"Out" Female Intercollegiate Athletes: Factors Leading to Athletes' Ability to be "Out" in Sport

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Sport has been identified as an incredibly strong institution that reinforces and perpetuates hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Connell, 1995). Sport, perhaps more than any other social institution, dictates the specific gender “appropriate” roles for males and females through gendered language, policies, and belief systems that are seen as “natural” and commonsensical (Messner, 2009). Further, sport exists as a heteronormative culture in which heterosexual assumptions about women serve to maintain the status quo and favored status of men (Kauer, 2009). This affects all women in sport as hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity require that all females adhere to heterosexual, hyper feminine “scripts” or face the negative consequences that occur when resisting the status quo (Griffin, 1998; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). While such cultures are pervasive and entrenched, researchers have suggested that one strong mechanism of social change occurs when lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (LBT) women in sport choose to let their sexual identities be known (Barber & Krane, 2005; Kauer, 2009). Thus, this research utilizes feminist standpoint theory to examine “out” non-heterosexual female athletes and the factors that influenced their decision and ability to reveal their sexual identities.

Feminist standpoint theorists assume that knowledge is socially positioned, thus, there are multiple “truths” that are a function of the varying sociopolitical situations confronting diverse social groups (Harding, 1991). Women are assumed to have a unique perspective based upon male hegemony exhibited in our society. Feminist standpoint theorists believe people in marginalized groups (e.g., females, sexual minorities) “develop both an understanding of how the world operates from the perspective of the oppressor group(s) as well as the realities faced as a member of an oppressed group” (Dewar, 1993, p. 219-220). By situating marginalized groups as central, their unique perspectives are uncovered and serve to chip away at the “taken for granted” notions espoused by the dominant groups. As Krane (1991, p. 403) noted, “If all women are considered other in sport, then lesbians [as well as bisexual and transgendered females] have an even greater propensity to be considered other”. Thus, LBT women are impacted by both sexism and heterosexism and, as a result, have perspectives that may be quite unique even when compared with those held by heterosexual women.

Heterosexism is defined as, “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, 1992, p. 89). Evidence suggests that heterosexism is inherent in many sport organizations (e.g., Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). Its consequences are numerous and well-documented. Non-heterosexual youth are two times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers (Russet & Joyner, 2001), LBT coaches and athletes are subject to stereotypes and discrimination (Barber & Krane, 1999; Krane, 1997; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), and heterosexist sport environments negatively impact team climate, individual focus, and coach credibility (Barber & Krane, 2005).

The negative consequences of heterosexism and homophobia in sport lead most LBT athletes and coaches to stay silent about their sexual identities (Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sykes, 1998). Nelson (1991) referred to it as “silence so loud it screams” while Barber & Krane termed it “the elephant in the locker room” and identified such silence as one of the biggest barriers to inducing change in sport settings. Sykes (1998) argued that the silence surrounding sexual orientation serves to perpetuate the status quo with as much force, or more, than heteronormative discourses. She argued the “. . . repetitive performances [of silence and image management], if unchallenged and uncomplicated as they frequently are, grant security and certainty to heterosexual story lines” (Sykes, 1998, p. 166). As such, Kauer (2009) and others argue that lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered women in sport can engage in social change merely by “coming out” and letting their sexual identity be known.

However, very little attention has been given to employees and athletes in intercollegiate athletics who do choose to reveal their sexual identities. To date, no research has been conducted on “out” LBT female intercollegiate athletes and the factors influencing their ability to reveal their sexual identities. Given the positive psychosocial outcomes of identity disclosure as well as the broader cultural implications of such counter-resistance, we hope to gain a better understanding of these factors through this research project.

To obtain our data, we have received permission to interview 10-15 “out” LBT intercollegiate athletes (or former intercollegiate athletes). Participants will be recruited via three methods, a modified snowball sampling method, an advertisement on an outreach and advocacy website for LGBT student athletes, and a flyer placed in the student athlete academic counseling
department at the researchers’ institution. To modify the snowball sampling method, the researchers will contact individuals they know who meet the selection criteria and ask if they would like to be involved in the study. They will then ask those participants to contact others who meet the selection criteria and provide them information about the study. A 21-item interview guide will direct the discussions. Questions are designed to elicit memories of the participants’ decisions to reveal their sexual identities, the factors contributing to those decisions, and the benefits or consequences of such revelations. The interviews will be audio-taped in order for them to be transcribed with absolute accuracy. Constant comparative analysis will be utilized to develop, organize, and refine the themes derived from the data. Trustworthiness and credibility of the data will be established through individual member checks, the maintenance of a reflective journal, and outside researcher review. Data collection will be completed by mid-December, 2010.

Results will be discussed relative to feminist standpoint theory to examine whether participants in our study provide unique insights into the process of identification disclosure within the masculine, heterosexist domain of sport. Results will also be examined in regard to current literature examining LGBT athletes’ experiences in sport in order to propose extensions to existing theory regarding the marginalization of LGBT athletes within intercollegiate athletics. Further, practical implications relative to individual, structural, and cultural mechanisms that empowered our participants to reveal their sexual identities will be forwarded. Suggestions for future research will also be discussed.