Petts et al., 2018), such as arguing that men, as primary breadwinners for the family, should not be expected to engage in childcare, or "babysitting" as Hugh describes it before Isla's rebuke. As outlined by Hugh, men who put in the "hard yards" (line 3) and look after their children are afforded "bragging rights" (line 4) and should be praised for being attentive fathers. This deeply rooted ideology is further evidenced through ethnographic observations. In one example, Kate brought her child to work when it was the school holidays and she could not find childcare for the morning. Kate was teased for being unprofessional and Peter (the CEO) questioned whether she would be able complete any work. However, no one within the team offered to help Kate, either by looking after her child or by sharing the workload. In contrast, when LeBron brought his child into the office under similar circumstances, he was instead praised by some of the women in the team for caring about his children. Moreover, Mary and Jess, arguably signalling their alignment with traditional gender norms, took turns entertaining his child so that LeBron could focus on work. In various ways, the team reproduce heteronormative Discourses and the difference in treatment of Kate and LeBron by their co-workers exemplifies strong attitudes within the team regarding traditional



gender roles. Kate seemingly opposes these traditional norms, by choosing a career over being a full-time mother/carer, yet her commitment to her job is questioned when she brings her child into work, and she receives an overall negative response from the team. LeBron also challenges traditional gender roles through his involvement in his child's care but, unlike the response Kate received, LeBron gets a positive response when he brings his child into work, mainly from the women in the team.

These heteronormative ideas surrounding parenthood also affect how women are viewed in leadership positions. As shown in Figure 1, Isla is part of the Senior Leadership team in the organisation, yet within the data she is often challenged when giving directives to the team and is interrupted or spoken over in team meetings. These findings are sadly unsurprising, given that similarities have been shared in other research examining language and gender in the workplace (Baxter, 2010, 2018; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Tannen, 1994). During interviews, Isla shared that her leadership style has often been described as "motherly", as though her position is legitimised by her being a mother. Women are often considered the 'behind the scenes' leaders of families, either through parenting family systems (Kerig, 2019) or parental gatekeeping (Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2019), or because of societal expectations around heterosexual relationships (Sells & Ganong, 2017). It appears it is more palatable for Isla to be in her position as a leader, giving directives and solving problems, because she is a mother as that fits within heteronormative ideas surrounding family (see also Kendall & Tannen, 2015).

### *Husbands, wives and partners*

Discourses related to heterosexual/heteronormative relationships are similarly reproduced in the team's interactions. In Extract 3, Hugh notes that he has to "check with the missus" (line 2) to see if he can attend an evening meeting. In a similar vein, within Extract 4, Chuck hesitates when asked to attend a working group meeting because "it's the wife's birthday" (line 3). The nominalisation of female partners as "the wife" and "the missus" as non-named actors was a common occurrence, used by most men within the team. Though there are instances within the data where these terms were used in an ironic way (predominantly by younger men in the team), it was noted throughout ethnographic observations that men within the team used "the wife" and "the missus" as serious terms when referring to their spouses. While it could be argued that these are used as terms of endearment, it could be viewed that by referring to their spouses as 'the' wife rather than my wife or my missus, they are instead referring to the role their spouses fulfil (the monolithic idea of a wife) rather than the people they are outside of it. This type of objectification is often seen in romantic heterosexual relationships (Mahar et al., 2020) and both examples reproduce Discourses related to the 'ball and chain' that are commonly associated with heterosexual couples (Deutsch, 2020). In their answers to Kate's question, the two men are implying that their partners are a restriction or a burden.<sup>31</sup> Both men suggest a possible lack of freedom because of their spouses, as though they would be able to agree to attend both meetings without hesitation if they were single.

#### Extract 4

- 1 Kate: we've got the working group meeting tomorrow + are you  
2 good for that? [elongated]: or?:  
3 Chuck: [elongated]: well: um ++ it's the wife's birthday tomor-  
4 Kate: sorry Wednesday not tomorrow

While the above examples are produced by men, a gender divide should not be assumed. There are many instances within the data where female staff, all of whom are married to men, moan about their husbands. The usual talking points centre on the lack of housework, unfair divisions of labour, and low levels of

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<sup>31</sup> Arguably expressing it as a spouse's decision simultaneously provide a justifiable reason not to attend work events supporting the expectation and authority of heterosexual relationships.

support in raising children, themes which have been found in other research that relate to marriage structures and marital hegemony (Chen et al., 2009; Schippers, 2018). However, when talking about their husbands, it is interesting to note that unlike the men in the team, there is very little objectification. The women in the team almost always refer to their husbands by name or (in the rare cases) as “my husband”. These examples (of both the men and women) highlight and reinforce the endemic heterosexual assumptions about relationship structures that occur in the organisation’s daily practices.

Due to these assumptions, the term ‘partner’ becomes marked. There are examples in the data set where members of the team try to guess the gender of someone’s partner (either male or female, with no consideration beyond this binary) when they feel someone has been vague, having used they/them pronouns when referring to their partner. No mention of a partner/spouse is even more marked, particularly when an individual has children. As mentioned previously, LeBron is a father and sometimes brings his children into the workplace. Moreover, he covers his desk in drawings made by his children along with cards and family photos. While LeBron constructs a strong parent/father identity, he does not talk about a partner. This challenges the team’s heteronormative standards of family. At its core, it seems a family should consist of two parents, presumably a mother and father, and children (Saggers & Sims, 2005). This is evidenced in the interview data (Extract 5) when I was debriefing with Kate.

#### Extract 5

1 Kate: he still hasn’t talked about his partner + I’ve never  
2 heard him talk about his partner + I don’t know if he’s  
3 married or whatever + it’s weird + the rest of us rabbit  
4 on about our husbands or wives but he doesn’t ... when he  
5 goes out to the schools in the area and he looks like  
6 them it’s really cool it’s really powerful + they can see  
7 that oh it isn’t just boring old straight white guys

As described by Kate, it is deemed “weird” (line 3) that she has never heard LeBron talk about his partner (line 2). It is assumed that he must have a partner because he has children. It is further assumed that LeBron is gay, or at least not straight (line 7), because he does not “rabbit on about” or mention a wife, unlike Hugh and Chuck (Extracts 3 and 4). On the one hand, it is refreshing that the possibility of LeBron being gay is not seen as problematic, especially when one considers how pervasive homophobia is within sport settings (Brackenridge et al., 2008). What is more interesting is that these heteronormative ideologies surrounding traditional or nuclear families are so prevalent that Kate assumes that LeBron was not straight before she even considered that he might not have a partner at all, as a single parent.

## **Discussion**

As the examples above illustrate, workplace norms that have been established, reproduced and reinforced by the team, and the organisation more broadly, have a strong alignment to cisheteronormative standards. Although the organisation’s public commitment to inclusion is filtering through to everyday team practices, these considerations do not necessarily expand to encompass individual practices within the team. The overall inclusivity of the organisation is reliant on individual engagement, in the Rainbow initiatives themselves and also in the personal reflection of individual norms and practices that comes because of these workshops. As has been exhibited in the previous examples, there are varying levels of engagement in this process within the team.

Extract 1 highlights these differences. While most of the team are discussing the homework task, Hugh states that he had already finished it. This was a frequent occurrence that was noted in other ethnographic field notes and spoken about in team meetings. Along with racing through tasks, often asking colleagues to provide quiz answers as he “doesn’t have the time” to complete online learning modules, Hugh was late or sometimes absent from workshops, despite attendance being mandatory for Community

team members. Furthermore, when challenged about his lower level of engagement by Isla and other members of the team, Hugh queries how and why the workshops are relevant to his role. Within the team, Hugh has a primarily administrative role where he organises community leagues and competitions within the region. He focuses on senior/adult competitions while Johnny, whom Hugh manages, organises junior competitions and leagues. It is evident that Hugh believes that his administrative job is not immediately affected by the organisation's public commitments to inclusion, as he does not directly work with members of the Rainbow community. This additional contextual information provides greater insight into the interactional data collected, particularly Extract 2 when Kate accidentally misgenders a transgender athlete (using she/her pronouns rather than he/him or they/them). After Kate signals her uncertainty, Hugh responds with "I dunno" (line 2). In the audio recording, one can hear Hugh's dismissive tone, suggesting his desire to move the meeting along or complete the task quickly. As mentioned previously, Hugh often spoke about not having enough time to do his job, which resulted in his meetings being very efficient. They rarely deviated from the primary purpose and contained very little small talk. As the primary purpose of the interaction is to sort players into different competitions, it could be argued that Kate asking about a player's pronouns deviates from this task.

While Hugh might question the relevance of inclusion initiatives to his role, others do not feel the same. Johnny's involvement in the conversation (Extract 2, lines 3–4) highlights this. As touched on previously, Johnny is managed by Hugh and also has a predominantly administrative role. However, it appears that Johnny views his role differently. During ethnographic observations, there was a clear change in Johnny's workplace practices following his engagement in the educative workshops. Recognising his privilege as a straight, White, cisgender man, Johnny often asked colleagues (and myself) about their experiences in sport, actively listening and adapting his behaviour accordingly. Despite not having a community-based role, Johnny recognises the importance of using inclusive language and engages as an active bystander (Meyer & Zelin, 2019). In Extract 2, he witnesses a problematic situation and takes action to improve it; in this case, he informs Hugh and Kate of the player's correct pronouns. By preventing Kate from continuing to use assumed, and incorrect, pronouns, Johnny prevents Discourses of exclusion to be reproduced in the workplace. Similarly, when Isla challenged Hugh about his comments related to childcare and "babysitting" his child (Extract 3), she challenged his heteronormative and traditional masculine views. By using humour, she did not overtly challenge Hugh during the team meeting (Norrick & Spitz, 2008); however, her remark will encourage Hugh to reflect on his thinking. Even though, as an organisation, there is a public commitment to improving inclusion, these examples show that the responsibility to actively engage in positive change falls upon individuals within the team. Moreover, they illustrate the importance of analysing language within this setting. By examining how Discourses of exclusion are (re)produced, and sometimes challenged, in everyday interactions, we can develop better resources and training materials that can be used by organisations to empower individuals and equip them with the tools to challenge exclusionary Discourse.

However, empowering individuals to confront these Discourses is not without its challenges. As demonstrated throughout this article, members of the team, either subconsciously or inadvertently, affiliate with cisheteronormative standards and values. Cisheteronormativity is a power regime that creates and upholds a social hierarchy based on the belief that heterosexuality is the norm and that everyone falls into two opposing but complementary genders: a man and a woman (Dollar, 2017, p. 10). This hierarchy, paired with the dominant, deeply engrained Discourses on sex, gender and sexuality (re)produced by sports institutions, means that it is extremely challenging to break free from gender binary thinking (Eng, 2008). It is evident that the team often struggle to understand and adapt for those who sit outside of these established gender, sex and sexuality binaries. The battle between these binaries and the sports context in which they operate is illustrated if we consider how Extract 2 continues.

Extract 6 (Extract 2 extended)

1 Kate: I'm not sure what her pronouns are  
2 Hugh: I dunno  
3 Johnny: [across the room]: I think they use either they them  
4 or he him pronouns:  
5 Kate: ah right!  
6 LeBron: [across the room]: yeah that's right + they he:  
7 Kate: cool +++ so yeah + we need to work out where he's  
8 going to play + [quickly]: I mean which //competition:\  
9 Hugh: /[elongated]: yeah:\\ + like what would he prefer  
10 to play?

After being informed of the correct pronouns, Kate and Hugh continue their conversation using he/him rather than they/them pronouns. By using he/him pronouns, they subscribe to the prescriptivist views of gender that are policed by sports institutions. As there are no specific competitions (at least none that have been created by the RSO) for only genderqueer or non-binary athletes, it could be argued that Kate and Hugh default to he/him in order to pre-emptively justify their decision to include the athlete in men's league/competitions. However, considering that the topic of conversation centres on the athlete's preference of competition, it could be countered that Kate and Hugh chose to use he/him pronouns because it aligned with their own understandings of gender and sex within a sporting context.

I argue that the team, and the RSO more generally, are *comfortably challenging*. The ever-increasing range of sex, gender and sexuality identities challenge traditional understandings of sport and competition. By working with transgender men and women, and allowing these athletes to partake in community sport, the RSO embraces this new era of sport and challenges the increasingly exclusionary Discourses that are being (re)produced by international and national sports bodies (Harper, 2022). However, to make this change more palatable, or 'comfortable', these athletes are only accepted on a case-by-case basis, and their inclusion predominantly relies on their conformity to binary categories (i.e. man/woman). As outlined by Love (2014, p. 337), sports organisations have devoted time and resources to create and maintain a "segregated system organised around a binary understanding of sex". The RSO relies upon this established system because to do otherwise would challenge much larger concepts, like the very foundations of sport.

Within competitions, even those at community level, concerns regarding fairness are of paramount importance. Athletes should be fairly matched, which means men should not play against women and vice versa, and all players should follow the rules (Anderson et al., 2019). Fair play in sport is key for maintaining the credibility, popularity and integrity of the game. This concept of fairness is often used as a weapon to delegitimise a transgender athlete's right to play and compete (Bailey & Jones, 2024). This view that inclusion conflicts with fairness is shared widely across sports (Devine, 2018) and is also evident within the data set. There are some who have tried to deconstruct this conceptualisation of fairness by forming Rainbow sports clubs and communities (Barras, 2024; Cronn-Mills & Nelson, 2016; Greedy & Lenskyj, 2022) and while this can be viewed as a queer alternative, this arguably does not resolve exclusionary practices in mainstream sport. To move beyond comfortably challenging and become fully inclusive for all Rainbow sportspeople, the RSO and other sports organisations need to question and deconstruct these prevailing Discourses about fairness while continuing to challenge pervasive Discourses regarding gender, sex and sexuality.

## Conclusion

To conclude, analysis of the data shows that when members of the Community team are consciously thinking about and working with the Rainbow community, they are mindful of their language use, such as trying to use correct pronouns, and actively work to implement learnings from their engagement in educative Rainbow initiatives. However, when team members engage in everyday workplace interactions,

or interactions that do not explicitly relate to their work with the Rainbow community, they reproduce Discourses that align to cisheteronormative standards, such as traditional masculine values, assumption of heterosexual relationships, and traditional gender roles, which in turn reinforces Discourses of exclusion on the basis of age, status, gender and sexuality. By conducting linguistic analysis, we can examine how these Discourses are (re)produced, but also challenged, in everyday interactions.

While the RSO is talking the talk regarding Rainbow inclusion, it is clear that they are taking a few stumbles while walking the walk. Though they make a public commitment to becoming a fully inclusive and welcoming community for all Rainbow players, staff, coaches, administrators and fans, I argue that they are only comfortably challenging. By including transgender athletes in community competitions, they challenge the exclusionary policies and practices prescribed by international and national sporting bodies. However, by aligning to the prescriptive gender categories established by sport institutions, they are not fully challenging the cisheteronormative hierarchies that are entrenched within sport. The issues that surround Rainbow inclusion, particularly regarding transgender athlete participation, are not disappearing any time soon. While the RSO is putting in the 'hard yards', and are continuing their journey to be more inclusive, they cannot become complacent. As examples throughout this article show, progress is not always linear, and people can easily revert back to binary thinking, especially when operating within a sporting context. Only by fully questioning and pushing the boundaries of this aspect of sport, can they truly begin to be inclusive for all.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Transcription conventions*

The following transcription conventions are used in the extracts.

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| (well)                   | Transcriber's best guess at unclear speech.  |
| [quietly]: :<br>[laughs] | Comment tags for paralinguistic features and relevant non-verbal features.<br>Colon at beginning and end of section indicates where comment tag applies. |
| +                        | Short pause of up to one second.   |
| ++                       | One to two second pause.   |
| +++                      | Two to three second pause.   |
| (4)                      | Four seconds or longer pause (length indicated by number in parentheses).  |
| wha-                     | Hyphen indicates the utterance is interrupted/cut off mid-flow.  |
| ?                        | A rising intonation at the end—usually indicative of a question.   |
| !                        | More animated intonation—usually indicative of an exclamation.   |
| CAPTIALS                 | Emphasis/stress.   |
| //                       | Indicates start of simultaneous or overlapping speech of current speaker.  |
| \                        | Indicates end of simultaneous or overlapping speech of current speaker.  |
| /                        | Indicates start of simultaneous or overlapping speech of incoming speaker.   |
| \\                       | Indicates end of simultaneous or overlapping speech of incoming speaker.   |
| ...                      | Signals that sections of the transcription have been omitted—usually to cut out personal information and protect the participant's anonymity.            |

### *Appendix 2: Data collection timeline*

| Month(s)      | Activity  |
|---------------|---|
| March 2023    | Ethical approval granted by home institution.   |
| April–May     | RSO recruitment—negotiation period.   |
| June          | RSO organisation consent obtained.<br>Individual consent obtained from participants.  |
| July          | Ethnographic observations begin; field notes recorded.<br>Focus participants (FPs) recruited.<br>FPs trained to use recording equipment.<br>Recordings of team meetings begin.<br>FPs begin recording workplace interactions. |
| September     | End of recordings (team meetings and FPs).<br>Feedback session with the RSO Senior Leadership team.   |
| October       | FP interviews recorded.   |
| November      | End of ethnographic observations.<br>Feedback session with FPs and other participants.  |
| February 2024 | Feedback workshop with the RSO.   |