Examining the Workplace Experience of Sport Employees who are LGBT: A Social Categorization Perspective

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For many persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), sport can be an unsupportive and even hostile environment (Anderson, 2005, 2009; Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Griffin, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009, 2010). In this heterosexist atmosphere, individuals who are LGBT are perceived to violate sport’s traditional norms and ideals, and are subsequently relegated to an out-group or devalued status (see Goffman, 1963; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Due to their out-group status, sexual minorities tend to have a markedly different work experience than their heterosexual counterparts. These differences become apparent when individuals who are LGBT are negatively stereotyped, forced to conceal their sexual identity, denied leadership positions, socially excluded, provided with limited organizational support, and receive poor performance evaluations—experiences in-group members do not usually encounter (Anderson 2002, 2005; Cunningham et al., 2010; Griffin 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009, 2010). As a result of this differential treatment, sexual minorities are more likely to report lower levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career success when compared to heterosexual coworkers (Ragins, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

A review of the extant literature points to two trends: (a) a focus on coaches and players, and (b) an almost singular investigation of people’s LGBT identity to the exclusion of other identities. Both trends are noteworthy for several reasons. With respect to the first trend, understanding the experiences of coaches and players is certainly significant, but their roles require them to be in sport. This is not the case for professional staff members who are LGBT. Thus, the question arises as to why professional staff members who are LGBT choose to work in heteronormative and heterosexist sport environments. The type of work in which they engage in is transferable to other settings, such as marketing and promotions, academic services, business operations, or information and technology departments. Indeed, these employees could seek employment opportunities at one of the many companies that have implemented nondiscrimination policies for workers that are LGBT (over 85% of the Fortune 500; see King & Cortina, 2010), yet they elect to remain in the sports arena. This paradox has not been examined.

Second, researchers have by and large focused on people’s LGBT identities while not examining the role of other identities. This is an unfortunate omission because the saliency of and people’s commitment to a particular identity is likely to fluctuate depending on the particular context (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In one notable exception, Gough (2007) found that involvement in sport provides unique benefits that can act as a buffer against the negative outcomes associated with having a stigmatized social identity. In his qualitative analysis, Gough showed how sport offered gay male athletes a therapeutic place of refuge where they could escape the personal struggles they faced outside of the sport context. These men expressed how their athlete identity afforded them greater social acceptance, which enabled them to develop positive self-concepts. Given these findings, additional research focusing on professional staff members is warranted.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the unique work experiences of sport employees who are LGBT, and understand the reasons why these employees remain in heterosexist work environments. Toward this goal, I draw primarily from a social categorization perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Richer, & Wetherell, 1987), to understand the affective reactions, attitudes, and behaviors of these employees. The social categorization perspective has been used extensively by sport researchers to examine how sexual minorities (and other marginalized groups) negotiate their stigmatized social identity in a sport context (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2003, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). In the current qualitative analysis, I contribute a new perspective to the literature by investigating how other social identities—in addition to sexual orientation—influence the work experiences. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the theoretical framework and present specific research questions that guided the investigation.

I conducted interviews with nine athletic department employees who worked in a variety of departments. The participants were mostly female (55.6%), Caucasian (77.8%), and had earned an advanced degree (55.6%). They ranged in age from 25 to 43 years ($M = 32.33; SD = 6.06$), and had all worked in the athletic department for a significant amount of time ($M = 6.89; SD = 3.69$). The participants identified as lesbian ($N=4$), gay ($N=4$), or bisexual ($N=1$).
Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed continually during the entire research process. The first step of data analysis involved reading each interview several times in order to gain familiarity with the data. Next, in a process of open coding (Berg, 2001), I identified common patterns and categories by meticulously examining the data line by line. Each individual interview was first analyzed in this way, and then broader connections were made among all open coding categories—a process known as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Integrating the categories and experiences of all the participants allowed higher order themes to emerge.

Despite working in a heterosexist sport culture, most of the participants expressed high levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall life satisfaction. Though all the employees identified with their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, they did not perceive their sexual orientation to be a central feature in their work environment. Rather, through the data, it appeared that other social identities were more salient in their lives, and played a significant role in shaping their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Higher order themes that emerged from the data include: (a) personal and social identification, (b) motivation to work in sport, (c) coping strategies, and (d) social change. Implications of these findings and practical suggestions will be provided during the formal presentation.