

## **The Personal and the Political in Teaching, Research and Activism**

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In this essay, we consider the ways in which Sugden's outline of critical proactivism plays out within our specific areas of research, teaching and activism. In particular, we consider how our understanding of "critical, practical, [and] empirical engagement, rather than fixating upon abstract debate and unmovable theoretical principles" (Sugden, 2010, 267) allows us to refine and develop as scholars and practitioners. We use personal narratives to demonstrate the self-reflective nature of our long-term engagement with a critical reading of sport, social justice, and different forms of activism. When considered together, these separate stories offer some insight into the ways in which critical proactivism is embedded within our work at the University of Brighton and will hopefully offer readers practical illustrations of the implementation of such strategies.

### **Megan Chawansky:**

When I consider notions of critical proactivism or discussion of public intellectualism (especially in sport) I lament the lack of feminist voices or the acknowledgement that much feminist theory seeks to challenge the division of theory and practice and dismantles the public/private divide that seeks to privilege the notion of 'public' engagement over 'kitchen table' or perhaps nowadays, 'Facebook' activists (or, some might say, slacktivists). How can you be a *public* intellectual if—as a woman or girl—your access to public spaces is curtailed by customs or daily practicalities? How can you speak out publicly if doing so will potentially threaten your life or your family's livelihood? Too often, the realities of women's and girls' public and private lives are not integrated into discussions of ideas such as critical pro-activism, public intellectualism and who is deemed worthy of these designations. I am not considered a public intellectual according to some prevailing definitions (see Bairner 2009) and so until a gendered analysis of this phenomenon ensures, I continue to adhere to some of the guiding tenets of US feminist thinking. My/our personal stories are political, our bodies are battlegrounds and—to paraphrase feminist folk singer, Ani DiFranco—that every time I move, I make a woman's movement.

For instance, I recently traveled to Brazil for a workshop and delivered a brief public lecture on my work as it related to the workshop theme of 'sport and social transformation'. I presented a portion of my recent research with Dr. Payoshni Mitra which examines a girls' 'sport for empowerment' project in Delhi and the changes that occurred in the girls throughout the duration of their involvement. During the Q&A session, I had one question on my presentation, which as sometimes happens, did not deal directly with my findings. Once the lectures concluded and my co-panelists and I attempted to leave the stage, I noticed six students, mostly women, heading straight towards me. One asked me, 'Do you think there will be a job for me [as a woman] in sport?' 'Yes,' I said to her, and I gave her my email and told her to send me a message so we can keep in touch. Another told me that my presentation almost made her cry, and that it was difficult to be a woman

in sport in Brazil. Finally, one woman asked if I would take a photo with her. I obliged. 'Tag me, and find me on Facebook,' I told her. Later that night, I had a new friend request, and Payoshni and I had the first summary of our project in Brazilian Portuguese.

When I was young and beginning to show some aptitude for the sport of basketball, my father refused to put up a hoop in our driveway, despite having the resources and space to do so. I know now that his strategy was—in part—to get me to play basketball with the boys in my neighborhood. He believed that this would make me a better and tougher player in the end. I begrudgingly did so, frequently lamenting that the boys would not pass to me nor did they seem to recognize my abilities. In some ways, I cite my father's decision for setting me on my current career path and for igniting my passion for researching, teaching and promoting girls' and women's rights in and through sport and physical activity. I also learned how to navigate spaces which minimize my contributions. I am a sportswoman who speaks, writes, and asks questions about girls' and women's sport. Because my work invariably challenges the public discourse which suggests that women's and girls' sports are not important enough to fund, talk about, broadcast, promote or cover in sport pages, I am not afforded the choice of whether to be political, an activist or to engage in critical pro-activism. My personal is political.

### **Christopher R. Matthews:**

The reason I was drawn to a critical sociological interpretation of the world is that within the discipline there is a strong personal and political commitment to making the world a fairer and more equal space to live in. Indeed, this basic idea underpins my teaching and research at the University of Brighton. Simply put I believe the key element of an academic career is to use knowledge to make the world a better place. A lofty, perhaps utopian, goal, but one which I feel is necessary. And also a goal that resonates with, and can be supported by, critical proactivism.

As Bairner (2009) highlights, a university setting may no longer be the best place in which to attempt such an undertaking. The pressures, tensions and strains of 'the brave new world' of academia (Holmwood, 2015; Matthews, 2014) are hardly conducive to becoming a public intellectual. However, I believe there is still space within which one can carve out an interesting research agenda which engages with public issues in a politically powerful and importantly rigorous academic manner. Such an undertaking is outlined by Sugden (2006, 2010) in his discussion of the Football for Peace programme. It is with such programs in mind and with support from colleagues at the University of Brighton that I have recently embarked on a project with Dr Alex Channon at the University of Greenwich. We are using our work together exploring combat sports (Channon and Matthews, 2015a, 2015b) to develop an anti-violence campaign. The key aims here are to use sports that might simplistically be associated with violence to undermine, challenge and raise awareness of domestic abuse. We have recently been awarded our first funding for this project and expect to bring it together over the coming summer months. Built within this activism is a commitment to using social theory and empirical evidence to strengthen and refine the ways in which we deliver the campaign. As such, there is not only a clear

intertwining of our academic knowledge and research agendas but also our personal political commitments to trying to bring about, in some small way, a better world.

Furthermore, while I have spent some considerable time thinking through some of the more challenging theoretical debates that exist within my field of research (Matthews, 2014), and I continue to develop research papers which explore such themes, I have certainly felt a sense of frustration at the likelihood that my findings are written in an academic 'code' which is challenging for those without experience of such jargon to decipher. As such, I have found the practical engagement that is a hallmark of critical proactivism has breathed new life into what could easily become stale academic debates. I agree with Sugden (2010, 267) when he suggests of such 'left realism' that "for some radical thinkers and doers it can offer a way out of the inertia so often brought on by ideological reification". So while it is important for us to continue to wrestle with the potentially abstract aspects of academic theory, I would argue that pursuing an activist agenda can offer a fantastic opportunity to break through theoretical stalemates. And as McDonald (2002, 101) argues "a radical sociology of sport should be seeking to assist the reconfiguration of the culture of sport by intervening against dominant relations of power". It is not unreasonable to argue that within such a process we can find the conjunction of my idealistic motivations to make the world a better place and the potential to develop interesting and useful theoretical advancements. This I would argue is strength of a critical proactivist perspective and one which I hope to employ throughout my career.

### **Nigel Jarvis:**

Annually I am invited to teach a group of final year under-graduate physical education students about issues related to sexuality and sport because of my research expertise and lived experiences participating in both gay and mainstream sport settings. My doctoral thesis was about grassroot gay male athletes and how their participation may help challenge (or not) traditional notions of masculinity (Connell, 1990). I have continued to focus my research on masculinity, gender and sexuality issues as well as the growth of the global gay sport movement.

Sadly this invite appears to be one of the few sessions where they are exposed to this important topic. The lecture starts with the students traditionally being asked to mention the first things that come to their minds when they think about lesbians and gay men and sport. After some initial trepidation, students consistently comment gay men like individual or 'feminine' sports like swimming or dance, while they perceive a lot of lesbians take part in soccer, field hockey or rugby. Normally these stereotypes generate quite a bit of laughter in the room. Further, the class learn about the recent history of gay sport clubs and the Gay Games, and are shown images and videos of the opening ceremonies and athletes taking part in various sports. Surprisingly very few are even aware of the Games as a global phenomenon. My lecture then continues to focus on wider issues of homophobia, masculinity/femininity debates and the inclusive politics of gay sport clubs.

During the lecture, one female student stated recently "I don't understand the big deal. Everyone gets along and young people here don't care if you're gay or straight. I don't

understand why there is a need for gay sport clubs or the Gay Games...people should just openly play in a club or in the Olympics.” While this may indicate what McCormack (2012) considers as diminished cultural homophobia, the student demonstrates naiveté regarding the complex nature and politics surrounding sexuality and sport. She may not be considering her place of study being privileged. Her University and department, teaching physical education, which has a long history of feminism and being tolerant of sexualities, is located in the south of England, near a city (Brighton) known for being liberal and gay-friendly. Therefore her world view is biased, insulated perhaps by her environment (academia), and does not consider a perspective from more conservative parts of the country. This would include, for example, the debated challenges associated with being ‘out’ in rural areas or less developed nations (see Leedy and Connolly 2007; Weinke and Hill 2013). Additionally, she and her fellow colleagues had difficulty in identifying famous gay athletes, further showing considerable work remains to be done despite her comments that people should play openly, regardless of sexuality.

What I try to achieve in my teaching is to make all students aware of how LGBTQI sport spaces, such as the Gay Games, potentially represent a significant transgressive and alternative space in the world of sport. Since the outset of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s, organized sport has become an integral part of developing lesbian and gay communities. There is little doubt that the considerable growth of gay sporting cultures over the past few decades signifies steady progress for sexual minorities in the arena of physical activity. My recent research on the legacies of the 2014 Gay Games held in Cleveland/Akron demonstrates how they have symbolic significance for both the gay and wider community, and accelerated the process of more accepting societal attitudes towards LGBTQI people in the area. Further, the condition of LGBTQI athletes can offer important political insights into the contemporary and generally conservative, albeit evolving, world of sport.

I always end my lecture by saying why this is an important topic for physical education students. I tell them that it is because they can help shape the future. They will influence how gender, masculinity, femininity and sexuality issues are addressed in schools where they will become the educators, because young children learn sporting norms and values from adults. Nothing makes me more pleased when students thank me at the end of my lecture and state they learnt something new and made them ask questions.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, these three narratives show promise and potential for continued engagement with the notion of critical proactivism and related concepts. As staff within the University of Brighton, we are fortunate that our interested in blending research, teaching and activism is supported by our institution through initiatives as the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP), a nationally recognized scheme which encourages collaboration with local partners, and the Springboard fund, which support staff and students who wish to engage in the types of activities we have described. But it is also important to note that funding support is only one, albeit crucial, dimension in the continuation of such work. Indeed, we would argue that the driving force behind critical

proactivism is the critical proactivists. As such, we encourage our colleagues to bring their own academically informed personal political commitments to bear on the world of sport.

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