

# ‘Everything is said with a smile’: Homonegative speech acts in sport

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## Abstract

The acceptance of gay males in sport is growing in various western countries. However, research also suggests that young males, including athletes, tend to engage in homonegative speech acts, often called microaggressions, that make it difficult for them to navigate practices of masculinity. We used solicited diaries or diary logs written by (non-)heterosexual young male team sport athletes (aged 16–25) to investigate how they experienced and heard expressions of homonegative and heteronormative microaggressive speech acts. We drew on Foucault’s notion of discourse, Butler’s conceptualization of performativity of heteronormativity and Sue’s work on microaggressions to examine how microaggressive speech acts by young male athletes reflect current sexual and gender cultural norms. The results revealed how homonegative speech acts were embedded in a gay aesthetic and abject femininity and used to endorse a desirable heteronormative masculinity. We concluded that homonegative microaggressive speech acts contribute to the preservation of discursive heteronormativity in sport despite growing acceptance of non-heterosexual male athletes.

## Keywords

gay aesthetic, homonegative, microaggressions, misogyny, performativity, speech acts, young male athletes

## Introduction

A significant body of research has revealed that in many situations gay male athletes are accepted and/or tolerated by peers in their sport (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Anderson and McCormack, 2015, 2018), including research in the Netherlands, known as a relative gay-friendly country (Elling-Machartzki and Janssens, 2009; Elling-Machartzki and Smits, 2012). Anderson and colleagues also found that practices of masculinity in the

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USA and the UK have become more fluid in football, with players and managers no longer afraid to hug, cuddle and kiss each other. The authors contended that behaviours that would once have led to homosexual suspicion and widespread stigmatization are no longer a threat to heterosexual identities and that the level of homophobia targeting gay male athletes is decreasing.

There are, however, indications that this assumption of inclusiveness ignores complexities of daily practice and speech acts that are embedded in various discourses. Various scholars (Diefendorf and Bridges, 2020; Pascoe, 2013) have suggested that research needs to focus on how social inequalities are institutionally or systematically reproduced and challenged at the interactional or speech level. A considerable amount of research has found that despite the growing tolerance of sexual diversity, young males engage in what Butler (1997) has called injurious speech acts grounded in same-sex sexuality (e.g. Nadal et al., 2011, 2016; Platt and Lenzen, 2013; Rasmussen and Harwood, 2003; Youdell, 2004). Injurious speech acts are those that consist of language that can inflict physical and emotional pain. For example, Elling-Machartzki and Janssens (2009) found that gay men explicitly mentioned avoiding participating in team and contact sports like football and other 'macho' sports because they had to deal with hostile comments, jokes and/or discrimination related to sexual orientation. Pascoe (2007) found that adolescent boys employed homonegative speech acts creating what she called a 'fag discourse' through their use of homonegative and heteronormative language and joking rituals. Students who used homonegative humour have contended that the seemingly discriminatory messages were unintentional or said in jest (McCormack and Anderson, 2010; Platt and Lenzen, 2013). Although some LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and others) students have been complicit in the use of such homonegative speech acts, in general they have reported difficulty in negotiating this 'humour', even when these speech acts were not directed towards them personally (Nadal et al., 2016). Ironically, these homonegative discursive practices often target heterosexual boys more so than those seen as gay because currently a gay identity is seen as a biological 'fact' and is, in that sense, accepted/tolerated (Bailey, 2016; Pascoe, 2013; Woolley, 2013).

McCormack and colleagues (McCormack, 2011; McCormack and Anderson, 2010; McCormack et al., 2016) have contended that the meanings of the words and phrases that constitute homonegative speech are dependent on the intention of the speaker and the social context. They have argued that there has been an increase in the use of positive gay talk; the authors construct that as a sign of a decreasing use of homophobic discourses. The notion of discourse and its relation to speech acts differ, however, from that used in the current study. McCormack and colleagues seem to use discourse and speech acts, including positive and negative gay talk, as synonyms, and do not locate the content of these speech acts within underlying discourses. We, however, draw on Foucault's (1980) notion of discourses as constituting power/knowledge. A Foucauldian notion of discourse combined with Sue's (2010) approach to microaggressions suggests that homonegative speech acts constitute microaggressions. These speech acts are not discourses in themselves but draw on them. Homonegative speech acts, therefore, can have subtexts that are embedded in dominant discourses about gender and sexuality.

Nadal et al. (2016), who systematically reviewed the literature on microaggressions and homophobic speech acts, concluded these speech acts can be considered homonegative because the words that are used are attached to negative things and events, and this humour is not gender neutral or sexually neutral. Woolley (2013) found that such homonegative microaggressive speech acts dislocated, constituted and, subsequently, marginalized targeted youth. Pascoe (2013) has argued that the focus of analysis in research should be on the context and the implicit and explicit subtexts of these speech acts and the discourses in which they are embedded. Together these findings suggest that although the acceptance of non-heterosexual male identities inside and outside sport has increased, the occurrence of homonegative speech acts or discursive interactions needs more scholarly attention, especially in sport since their use can be injurious and may act as a barrier for young men to participate (Elling-Machartzki and Janssens, 2009).

The purpose of the current paper is to explore how young men (aged 16–25 years) used homonegative speech acts in the competitive sport context and how self-identified non-heterosexual young men navigated these speech acts. We subsequently address the subtexts embedded in these microaggressive practices. We do so by drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse and power, Butler's conceptualization of the performativity of heteronormativity and of injurious speech acts and Sue's work on microaggressions.

According to Foucault (1980), power is productive, operating in or circulating through everyday discursive practices. Discourse, as described by Foucault, is what can and cannot be said about a specific topic. Discourses create lenses through which individuals understand various knowledges, truths and social realities and reproduce and resist them. Some discourses, such as those about a desirable and celebrated masculinity associated with certain sports, dominate at a certain time and place and become a regime of truth masking their constructed nature and the power and privilege that circulates from it (Connell, 2005). Disciplinary power acts on individuals in part through processes of (ab)normalization (Foucault, 1980). The acceptance of males who identify as gay and the use of homonegative speech acts among male youth described in the previous paragraphs suggest that discourses about the predominance and policing of heteronormative masculinities in sport have shifted to include a greater variation in the practice and acceptance of what are constructed as desirable discursive practices of masculinity (Pascoe, 2013). This acceptance of sexual diversity may not necessarily mean that heterosexual hegemony has weakened, however.

Butler (1993) suggested that discursive practices pertaining to gender and sexuality occur simultaneously and are performative. Performativity is the word Butler uses to refer to embodied repetition over time. Discourses are performative when they co-produce what they name; that is, performativity is the materialization of norms through the body. They are part of what she has called the heterosexual matrix that produces norms about gender and sexuality. Bodies and their actions often tend to be judged through a heterosexual lens; that is, individuals are assumed to be heterosexual until there is 'evidence' they are not. In other words, gender and sexuality intersect and discursive practices about either one are both repetitive and have the other as subtext.

Butler (1993, 1997) used Foucault's notions about the power of daily discursive practices to constitute individuals, to argue that speech acts reflect what individuals do (the act or the performative) and the consequences of that act. A speech act is performative when it

is repetitively used to categorize individuals, behaviours and attitudes and these categorizations are recognized by others. According to Butler (1997), injurious speech acts are illocutionary; that is, the acts themselves are the deed that they effect. They result in injury due to their repetition over time so that their meanings become incorporated and embodied.

Similarly, Sue (2010) contended that injurious speech acts such as swearing and other subtle homophobic or homonegative verbal and non-verbal, signs and signals are forms of microaggression. Specifically, Sue's work on marginalization moves beyond the concept of acceptance (or not) of gay identities and suggests the focus should be on the content of daily speech acts that he calls microaggressions. These are daily encounters of subtle discrimination and negativity that are experienced by males who are constructed as gay, who are emotionally expressive and/or exhibit behaviours associated with femininity. Woolley (2013: 292) has argued that the use of homonegative microaggressions illustrate 'the violence of performative speech acts'. These subtle daily forms of homonegative speech acts tend to be overlooked or ignored when the focus of policies at schools and in sport is on acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals while such acts do occur on a regular and repetitive basis and thus become performative (e.g. Munro et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2016).

Much of the research on homonegative microaggressions tends to focus on schools and colleges and on types of microaggressions. There is, however, little available research within the context of the competitive sport setting that examines homonegative speech acts as daily microaggressions and the themes their content reflect. We investigated the discursive practices of masculinity that are embedded in homonegative speech acts about gays/queers by young male athletes and how their use may both destabilize and reinforce notions of masculine heteronormativity. Specifically, we explored the content of the homonegative interactions or speech acts occurring in male team sports (aged 16–25 years), during practices and competitions in Dutch sport.<sup>1</sup> We focused on the possible deployment of homonegative language. The research questions asked were:

1. How do young male team sport athletes deploy homonegative speech acts in their interactions (their talk)?
2. How do self-identified gay athletes navigate this deployment (their walk)?
3. Which discourses do young male athletes draw upon in their use of homonegative speech acts?

## **Methods**

The research on homonegative speech acts cited in the previous sections was based primarily on a combination of interviews and observations. We assumed that a reliance on the use of retrospective interviews about daily interactions could produce vagueness due to problems of recall and could result in generalities like 'sometimes innocent gay jokes are made'. Since our focus was on daily homonegative microaggressions in mainstream young men's sport and on how self-identified gay players made sense of these interactions, we used solicited diaries or diary logs written by gay and straight young male team sport participants in a variety of sports. They described what they heard during their own practices and competitions. We supplemented these observational accounts with interviews of these diary keepers about their logs. The use of solicited diaries enables individuals to record

their daily lived experiences (Filep et al., 2018). The collection of data through diary logs or solicited diaries enabled us to engage in an in-depth exploration of the 'mundane interactions' or 'particular routines and rituals of behaviour' (Latham, 2016: 158) that were observed and experienced in mainstream young men's team sports.

We recruited young men for our study who were already members of sport teams to log comments made during practices and competitions. Scholars who use participant participation for critical inquiry usually strive to obtain informed consent of all people involved in the study. This may, however, not always be possible, or may even be undesirable, since it may conflict with two other important ethical issues: confidentiality (protecting privacy of observers) and beneficence (not doing harm to anyone) (Calvey, 2008; Roulet et al., 2016). We believe that given the ambiguity and uncertainty of universal acceptance and celebration of sexual diversity, the diary keepers have the right to have their sexual identity protected, including those who are not 'out' to their team. We protected them from potential harm such as harassment, that could be provoked by disclosing their engagement in the observation of homonegative social interactions. This protection from harm outweighed the importance of informed consent from all members of the observed teams and their opponents. Moreover, by not revealing their role as research-informant, we believe that our diary keepers were able to observe the 'usual' practices related to homonegative microaggressions. Given the policy position of national sport organizations that participants in a sport must accept sexual diversity, we assumed that male athletes might censor themselves if they knew their speech acts were documented. Possibly, too, the awareness that they were part of a study on gay-themed interactions might have produced exaggerated or extra 'gay jokes' and 'fag talk' among team members. We therefore assumed that diary keeping by actual team members would do little or no harm to other team members and opponents while contributing to better understanding of the dynamics of speech acts and experiences of a subordinated and vulnerable group.

This type of embedded ethnography can be emotionally demanding for observers, since they may witness and also participate in microaggressive practices and speech acts. Therefore, we paid extra attention to informed consent procedures and the wellbeing of the diary keepers throughout the study. They all gave informed consent after they were informed in detail about the study's aims, our expectations for them (intake, follow-up and debriefing interviews; number of diary logs; time period), issues of confidentiality and anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing at any time from the study. The diary keepers agreed not to inform their team of their involvement in the study and to respect the privacy of their team members in written logs and in the interviews. Moreover, they agreed to behave in their usual manner and not to provoke comments or ask questions because they were participating in the study. They were asked to register data via logbook reports shortly after training sessions and matches had been completed, but without the presence of team members.

The diaries were supplemented by interviews. Each diary keeper was interviewed three times, usually by telephone. In an intake/instruction interview, they were given details about the study and its methodology. A follow-up interview with each of the diary keepers about their experiences occurred after they had completed the first five logbook observations. Debriefing interviews were held when diaries were complete. In the follow-up and

debrief interviews, the diary keepers could supplement their logbook observations with further details and experiences. Additional debriefings were also offered to participants who wanted to reflect on the impact of these speech acts on their lives. This offer was used by two gay observers who had not yet come out to their teammates. Their participation in the study gave them insight as to why they found it so difficult to come out.

### *Diary keepers/observers*

Athletes with diverse self-identified sexual orientations who were active members of a team at mainstream sports clubs were recruited to be diary keepers. We found participants by using our personal and professional networks, various sport and LGBT-related channels (e.g. social media, LGBT associations), and by snowball sampling. It was especially difficult to recruit an adequate number of self-identified non-heterosexual diary keepers. Seven self-identified heterosexual and four self-identified gay team sport athletes, of whom two were explicitly out to their team, between 16 and 25 years old agreed to participate in the study. They were active in six different men's team sports: handball (one team), baseball (one team), field hockey (one team), korfbal (one team), rugby (one team), and football (seven teams). None of the observers had an immigrant background and three of them – including one self-identified gay observer – played on a multi-ethnic team. Diary keepers received a small gift voucher as compensation for participating in the study. The names of the young men mentioned in the results are fictitious.

### *Data collection*

The reporting was based on a semi-structured design. The diary keepers used a simple logbook format with space to register gay-themed language and non-verbal behaviour that they encountered on the pitch during training/practice sessions or matches, in the car or in the locker room. Since microaggressions including gay talk may have become so normalized (Nadal et al., 2016) that such speech acts are not always recognized as such, the first and third author designed a logbook format to enhance the sensitivity towards and awareness of diary keepers for possible homonegative microaggressions. We created three general categories for use in the logbook with several sub-topics as examples/explanations. These categories were based on literature on microaggressions cited earlier in this paper. We assumed this template would facilitate the registration of observed homonegative language and ensure rigour by assisting diary keepers to respond in ways that were congruent with the aim of the project (Filep et al., 2018).

The logbook template or structure was refined based on the feedback from three athletes who tested the format in a small pilot study. The three main categories were: (a) general gay-themed comments, jokes and non-verbal body language, from which we distilled homonegative remarks; (b) person-directed homonegative comments and (non-)verbal jokes based on appearance or behaviour; and (c) homonegative (non-)verbal jokes and comments about openly gay team members. The 11 diary keepers used the revised logbook to register their comments and incidents after completion of a practice or match. Logbook observations were supplemented with further details and experiences during the interviews.

All of the diary keepers were given the diary log format and detailed instructions. Each diary keeper was asked to engage in at least 10 observations within a period of 2 to 3 months. Since one of the observers wrote diary logs for 2 different teams in different sports of which he was a member and several diary keepers collected data from more than 10 training sessions or competitions, a total of 130 observations were conducted.

### *Data analysis*

We approached our analysis with a queer sensibility; that is, we attempted to avoid the use of a gay/straight binary to describe or categorize the results. In addition, since we only knew those who self-identified as non-heterosexual, we did not want to make assumptions about the other athlete observers since some may have been closeted non-heterosexuals. Consequently, we made no assumptions about or comparisons across sexual identities unless specifically noted by our diary keepers.

The observations were analysed in an iterative process, including both inductive and deductive coding based on our theoretical framework that assumes language is both descriptive and constitutive (Butler, 1993, 1997). This involved reading and rereading the data several times to check and confirm the relationship of various coding themes pertaining to heteronormative and homonegative speech acts and microaggressive practices.

We combined the diary and interview data for our analysis. Initially, all relevant text fragments from the logbook and interview data were sorted into themes that reflected the type of comment. These a priori themes were subsequently rearranged and revised to higher-order themes, new themes or subthemes after discussion/reflection. This process of clarifying the microaggressive practices/speech acts took several iteration cycles until all three researchers agreed with the analysis. Resulting themes were furthermore compared by sport; we found no clear discernible differences across sport.

## **Results**

In the first half of this paper (the talk) we describe the microaggressive speech acts or talk of the team members that diary keepers had recorded or described in the interviews. We illustrate how young male athletes participating in the various sports appropriated the words ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, and often linked these words to weakness/mistakes/errors, normalized humour about gays, used physical stereotypes about ‘gays’ and engaged in anti-gay physical aggression. We use a gay/straight binary only in the second half of this paper (the walk) where we describe the reactions of those who self-identify as gay and how they navigated or walked through dominant ambiguous heteronormative and homonegative speech acts (Butler, 1993). Throughout the results we point to the discourses in which these speech acts are embedded and discuss the use of those discourses in the discussions.

### *The talk*

*Appropriating ‘gay’ and ‘queer’.* The words ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ were used in various ways, which at times made their use ambiguous and their intended meaning difficult to interpret. These words were frequently used in an intentional and directed manner to address

and/or swear at athletes. Diary keepers noted:

After the game had been won a player shouted: 'That was really good, gay boys.'

The trainer enters (the locker room), with the words: 'OK, you queers.'

Saying 'Hi faggot' to a teammate who shows up too late during practice.

Someone yelled in the locker room 'hey, which queer has stolen my shampoo bottle?'

Our first senior team practised while we were also practising; someone said 'See how those queers run!'

The meanings of these forms of address and what they were intended to convey are not entirely clear when seen as isolated speech acts. However, when they are placed alongside the other microaggressive speech acts, then together they strengthen dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, as we show further on.

*Associating 'queer'/'fag' with weakness.* At times the words 'gay' and 'queer' were used to insult the young men in order to motivate them and to convey perceived weakness. Diary keepers wrote examples of comments made about the opposing team and own team members such as:

Let's get those queers!

'Hey fairy, start defending!' directed at a teammate.

A lad from our team was cursed by calling him a 'queer' when he fouled an opponent.

One of our athletes yelled 'you queer!!' to our goalie when he let in a goal. And he meant it.

Homonegative expressions were used when athletes gave up or had to stop playing during a training session or a match: 'When an opponent lay on the ground after being fouled, athletes said: "Come on, fag, get up."' Similarly, when officials were assumed to have made an erroneous call, athletes often engaged in homonegative microaggressions. A linesman, referee or coach of the opposing team was often called a 'queer' if they were perceived to have made mistakes or if they had made a decision with which athletes disagreed. Calling the linesman or referee a 'queer' or addressing them with other comments often occurred in such a way that the referee or coach was unable to hear it since the utterance of such homonegative comments violates the rules. Only one diary keeper reported that an athlete received a yellow card and another athlete a red card for calling the referee a queer.

This association between homonegative speech acts and perceived weakness used by the athletes in the current study is not unique. Others (e.g. Bailey, 2016; Nadal et al., 2016) have reported similar results in non-sport settings. Magrath (2018) reported that in the sport setting, football fans have justified their use of homonegative language to



comment on perceived weakness of the opposing team or referees. We return to this point in the discussion. Homonegative speech acts were not only used to motivate and disparage athletes, however, but their use was also framed as humour.

*Normalizing homonegative discourse through humour.* Comments recorded in the logbooks revealed jokes with a homonegative undertone: ‘We became champions in this match. The opponents wanted to keep us from winning the championship, but they didn’t succeed. Jokes were made like “hahaha, what a bunch of queers, they couldn’t stop us!”’ Several diary keepers pointed out that comments that were crude should not be taken seriously but should be interpreted as a joke. For example, a diary keeper could not imagine a gay teammate having a problem:

The remarks that are made can often come across in a way that’s not intended. I can imagine that it can be experienced as offensive because a lot is said with a negative undertone. I’ve only noticed it since I’ve been looking for it, but I do expect that a gay team athlete would be accepted in our team.

In contrast, another observer notes: ‘I am happy I am not gay because it (being gay) seems difficult; I do not think any of our team members is gay.’ The observers, including those self-identified as gay, considered homonegative remarks to be a ‘normal’ part of sport and interpreted them as reflecting their ‘team culture’. In the debriefing interviews, several gay observers mentioned that they sometimes cracked a joke themselves, thereby causing others to make jokes in turn. McCormack (2011) has argued that joking in this manner reflects a gay-friendly environment because it supports inclusion of openly gay men who in the past have been seen as subordinated. Although there has been an increase in gay-inclusive male sport teams, we argue, however, that such comments and jokes should also be situated and interpreted in a larger context in which microaggressions are part of discursive practices that strengthen and reproduce an institutional gendered sexual hierarchy. We expand on this in the next section.

*Enacting non-conforming embodiment.* The logbooks and the young men who were interviewed described what happened when an athlete’s appearance and behaviour were incongruent with dominant discursive practices of masculinity. Their microaggressions contained discursive assumptions used as regimes of truth about the embodiment of gay men such as their appearance and interests and their enactment of bodily dispositions. This gay embodiment and enactment was seen as performing a sexual aesthetic regime of truth associated with femininity (Bridges, 2014; Bridges and Ota, 2019). A tight pair of shorts, for example, was described as ‘queer shorts’. A diary keeper noted that his teammates expressed disapproval and contempt of the goalkeeper of the opponent’s team who used a blowdryer to dry his hair and said ‘He’s a gay boy.’

The manner in which athletes moved their bodies was also at times constructed in a derogatory manner, such as ‘Look at the way you chase the ball, what a queer!’ Also:

I was sitting on the bench with a few other teammates. One of the opponents had a gay posture; the way he walked accentuated his ass, the way he played the ball, and how he showed a loose

wrist. It looked really gay. My teammates said, ‘that’s a faggot’, ‘sure he’s gay.’ They then looked at me and said: ‘He looks a lot like you, should we also start worrying about you?’

The comments were not only produced verbally, but were occasionally accompanied by gestures such as an exaggerated loose wrist:

(A statement was made) (a)bout a young boy playing in a junior team in our club: ‘It’s obvious he’s going to turn out to be a real faggot later, just look at his limp wrists’. They then acted out the gestures in a really exaggerated way.

According to Sue’s (2010) description of microaggressions, these critical microaggressive speech acts pertaining to appearance and enactment of gender and sexuality are microinsults because they rely on stereotypes to normalize or abnormalize a person’s appearance. In this way, these speech acts constituted gay men in a specific manner and revealed the performativity of homonegative speech acts. Bridges and Ota (2019) contend that the use of such sexual aesthetics erroneously suggests there are universal elements of gay identity and culture. These speech acts or micro-insults may not reflect reality, but those engaging in these microaggressions believe these behaviours and appearance reflect what Foucault (1980) calls a normalized regime of truth about gay men. The young men participating in these sports constructed a gay aesthetic based on an intersection of dominant discourses about femininity and gay sexuality. This aesthetic includes a focus on specific sexual acts.

*Constructing non-heterosexuality in terms of physical desire.* Several scholars (e.g. Buijs et al., 2011; Youdell, 2004) have found that a homophobic regime of truth about gay physicality and physical desire defines it in terms of anal sex. Popular homophobic discourse suggests that if a man or boy who is constituted as gay bends over, then he is preparing for/inviting anal penetration (Youdell, 2004). Several observers noted use of this discourse. Specific sexually oriented content was often embedded in microaggressive discursive speech acts. A diary keeper described an incident in which ‘(an) athlete bends over after a jumping exercise. He then is asked if his boyfriend likes that a lot.’ Another diary keeper noted a joke that was passed on: ‘What’s the difference between a chef and a poof? A fag stirs around in yesterday’s meal.’ Gay observers who were ‘out’ also noted jokes that were made about them, such as ‘“Are you off to the shower? Then I’ll wait a bit.” Laughing, and then “Ha, no, I actually enjoy being in the shower with you . . . pick up the shampoo bottle, will you?”’

The logbook reports gave an example of how gay identification was reduced to physical sexuality. A gay athlete came out to his team and his coach. He received questions like ‘Who do you fancy? The one with curly hair or the blonde?’ In other words, non-heterosexuality was constructed primarily in terms of physical desire. In general, however, the comments created a sexual aesthetic in which gay males were seen as ‘dirty’ and a threat: ‘Four of us (teammates) talked about another teammate who sometimes behaves like a faggot. (They said) (h)e paid too much attention to two athletes who were taking a shower and specifically to their “sex pistols”, so to speak.’ Another diary keeper noted how his teammates expressed themselves in a homonegative manner about an acquaintance they all

knew: 'He has become such a gay boy, a chocolate knight, really dirty, bah!' After one of the observers told his teammates he is gay, a series of homonegative comments by teammates followed and 'occurred, day in, day out', such as 'Don't look at me that way, you dirty so and so' and 'You'll have to go to another dressing room.' Being gay was therefore framed not only as being weak or effeminate, but also reduced to constructions of same-sex physical aesthetics. Such speech acts at times were part of macro physical aggression.

*Shifting from verbal microaggression to physical aggression.* Although microaggressions dominated the talk, two gay observers also recounted having encountered macroaggressions or dangerous situations. Sue (2010) describes these aggressions as forms of micro-assaults. Hessel came out to his team not so long ago. He has thought about stopping with his sport because he does not feel comfortable with the way he was 'represented' and treated. He explained:

Some of the lads throw the ball extra hard in my direction because they think I should be able to handle it as a gay. When the coach saw what was happening, he pulled me in front of the group and said that it didn't matter that I was gay and that they shouldn't have wrong expectations by playing the ball so hard. That certainly helped me.

Guido gave another example of homonegative violence or micro-assault. Although Guido felt accepted as a gay athlete by his own team, he was aware that an opposing team could be less tolerant. After several heavy fouls and offensive actions occurred during an emotional match, Guido's team decided to stop playing and walked off the pitch. In his logbook, Guido wrote the following after the match:

After we had left the pitch, we were constantly being called a 'bunch of gay boys'. I responded by saying that I was the only gay athlete in our team, and that they'd be better off keeping their mouths shut about gays. Then they retaliated by calling out: 'number four (my shirt number) is a queer!', to which I reacted: 'Yeah that's true, you're not insulting me by saying that'. They also said to me: 'Are you going to the Reguliersdwarstraat tonight?' Getting fucked in the arse!' To which I answered: 'Yeah, want to come along? That will be fun!' As we walked to our car, we heard someone say: 'Where is number four? Where is that poof? We're going to go gay bashing!!' One of my teammates answered: 'Why? Do you want his telephone number?' Luckily, they didn't recognize me in my normal clothes . . . After the match we left the club quickly and had a beer somewhere else. We made jokes about it and I was also complimented on the way I had responded.

Sue's (2010) definition frames these acts by teammates or threats by opponents as micro-assaults because they reflect an intention to harm through words or actions. Guido's performance also reflects Butler's (1997) contention, however, that performative speech acts not only constitute their targets, but also that that very constitution presents the possibility of counter speech. In other words, those who are targets of injurious speech such as homonegative language may talk back, which is what Guido did in reaction to this micro-assault. The team also sent a letter of complaint to the KNVB (the Dutch football association). The KNVB, however, refused to enforce sanctions against the offending club. By neglecting its institutional responsibility in this

manner, the KNVB supported and strengthened heteronormative hegemony. Bury (2016: 217) has argued that '(w)hile gay footballers are included into the football family, the conditions of their inclusion are determined by others, who dictate that inclusion only works on the basis of adopting mainstream competitive and hetero-masculine values while remaining different'.

### *The walk: coming out/visibility*

Most of the young men who acted as diary keepers have learned to accept this gay talk behaviour as normal since 'that's how we are'. During the interviews, those who self-identified as gay reflected on how they experienced these microaggressions. Cees (gay) indicated that he encountered 'gay' in jokes and remarks fairly frequently:

It's as though it's become accepted to call out 'Hey gay boy'. It's become a filler, intended as a comic or funny remark. All these kinds of comments sometimes come across to me as hurtful and denigrating. I don't react to them; I may make a remark about it, but I never escalate it or anything like that. I also laugh along with the jokes sometimes. They've got no idea that someone they know is gay. I wonder sometimes how they would react if I told them I was gay. I reckon it could cause a few problems, that's what makes it so difficult. Maybe they'd want me to start showering separately. . . . On the other hand, we're all friends and I've known them for years. Of course, I won't turn up one day with a pink sports bag. Maybe they'll think it's a joke, when I tell them, that I'm pulling their leg because you just can't see by looking at me. And I don't watch the Eurovision song contest or behave in a typically gay manner.

Cees' reaction reveals that the comments and jokes made about gays affected him personally, but he did not dare to let the others know that he is gay. Cees preferred to keep his mouth shut because he was afraid of reactions and because he realized that using the word 'queer' is considered to be 'normal' in his team. He seemed to have internalized a certain form of homonegativity and the gay aesthetic described earlier. He accepted that a man can become the target of ridicule if he does not act in what the majority has defined as 'normal' and if he does not fulfil masculine heteronormative expectations about how 'real' men look and behave. He distanced himself from a dominant gay aesthetic discursive practice that he knew was used by others for labelling those constructed as gay. This example also reveals how homonegative microaggressive behaviour can stigmatize any athlete whose behaviour may not always be congruent with the performance of heteronormative masculinity. The iterative performativity of these practices may then result in internalization of homonegativity and fear of coming out as gay.

These microaggressive practices also meant Niek (gay) did not dare to tell his teammates that he is attracted to men. He described his reaction after hearing homonegative speech acts by two of his teammates:

I thought, 'did they really say that?!' I hadn't expected them to say such things. It doesn't bother me, but it doesn't make it any easier to bring up the subject of me being gay. I think it's strange, I'm not at all what you would call a stereotype. What can you do when someone says something like that? I just let it pass, it is not the right moment for saying something about it. That just has the opposite effect.

Similarly, an 'out' athlete (Hessel) distanced himself from the dominant discourse of gay aesthetics and described how he negotiated the subject of 'gay' and how he tried to conform to the dominant homonegative culture:

I can sometimes break the ice with a witty comment about my homosexuality, but sometimes I have my doubts about what I can and cannot say. They consider it totally unacceptable when I start talking about how attractive a certain man is. I need to hold myself in check sometimes so that I don't react too quickly when they start talking about women in macho terms. It's at times like these that I feel like making a comment about men, but I think better of it.

The self-identified non-heterosexual athletes participating in our study often engaged in self-censorship to avoid being seen as provocative. They made sure they did not behave or dress in ways associated with femininity or gay as circumscribed by a dominant discourse of gay aesthetics: 'As long as you do not prance around, have loose wrists, have a tight behind or high voice then you will not have any problem being a gay athlete.' Niek felt accepted because he behaved in a heteronormative manner. Another observer contended that if an athlete behaves according to constructed sexual gay aesthetics then he can expect homonegative comments. Hessel (gay) described the ambiguity of these microaggressions: 'There are about five of them at the moment (who engage in homonegativity) and there's one person in particular who makes aggressive remarks... it's pretty confrontational really but actually everything is said with a smile.'

This ambiguity between speech acts that are confrontational or oppressive and facial or other expressions that say something else constitutes a microinvalidation (Sue, 2010). Specifically, microinvalidations are microaggressions in which those speaking ignore how their speech acts (and other behaviours) may be oppressive or impact their targets.

Self-identified gay athletes as well as any athlete whose behavior did not fit the desired heteronormativity therefore had to negotiate homonegativity in team cultures that purported to be gay-friendly. These data suggest that those who self-identified as heterosexual exercised sovereign power to decide which speech acts were allowable and, in so doing, they privileged a form of masculine heteronormativity that included discursive practices of gay aesthetics misogyny.

## Discussion

The microaggressive speech acts we describe in this paper privileged a heteronormative masculinity that is not specifically named but constructed in terms of *what it is not*: not weak, not associated with femininities, not associated with losing, nor with male homoeroticism, nor with what is considered to be abject. The dominance and normalization of such speech acts preserved the status quo, reinforced a gender binary and a constructed gay aesthetic and privileged a sport-related heteronormative masculinity. They reflect speech acts in sport by young men that are also common in schools – inside and outside physical education (PE) lessons – in different countries (e.g. Bailey, 2016; Linville, 2018; Nadal et al., 2011; Pascoe, 2007, 2013; Youdell, 2004). The members of sport teams observed in this study drew on heteronormative discourses in various ways.

They normalized heteronormative privilege in discursive practices by appropriating the words 'gay' and 'queer' in an ambiguous manner. At times, when these words were used as a greeting, they seemed to be devoid of any association except with masculinity or negativity since the words were used to address other young men. These words were employed in a subtle and repetitive performative way. Similar to participants in other studies (Bailey, 2016; Nadal et al., 2016; Romeo et al., 2017) on the use of homonegative language by youth in non-sport contexts, members of the observed teams in the current study often linked these words to perceived weakness, mistakes and/or errors.

Such homonegative speech acts were performative and not an isolated activity; they reflected current sexual and gender cultural discursive normalizations. The performative use of these speech acts contributes to the preservation of discursive heteronormative social systems of power. Those who engaged in these speech acts did not invent these expressions but drew on discourses about sexuality and gender that already existed. Butler (1993) has pointed out that performative speech acts are successful not just because of their intention, but

only because that action echoes a prior action, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. . . . In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (19)

The injurious nature of these speech acts flowed from the accumulative force over time of dominant discourses about sexuality and gender including heteronormativity and served as resources for the meanings attached to these words. Briefly, these speech acts resonate, especially in sport contexts, because they are embedded in a history in which modern sport was constructed to emphasize specific desirable practices of embodied heteromascularity (Adams, 2013). Practices associated with weakness such as those attributed to gay men/homosexuality and women/femininity were and continue to be devalued and often form the base for injurious speech acts (e.g. Bailey, 2016; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; DeBoise, 2015; Hoskin, 2019; Pascoe, 2007, 2013).

The homonegative language used during interactions in sport in the current study was both descriptive and constitutive. Although the deployment of homonegative speech acts through humour and use of gendered stereotypes was normalized among the teams in the current study, that use often had the capacity to wound or to Other those who did not comply with dominant discursive practices of masculinity. Being seen as mentally or physically weak or as engaging in a physical enactment of an aesthetic associated with gay men, making mistakes and/or being seen as submissive meant an athlete could become a target for physical aggression regardless of sexual preference. The young males who identified as gay therefore primarily aligned themselves with the sexualized language used by their peers. We also note that not all of the recorded acts could be seen as *subtle* microaggressions but some are examples of micro-assaults and actual aggression such as throwing the ball with extra force at a gay athlete or threatening to attack a gay athlete after a match.

The microaggressive manner in which these Dutch young men used language they associated with queer is congruent with homonegative speech acts described by other

scholars (e.g. Bailey, 2016; Bridges, 2014; Davies and McInnes, 2012; Pascoe, 2007, 2013). They suggest that boys engage in these speech acts to 'prove' their heteromascu-line normativity and to avoid labels associated with a gay aesthetic. This reflects Butler's (1993, 1997) contention that speech acts shape subjectivities through their repetitive performativity. The content of these microaggressions and their prevalence suggest that those who identify as non-heterosexual and those who are marginalized because of their non-conforming behaviours may be continually navigating and negotiating linguistic appropriations of words associated with gays and gay aesthetics.

The speech acts pertaining to gays and sexuality in the described sporting culture of young male athletes reflect the argument made by Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 247) 'that normative constraints are shifting (but ignore) . . . that these shifts have largely taken place in ways that have sustained existing ideologies and systems of power and inequality'. The athletes in the current study selectively integrated homonegative speech acts associated with gay aesthetics into their performance of gender. This incorporation does not change relations of power since, as the data suggested, its assigned use is largely determined by those endorsing a desired heteronormative masculinity. The reactions of those self-identified as non-heterosexuals in this study suggest they are included only if they practise and endorse heteronormativity and ignore homonegative microaggressions. Similarly, Croce (2015: 3) argued that

in an era of growing tolerance toward homosexual sexuality, the ways in which homophobic attitudes express themselves are remarkably adept at changing. As many critics and theorists suggest, such a discourse is so subtly couched that it may turn out to be more dangerous than openly reactionary views.

These speech acts described not only how these young men construct sexuality, but also how they constructed gender. What is seen as male weakness or femininity is defined as gay and therefore abject. Specifically, microaggressions using homonegative talk functioned to continually repudiate difference, especially that which was seen as an abject form of masculinity or associated with femininity (see also Buijs et al., 2011; Butler, 1993). The devaluing of what is associated with 'feminine' served as a subtext of many of the homonegative speech acts in this study and supports Pascoe's (2007, 2013) contention that research on these speech acts has neglected its gendered content, or rather its femmephobia. Femmephobia, sometimes called effem-inophobia, is a disdain for or a systematic devaluation of femininity and reflects misogyny (Adams, 2013; Annes and Redlin, 2012; Hoskin, 2019; Richardson, 2009). If gender equality would be a current dominant discourse in sport then a gay aesthetic that associates specific and bodily enactments with femininity would not be constructed as an insult.

This gendered subtext of femmephobia and misogyny is strongly embedded in the wider context of sport and its discourses. The norm for valued behaviour continues to be practices associated with desirable sporting heteromascu-linities (Adams, 2013). Although those researching these speech acts have described the anti-feminine nature of their content, this normalization of misogyny and how it may be reproduced and embedded in other discourses about sport, such as those about leadership and women in sport, has

received relatively little scholarly attention in research. This intersection of gender and sexuality in homonegative speech acts needs more attention, however, since it may explain why these speech acts specifically frame what is constructed as feminine as abject. This abject aesthetic ascribed to and associated with women may partially help to explain the difficulties in increasing the gender ratio in positions of leadership such as governance and why men are preferred as coaches for high-performance sport (Caudwell, 2016; Fink, 2016).

In conclusion, although male athletes in general may be more accepting of gay identities and may engage in interactions associated with gay masculinities in western contexts such as hugging and cuddling, the speech acts of the athletes observed in the current study emphasized microaggressive abjection of femininity and sexuality rather than celebrating sexual diversity. These homonegative speech acts were not so much individual actions that can be pathologized and/or curtailed through rules, legislation and/or punishment, however, but reflected how relations of power operate in sport and non-sport settings. These findings suggest that dominant discursive practices associated with desirable heterosexual masculinity exerted a great deal of power as to how the behaviour of these male athletes was defined and judged. These normative judgments are embedded in structural social inequalities in society, including in sport. This suggests that these inequalities and how homonegative microaggressive speech acts flow from and inform them need ongoing attention by policy makers and scholars.

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### **Notes**

1. This study was part of a larger study on sexual diversity in sport. The entire project was commissioned and sponsored by the Gay Sport Alliance (GSA) and directed by the research institute where the third author is employed. The GSA consisted of five national team sport organisations, the National Olympic Committee (NOC\*NSF), the national organisation for LGBT rights (COC Netherlands) and the Foundation of LGBT sport organisations.
2. Well-known street in Amsterdam that is popular with LGBTQI people.



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