Playing Gender: The Performance of Gender Roles among Trans Athletes in Pacific Netball

Emma Sherry, La Trobe University
George Cunningham, Texas A&M University

Socio-Cultural - Diversity (International Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2017-058
Thursday, June 1, 2017
3:30 PM
Room: Yale

Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings
While sport has become more inclusive in many respects, trans individuals (i.e., persons whose sex assigned at birth differs from their gender identity and expression) still face barriers to full participation (Buzuvis, 2012). Even when sporting opportunities are present, trans individuals face discrimination from other participants, fans, and coaches (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011, 2012). As a result, sport has largely come a domain exclusively to cisgender individuals (i.e., persons whose sex assigned at birth is the same as their gender identity and expression).

While trans prejudice and discrimination are present throughout much of sport, there are exceptions, with netball representing one such example (Tagg, 2008, 2012). Traditionally viewed as a sport for women, netball has been identified as a sport where trans people are safe and welcome to play, officiate, and deliver the sport program. In doing so, they contest traditional ideas of gender and contest the cisgender-only domain that usually pervades sport. The purpose of this study is to speak to the experiences of the transgender netball community, and the performance/s of gender in their various roles in the sport. We do so by focusing on netball programs in the Pacific Island nations of Tonga and Samoa facilitated by Netball Australia via the Pacific Sports Partnership program.

Research Context
In many Pacific Island nations, there is a cultural acceptance of a third gender, that is boys or men who dress and perform as female. Samoan Fa’afafine – or Fafa – are men who are raised as females and identify with that gender. Being a Fa’afafine or the practice of males adopting female gender roles and the attributes traditionally associated with women is deeply embedded in much of Polynesia. In the Tongan context, this third gender is also apparent; however, they are known as a fakaleiti or leiti. Our research focuses on the experiences of Fafa and leiti athletes as they participate in netball.

Tonga comprises 177 islands in the southern Pacific Ocean, of which 52 islands are inhabited by approximately 103,000 people. Seventy percent of Tongans reside on the main island of Tongatapu. The Kingdom of Tonga is a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy; there is a strong hierarchical social structure operating in Tonga whereby all titles are heritable and follow the male line of descent. In districts and villages this social ranking system dictates who has power and authority in a community context.

Samoa consists of ten islands located in the south west Pacific Ocean; however, only four of these are inhabited. There is a population of over 187,000 with 19.6% of people located in Samoa’s capital, Apia. In Samoa, there are strong hierarchical village, political and social structures. Alongside the country’s Western styled political system, exists the fa’amatai chiefly system. The matai is the holder of the family chief title; he or she is responsible for caring for the family, and controlling and preserving village lands/resources – each matai represents their family/clan in the village council. Therefore, the matais fulfil a dual role as both chiefs and local politicians.

Research Approach
The participants for this research were drawn from the Fafa (15 participants) and Leiti (15 participants) communities in Samoa and Tonga who are engaged in the sport of netball, as players, coaches, officials or administrators.

Data were collected through qualitative in-depth individual interviews. To ensure was collected in a culturally respectful manner, local netball staff undertook the interviews in their local language with participants, under the guidance and supervision of the research team. Questions included discussing: why these communities play netball and not other sports? What are the cis-gender participant attitude towards faafafine/leiiti participation? And questions around sexual stigma and sexual prejudice. Data collection and interview translation is currently in progress.
All interviews are being translated and transcribed for analysis. The data analysis for this project will be a hybrid inductive/deductive model (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). All qualitative data will be organised in NVivo 10 for analysis. The themes presented here will be arrived at through a systematic coding process, including a broad read through, a search for recurring concepts and patterns, and then a grouping together of recurring concepts and patterns into themes to make sense of the data and address the research aims of this project.

Anticipated Findings and Discussion
Although data collection is still in progress in both Samoa and Tonga, some initial findings can be presented here. In both nations, the transgender community play an essential role in the delivery and participation in the sport of netball, including roles as athlete, coach, official and in the administration of the national netball federation. For example, all formally accredited netball umpires in Samoa are from the fa’afafine community. It appears from initial analysis that netball provides a safe and inclusive space for active engagement and participation in sport that is not provided elsewhere.

It is interesting however to note that the performance of gender roles in these nations is changeable, depending on the sport role being performed. When playing the sport, the trans athletes can only compete as a male, and play in a mixed-gender or male only competitions. This includes a requirement to dress as a male, in shorts and t-shirt, rather than a netball skirt. However, when in the role of netball umpire, coach or administrator, the performance of the woman identity can accepted and expressed. This requirement to switch between gender roles in the same context or indeed on the same field of play appears unique to the Pacific Islands. Thus, while many aspects of netball are more inclusive than other areas of sport, there are still elements that promote traditional notions of gender and privilege cisgender individuals.

The research team will discuss these paradoxes, theoretical contributions, and implications for sport managers.