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# Kicking Against Tradition: Women's Football, Friendships and Family Life

## Abstract

This article examines friendships and social networks in the context of amateur women's football. Studies of intimacies and friendships tend to situate women's single-sex friendships around emotional support (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan, 2008), therefore, this research looks at a diversity in female friendships, in order to account for a better understanding of complexities beyond a traditional masculine/feminine binary. Drawing on 10 open interviews, social and friendship networks emerged in two main areas. Firstly, although non-traditional social groupings were evident, it was apparent that some participants had to negotiate a dual-role and fulfil domestic expectancies, which impacts upon ability to take part. Secondly, there were friendships based on sociability and these were integral to the connectedness of groups not defined by conventionally gendered roles defined by emotional ties (Allan, 1989), but instead on collective interest focussed around playing sport. These groupings are of interest because they are contrary to conventionality that frame emotional femininity, and foreground social activities that accentuate variety rather than confine friendship groups in terms of either masculine or feminine practices.

Keywords: friendship, gender, women, football, sport, domestic responsibilities

## Introduction

On reaching the semi-finals of the 2015 Women's World Cup, England manager Mark Samson explained, 'I think that's the story of this team so far, it's that everyone's played a part when needed, from the side, on the field' (The Telegraph, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2015). Although we look at the experiences of amateur players, the sub-text underpinning Samson's statement resonates with the focus of this research paper. For example, the demands of domestic responsibilities often hindered participation in 'non-domestic' social networks, thus highlighting the extent to which gendered conventions remain embedded. For female football players, attention is most frequently focussed on 'deviant' sexualities (Caudwell, 1999:401; Cahn, 1993:356), which displaces women's participation. Hills and Croston (2012) have argued for example, that because football prioritizes hegemonic *heterosexual* masculinity, a consequence for women is that playing football is perceived to undermine dominant hetero-normative femininity. This has connotations for encouraging girls to take part and the choices they make with regards to participating in gender appropriate sports (Hills and Croston, 2012:591). Although there are increasing number of women playing football (see [www.thefa.com](http://www.thefa.com) for latest figures), in broader public and media discourse, men's participation remains the dominant focus. Additionally, football holds a prominent place in the popular imagination, it

is a mainstream sport, and it is therefore a unique setting for the formation and maintenance of friendships because women's participation does challenge 'normal' femininities. We therefore argue for a better understanding of friendship bonds in the context of football in order to account for complexities that disrupt a conventional masculine/feminine binary.

The participants in this study met to train an average of twice a week and this was often followed with a post-training drinking session. Players would also often meet at various other times during the week. Poulton (2012: 2) for instance, explains how for women, transgressing into 'masculine' spaces can be challenging. In such a way we aim to foreground the tenacity with which women sustained their participation in football at the same time as balancing domestic responsibilities. Within the context of sociological debate about the heightened importance of friendship in late modernity (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Jamieson, 1998), we contribute to this literature by looking particularly at the everyday lived experiences of female friendships. Women's friendships in football are specifically of interest, because feminine *conventions* situated by dominant discourse tend to undermine the importance of sociability.

Drawing on empirical work conducted for this paper, what emerged in analysis were two thematic strands that were indicative of the ways in which women manage, negotiate and frequently transgress conventions. First, we were interested to see how women balanced domestic responsibilities and the commitment necessary to be part of a football team. Second, in managing *dual-roles*, there were apparent intersections that impact upon sustaining friendships and associated social activities. As a result, assumptions about the essential nature of same-sex friendships conceals the multiple ways in which female friendships can be framed and experienced. More simply, the feminine/masculine friendships narrative is insufficient for understanding the complex ways in which friendships are maintained *per se*. Our research sample are all adult amateur female football players, meaning that our findings have implications for gaining insight into the strategies that women use in order to undertake and sustain participation in physical and social activities beyond adolescence and outside of the sphere of conventional responsibilities.

### **Competing Spheres: Football, friendship and domestic life**

Relationships, taking the form of family, kin, sexual and couple-relationships, along with other associations including friendship, lie at the centre of contemporary sociological debate. Within sociological analysis there has been a shift to decentre the family and heterosexual couple in terms of intimacy and personal life (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007) in recognition of the meaningful relationships which people maintain and negotiate beyond traditional structures. Within this context, friendships become more relevant to our lives than traditional ties such as kinship or community networks. Analysis has shifted from rigid conceptualisations of 'the family' as an institution towards the more nuanced category of 'personal life' (Smart, 2007), with an increasing focus on the role that networks of various intimates play in our personal lives (Jamieson et al., 2006). Detraditionalisation theorists including Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, 2002) have argued that the impact of late modern social and demographic transformations have resulted in increasing weight being given to elected ties, such as friendship, over more traditional bonds. Yet in popular understanding and everyday practice, the couple is often treated as the centre of our intimate life (Jamieson, 1998), and perceived as somehow superior to other relationship types. Claims about the detraditionalisation of personal life sometimes fail to acknowledge the investments of men and women in conventional notions of masculinity and femininity (McNay, 1999) in the way they conduct their relationships. We argue that this is particularly the case for women within a dominant hetero-normative framework, which privileges romantic rather than sporting or professional success as a marker of female achievement (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003).

We forward an argument that where women's friendships are organised around a common sporting interest, specifically a traditionally masculinized context, participation can disrupt broader gendered discourse. Because these friendships tended to be social as opposed to conventional emotionally expressive femininities, the wealth of women's experiences positioned this critique as a way to understand complexities and the variety of ways in which female friendships can be meaningfully asserted beyond the boundaries of tradition. The specific nature of friendship as a social tie has been subject to extensive sociological study (e.g. Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan, 2008). There is some evidence that those people living the most individualised lives centre their relationships around friendships in a way that

reconfigures domestic space and its association with the conjugal couple and nuclear family (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 153). Research into the friendship networks of same-sex people has indicated friends can take on some of the duties traditionally performed by family members (Weeks et al, 2001). However, empirical evidence has generally failed to support the suggestion that friendships are replacing family relationships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

While there have been undeniably wide-ranging shifts in personal life since the 1970s, it would appear that family (including couple/marriage) and friendship remain divergent in the way that people practice and prioritise their relationships (Allan, 2008). Using Morgan's (2011) framework of 'family practices' to consider friendship and intimate practices, Cronin (2015: 2) argues that the intersection of couple relationships organises people's intimate circles, with intimacy framed as a finite resource to be distributed using a principle of scarcity, which actively creates and reinforces the boundaries of 'friendship' and 'the sexual couple'. Within this context we interrogate the ways in which the participants in this study negotiate their 'primary' couple relationships and domestic responsibilities with being an amateur footballer and particularly the accompanying friendship network. Heterosexual women are usually responsible not only for domestic, but also emotional labour (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993) within their partnerships, which can limit their ability to participate in sporting and leisure activities.

Moreover, there is often a tension between the ideal couple relationship and the demands of friendship (Cronin, 2015), with the former usually being given priority. Research conducted in the 1970s (Rubin, 1976) found that upon marriage wives tended to restrict or terminate contact with same-sex friends, unlike their husbands who maintained social arrangements with male friendship groups. Women also tend to select friendships that support their relationships rather than undermine them (O'Connor, 1992). Participating in a traditionally masculine sport therefore could be potentially challenging to negotiate and friendship networks are undeniably complex and influenced by friendship groups (Hills, 2007: 321). In physical activity it might be perceived that physicality undermines conventional femininity and is therefore a less valuable, even desirable, form of 'capital' for females to accrue. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) for example, identify the 'masculinized doer' (the 'tomboy') and the 'feminized non-doer, and Hills (2007) has further suggested that this dichotomy influences

the decisions that girls make with regard to physical education. Other research indicates that female friendship is usually established on emotional sharing, with the male equivalent taking the form of 'doing' in the context of activity based exercises, 'women's friendships tend to be less extensive and less concerned with sociability as such, but to involve greater self-revelation and empathy' (Allan, 1989: 72). Therefore, women in particular are expected to prioritise couple and family life as the ultimate marker of success (Sandfield and Percy, 2003).

In the experiences of our participants, we interrogate the basis of their relational bonds. Being part of a team in addition to the physical component of playing football actually strengthened the intimacy and shared identity of the group. These were social rather than emotional sharing aspect of these friendships. Participants would often demonstrate their care for each other instrumentally through shared activities, which is traditionally a hallmark of male friendships (Jamieson, 1998: 100). This disrupts the conventional framing of female friendships, indicating the more complexity that represented in terms of symbolic 'gender' maintained in broader discourse.

### **Research Design**

The sample used for this study constituted amateur female football players covering an age range of 22-55, chosen because of their participation in playing or coaching football. Given that the primary purpose of the study was to understand how friendship and social networks underpinned experiences of playing football, the sample was self-selecting because the study only required that women were involved in football in some capacity. Although we have conducted 18 interviews of between 45 minutes to 2 hours in length, for the purposes of this paper, we draw on 10 of these as a sample to interrogate key emerging themes that can be the basis for further research. Given the size of the sample we do not make claims to broader representation, but do point to the quality of the empirical evidence produced from this fieldwork. Our aim was to understand the grounded interactions that female football players employ in balancing transitions between domestic and leisure spaces. With claims relating to factors such as ethnicity or social class limited by the small sample size, our analysis instead offers qualitative insight into meaningful friendships and communities forged through leisure activities.

The open set nature of the interviews instigated an experiential narrative, and the prevalence of friendships as an intrinsic facet of these experiences emerged over several different interviews. We did not set to 'find out' about demographic information such as marital status, social class, sexualities etc., the sample was not chosen on this basis, and thus analysis into such themes is not considered in this paper, although it did emerge in the experiences of some participants. Data was collected using narrative interviews in order to situate the epistemological trajectory that will contest 'dominant knowledge claims' (Harding, 1991:149), and prioritise the experiences of female football players. The narrative is dependent on linking the story to individual biography as it is spoken in an interview context, '[narrative] analysis interprets and compares biographies as they are constituted in the research interview' (Riessman, 2008:57). In the context of this research then, this focus incites a critique of cultural practices defined by hegemonic masculinity (Woodward, 2008:546; Caudwell, 1999:401; Cahn, 1993:356), and explores the extent to which women's football, and women's participation in the social aspects of playing football, can advance contestation of the dominant gender hierarchy.

In order to preserve the properties of the story, each transcript was taken firstly in isolation, to keep the story 'intact' from case to case. Emergent themes were identified and then compared as a cross-section, across different transcripts. There were two main themes that emerged, and the following sections of this paper are organised around firstly, balancing domestic responsibilities and participation in football, and secondly, friendships and social networks. Not all participants talked about family commitments, or if they had any at all. Nevertheless, it was notable that some participants were be much more duty bound by domestic responsibilities. When friendship and group networks do emerge therefore, they were greatly valued and emphasized the 'social' aspects of experiences that they identified with strongly.

### **Transgressing Spaces: Balancing Domestic Responsibilities and Participation in Leisure**

With the sexual couple at the centre of contemporary personal life (Cronin, 2015; Gabb et al, 2013), participants have to negotiate space for football based activities and networks around these dominant relationships. We found that football provided both the structure for the maintenance of these affiliations and the support mechanism underpinning participants'

transgressions of conventional female relationship priorities. Transgressions are never clearly experienced as 'inappropriate', but inferred a meaningful search for identity that seemingly finds voice in adverse conditions. The challenges associated with establishing and maintaining female friendship networks and the longevity of some the friendships were indicative of the extent to which their social networks formed through football endured. More simply, the strength of friendships and veracity with which such networks emerged across all interviews, foregrounds how participating on football was positively experienced. When discussing friendships for instance, and what they 'get out' of playing football, the importance placed on these social ties and creates strong friendship bonds that challenge *normative* gender roles.

Against a backdrop of past experiences and being 'encouraged' to take part in more 'feminine' activities, there were 'deviations' from gendered traditions. Coddington for instance, has argued with regard to female football fans, that transgressions into traditionally masculine spaces are overwhelmingly positively experienced (Coddington, 1997:57) as one participant indicates below:

Because women's football is predominantly amateur, in fact almost entirely amateur really in Britain, you know you've got semi-pro contracts, but they're not worth that much really in monetary terms. And because of that, the commitment shown by female players is phenomenal. (Gillian)

Yet despite these transgressions, while domestic responsibilities remain stubbornly gendered (Jamieson, 1998; van Hooff, 2011), women may have limited opportunities for participation in friendship groups, particularly those based on leisure activities. Simply making the time to play football for example, even at the highest professional level. Katie Chapman, a midfielder for England and Chelsea, has spoken openly about her struggling to balance her commitments to her husband's and sons, with the demands of football (Taylor, 2015). This also emerged in our data because participants talked about domestic pressures and relationships that affected playing football. There was a friction between maintaining a 'privatised' feminine role and participation in 'public' leisure spaces. Although it might vary between urban and non-urban, economic and class status (Jamieson, 1998:86), there was a balance between



domesticity and leisure illustrated in many participants' accounts. Lauren, a single 28-year-old footballer explained the loss of players down to the demands of other relationships in their lives: 'girls go off with boyfriends and all that stuff' because 'I suppose in a way it's not natural for us to play the game', highlighting the challenges for women in meeting the demands of conventional couple relationships. It was interesting how from this context, women can be tenacious in transcending expected roles, and making transitions from private to public, or even back and forth. As Martha explains:

So then I [pause] as soon as she [Martha's second child] was born really, six weeks after, something like that, I went [pause] she is now 22 months, I went and start playing with this lot and they're my age group I would say, because I'm 39 this year. There are girls 35, there are 25, you know, there's a range of 25 up to even 56, we have a lady who's 56. (Martha)

In this extract, it seems Martha barely paused to give birth to her second child before resuming football. Moreover, she was sanguine about the impact of her family life on limiting her opportunities to play football throughout the interview, although she is married with two children in her late thirties. Although there are quite clearly dual responsibilities, Martha prioritizes football in order to be able to balance domestic life and participation in the public sphere. This is an achievement in the context of domestic and work pressures. Research into the amount of time spent on domestic work (including Hoschild, 1989; Presser, 1994; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; van Hooff, 2011) continues to document the unequal division of household labour within heterosexual relationships, with women undertaking around 70 per cent of the work (Mansfield and Collard, 1988; Baxter, 2000).

Other participants acknowledged the potential conflict between family/couple relationships and participation in a team sport. For example, Michelle discussed domestic responsibility as something that impinged on the time female football players could give to training and their careers more generally. Crucially, this influences with opportunities to maintain existing friendships, or establish new ones. Unlike Martha, she is less optimistic about the ability of women to balance the demands of both football and family life, and acknowledges the loss of players because of the conflict between the two roles:

It is tough, we've lost two or three of late where they've got a mortgage, or working on a Sunday as well, and also the children side of it. I mean we've got a youngster with us now, she's 25/26, it's no age really, she's just had her second child now, and whether she'll come back in [pause], she said, well, she might do, but the pressures the internationals put onto them as well in terms of this, training that, you know whatever. With a young family and keeping down a full time job, which you need to do these days to play their mortgage, you know, it's difficult for them. (Michelle)

On the grounds of meeting domestic demands, there are insufficient opportunities and limited structures that fail to facilitate women's opportunity to balance the two roles (Haugaa Engh, 2011:139). This was apparent in several interviews, and ultimately in the extract above, Michelle indicates that a choice must be made between one and the other. Gillian's account supports this analysis, noting that the lack of institutional support for women's football means that the team is based entirely on commitment from players who are also enduring societal pressure to conform to more mainstream feminine identities:

You know, if you look at the England set up now, I know quite a few of the girls who have been involved with the England set up or who are coaches now, and these are always people who have kind of put their careers on hold for 20 years, and their families effectively. And they wouldn't get that in men's sport at that level because the professionalization of the men's game has altered the mindset. (Gillian)

Not all participants divulged their involvements with family commitments, or indeed, if they had any at all, nevertheless, it is notable that some of these women's experiences may be duty bound by domestic responsibilities to the extent that participation in football and the associated friendship networks had to be negotiated around them. There is also recognition of increasing freedoms and choices in relationships and personal life. Ann, a participant in her mid-fifties recounts her parents preventing her from playing football when she was younger because it conflicted with what they expected of her as a young woman 'I was desperate to play, and then me parents said "you're not going anywhere" women and sport perhaps wasn't seen or recognised, you know'. For her this is in contrast to today when women have increasing choice to define their own life choices: 'families have changed, you know, the social, you know, lifestyle and that sort of [pause] stuff'.

This research has found limited evidence to support theories of de-traditionalisation in the way that women order their personal lives. There is still recognition that romantic partners and family life take precedent, if not always for individual participants, then societally. The 'meaning-constitutive traditions' identified by Gross (2005: 295) are as influential to participants' understandings of their relationships as late modern fluidity. Rather than challenging the heteronormative elements of their relationships, many participants negotiated around them in order to maintain them. However, these women's experiences of the friendships themselves often did challenge societal expectations regarding traditionally gendered same-sex friendships, which we explore in the following section.

### **Disrupting Tradition: Friendships and Social Networks**

In this section, we interrogate how the transgressions discussed in the previous section intersect with the formation of *non-traditional* friendships. Moreover, we assert that women's engagement with football presents a contest to conventions regarding *how* ideal female friendships are constituted. Although individualisation theorists assert the primacy of late modern 'elected' social and demographic ties such as friendships over more traditional heteronormative bonds (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002), this posited shift was not evidenced here. Many of our participants reported having to organise their participation in leisure, or in this case football, with balancing their domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, while facing pressure to maintain traditionally 'feminine' roles in their personal lives, the friendships that women acquired through football did not conform to conventionally gendered stereotypes about female friendships. This highlights the limitations of categorically defining friendships as definitively masculine or feminine, and which can conceal the multiple ways in which same-sex friendships are lived and maintained. For instance, research participants placed great value upon the social facets of their friendships, contrary to research suggesting that female friendships are based principally upon emotional ties (Allan, 1989).

The tenacity with which these experiences were recounted suggests that women's participation in football can be a productive space in which traditionally defined (gendered) friendships are contested. In such a way, the experiences of the women we interviewed

indicated how playing football provided a place that encouraged positive social engagement, expressed through social networks and friendship groups. Our contention is that such transgressions and sustained participation in 'social' leisure spaces have the potential to encourage social transformations with regards to contesting traditionally feminine friendships (Jamieson, 1998:15). A number of the participants discussed their friendships with teammates with reference to durability and sociality as well as emotional depth. Linda described one her longest standing friendships:

I've known Rebecca since she was about 10, because her mum and dad and my mum and dad used to go drinking in the Conservative Club, which was where I met Rebecca, when she was little so, and they only lived around the corner. So we met them, and me and Rebecca have been going to City together for like, I don't know, 30, 35 years. (Linda)

The maintenance of this friendship through playing football is focal point, and Linda impresses value and implicit pride in its longevity. A variety of authors have commented on the integral aspects of women's experiences in football as emerging in a counter culture (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Scraton et al, 1999; Coddington, 1997), and these experiences diverge from the common ground of feminine friendships organised around emotional sharing, and are instead based on doing things together i.e. activities. Sociality therefore would seem to bear some validity in affirming the value drawn from playing football:

We met a lot of friends through the playing, that still, you know, I've known Benny and Rachael, Rebecca for God knows how long. And Rita and all the other people that I used to play with before [pause] if we all sat down and had a laugh, we'd probably remember a lot more things. Me dad's got pictures. (Linda)

It is interesting that in this location we might conceptualize as a space whereby women may overcome the 'traditions' with which their friendships were defined. Nina for example, explains how football is an outlet in which she is able to assert herself. It as a 'safe' space, it is familiar and comfortable for her. She discusses acquiring confidence, which for her was a way of becoming more social. Such a testimony illustrates how participating in football adds social value, because it is a context that encourages them to explore their character and

identities through the building of relationships that perhaps would not be so easily found elsewhere.

In terms of it [football] has given me, the social aspect for me is incredibly important because I'm not naturally outgoing, I do tend to [inaudible], if I feel confident where I am. (Nina)

Nina went on to say that 'it [football] is just in an environment where I've always felt comfortable and people [pause] enjoy me being there, and even when I fight with people in the team, I've always had other people to fall back on. So I think personally, it's given me the best and the toughest times.' From the participants' accounts, it was apparent how football often facilitated the development of social bonds. Sarah's discussion of playing football on a Sunday talks about quite mundane actions of setting up football nets, but in doing so, she engages discussion regarding the level of professionalism and preference for how this intersects with socialising:

The higher up you go, I would say the more professional. If you want to turn up and just have a laugh, like recreational, then you'd be in the county league and you'll play at Hough End and spend hours on somebody's shoulders trying to put the nets up won't you? Which still goes on, you know, you go out and you don't know who has had too many, who's tanked up from the night before. (Sarah)

One fundamental aspect of these experiences focus on communal interactions. Sarah's recollections are demonstrative of how playing football allows these women to socially network and make transitions into the public sphere. Both accounts are discernibly hierarchical, 'and as you go up and it gets a bit more serious, you should, yes, enjoy yourself, but we've got a game on, if you want to play, play, if you want a laugh, drop down. Because there probably are, there are a lot of girls who've dropped out the football who have had the talent, because they just want to go out. They think it's probably like, the lads, isn't it, you know?' In such a way, participants demonstrated how fully committed

they were to playing football and it was a valued part of their week, because it was a space that encouraged friendships.

Transgressions into traditionally 'masculine' spaces, in the form of friendship groups, were a positive context in which they confronted 'tradition', contesting the ideological link between masculinity and football (Cashmore and Parker, 2003). The strength of participants' social ties to the group were articulated with veracity, and deviated in the sense that these friendships were based on leisure activities rather than emotional sharing more often associated with expressing a conventional femininity. These 'types' of friendships have traditionally been a masculine stronghold, yet participants' alliances were still reinforced in this context. The endurance of friendships and the positive 'doing' experiences of playing football therefore, contest the stereotype underpinning the gender binary.

Nina discussed her work in the organisational aspects of the football team, which revealed the dimensions of participation in football acquired from such social engagement. Skeggs (2004) has cited the exchange value of social capital, specifically beneficial to increased participation in the public sphere (Skeggs, 2004:75). As Nina goes on to say:

Well the club rules say that you're not allowed to drink 24-hours before the match, pretty much everyone sticks to that. Unless there's birthdays or, but no, usually no-one's got a hangover which is pretty good. We used to enforce it, but now we're not even enforcing it. I think it just comes with the feeling of a club, of a group. In a way, it [football] introduced me to the whole like hen group, you know just girls as group spending time together, which I hadn't experienced as such, before joining football. There are some people who you, it was weird, some people who are actually quite good [at playing football] who are really negative about girls playing football. Like girls can't be as good and stuff. (Nina)

Within this space, Nina expressed a sense of self-determination and consequently ownership. She talks about a 'hen-group' for example, around which social activities are

organised. Moreover, Nina talks about feelings that come from belonging to a 'club', she asserts the value of this space as facilitating grounded, and meaningful, interactions. In short, there are noticeable group formations that are integral to her experience, illustrated in the formation of friendship groups.

The sociality of these group ties are frequently expressed with some veracity to the extent that Sam's discussion of her Wednesday football group is quite emotive: 'but I think that now I've found a group that I feel quite happy with, you know everyone's accepted, this is the Wednesday one, now I've found this group I feel that it probably has helped me now. I mean it's probably, I was probably wrong to give it up you know.' Sociality and the bonding may be expressively emotional, but not in a conventionally feminine sense. The friendship group she outlines is a gathering organised around a mutual sporting interest and the social activities that support it. Allegiances are therefore, experienced around shared consumption of various activities of 'doing' rather than disclosing intimacy (Jamieson, 1998):

'Cause I could have met some absolutely fantastic people over the last few years and I've missed out on that. But at least I'm doing it now and at least I'm socialising with like-minded people as well so, it's all good, yeah. I think that the Wednesday group is really quite a close-knit group, and they've got core people. And I think that the group has been running for about 10 years. So you do really well to get in with this group and, you know, great people, different age groups you know, fantastic. (Sam)

Although some participants discussed domestic 'expectations' that remain apparent, the endurance of friendships and networks demonstrably reveal that football can be spaces for facilitating the formation of friendship group that contest discourse regarding conventionally defined *feminine* friendships. As we cited in the previous section (in interview with Michelle), there are still very clear 'expectations' with regard to domestic responsibilities, suggestive of the endurance of conventional gendered roles and corresponding femininities. Yet by soliciting the grounded experiences of female football players, we found that female friendships are much more layered and complex than represented in broader cultural

discourse, particularly where opportunities are prevalent in traditionally *masculine* (football) social contexts.

As illustrated by the interview extracts, what emerged strongly from the research was that there are experiences that diverge from the common conception of *feminine* friendships organised around emotional sharing, and instead based on doing things together more usually the preserve of *masculinity* (Jamieson, 1998: 100). Sociality would seem to bear some validity in affirming the value drawn from playing football in these women's experiences. The strength of social ties formed in friendship groups organised around football, and activities of doing, generally laid the foundations for expressive and coherent identities perhaps not generally recognised, or perhaps legitimated in conventional discourse because they are women's networks. The veracity of these 'communities' centred on football, or female 'owned' communities, were quite lucid and tenacious in expression. In the following examples, to the extent that there are activities organised around post-match drinking, the success of the 'team' was strengthened by the camaraderie encouraged by social activity. Pat particularly refers to 'mates', transferring the activity of sociality and bonding back into a match environment, 'they're your mates and you're not going to let them down':

(It's quite a broad age range?) Yeah, very wide. From I would say from about 18 up to about 55 or 60 possibly . . . different people who you would [pause] I personally would never meet these people you know, it if weren't for football, so it's great really. And we all make time to go for a drink after football. So it's nice and you get to know people you know rather than just playing football with them. And I think in the pub last night, I think we probably had about 12 people in there, so you know, it's good. (Kat)

We've always had a drink after football together, and I think successful women's teams do need that camaraderie, that team building thing, I really do. I don't know about the really top teams, but I find if [pause], I've always found that if you don't have that camaraderie, you lose the fact that you do anything for somebody on a pitch if you see what I mean. They're your mates and you're not going to let them down, you're not going to let them be kicked up in the air and that sort of thing. I think that's really



important, I always have done. And yeah, I've got friends I played football with years and years ago, and I'd like to compare that to men's football 'cause I don't know if you know that's a similar thing. (Pat)

The directness of the friendships based on sociability and activities of 'doing' in these experiences are quite definitive, and to this extent conceptualising friendships as masculine or feminine does not sufficiently capture or account for the complex way in which social and friendships ties can be experienced. In this way, perhaps the main contribution that this paper makes is not only to the diversity of women's football *experiences*, but also a better understanding of 'friendships' *per se*. Consequently, the narrative of sociality in the context of women's football exposes the limitations of conceptualising friendships by means of conventional gender *types*. This facet of women's football is fundamental to understanding the strength of women's social ties forged and experienced in football, which can then lend some coherence to identifiable female networks and transitory spaces that show the value of female friendships formed through football.

## **Conclusion**

For the purposes of this paper, we have interrogated the ways in which women may prioritise couple and/or family relationships, and how this might undermine their ability to participate in leisure activities and associated friendship networks. Our focus has been specifically on the ways in which amateur female footballers negotiate the various roles and responsibilities in their lives within this context. The paper has also examined women's friendship within the specific context of football because it became apparent during the interview process that friendships based on sociability were integral to the connectedness of these social groups. There were emergent social ties based not on conventionally gendered roles defined by domesticity, or gendered discourse that sustains female friendships as principally intimate and emotional (Allan, 1989), but instead on collective interest focussed around playing sport. Our findings support Allan's (2008: 1) thesis that while there has been increasing diversity in the prioritization of different types of relationships, boundaries still exist between family and friendship ties, with friends regarded as the 'backdrop' (Cronin, 2015: 7) to heterosexual couple relationships. While friendship is given increasing cultural weight, the dyadic couple

remains the focus of most people's lives (Gabb *et al.*, 2013). Normative and institutional ideas continue to structure the parameters of family and friend relationships (Allan, 2008: 10). The privileging of family/couple relationships, which is supported legally and institutionally, signifies the differing status of these relationships. Individuals have the potential for increased flexibility, while still operating within structural constraints and this greater freedom applies to the ways in which they conduct their relationships.

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