Attitudes toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Coaches

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While Americans’ attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals have improved over time (Herek, 2009), prejudice is still prevalent in sport. For instance, Krane and Barber (2005), in their qualitative analysis of lesbian college coaches, illustrated how the women in their study felt prejudice in the workplace, expressed a reluctance to disclose their sexual orientation to coworkers, and reported that their sexual orientation was “used” against them in the recruiting process. Gay male professionals working in sport (Cavalier, 2011) and lesbians (as well as women who are presumed to be lesbian) working in academia (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010) have reported similar experiences. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that current athletes (Anerson, 2002, Plummer, 2006), former athletes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, 2009), parents of athletes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), and people training to be in the sport and exercise arena (Gill et al., 2006) all express sexual prejudice.

Examination of this literature points to several trends. First, researchers have largely focused on people who express prejudice, an understandable emphasis given the prevalence of prejudice in sport. Missing from this analysis, however, is concurrent investigation of persons who support sexual minorities. Second, while there is considerable research focusing on the prevalence of prejudice and how this prejudice affects people’s attitudes and behaviors toward LGBT individuals, scholars have largely overlooked motivations for this prejudice; thus, antecedents of sexual prejudice are not well understood. The purpose of this study is to address these gaps in the literature.

Specifically, in focusing on people’s attitudes toward LGBT youth sport coaches, this research was guided by two research questions:

1. What are people’s attitudes toward allowing children to play on teams guided by LGBT coaches?
2. What factors inform people’s attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches?

To examine these research questions, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 adults living throughout a geographic region in the Southwest United States. The sample included 4 African American women, 2 Hispanic women, 5 White women, and 3 Hispanic men. The mean age was 46.57 years. The participants worked at three different universities and included 5 professors and 9 staff members. Participants responded to questions focusing on (a) their background information, (b) their attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches, and whether they would allow their child to participate on a team led by an LGBT coach, and (c) the reasons why they held the attitudes they did. The interviews, which lasted between 25-50 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following Glesne’s (2006) recommendations, I recorded my personal observations and perceptions in a reflexive journal, as doing so allows researchers to understand how their own attitudes and perceptions might influence the research process (see also Schwandt, 2007).

Following a constructivist paradigmatic approach (Ponterotto, 2005), I used an inductive data analytic process (see Schwandt, 2007). Specifically, after reading and re-reading the various sources of data, I broke the data down into 21 different codes, and then, through comparative analysis, aggregated these codes into 9 different themes. These themes addressed the two major research questions: attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches and sources of the attitudes. I also took additional steps to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, including the use of peer debriefers and providing member checks (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, in addition to the various data sources (interviews, reflexive journal), I also had multiple checks of the interpretations.

Results indicate that participants’ attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches were grouped into three themes: Indifference, Qualified Attitudes, and Support. People who voiced Indifference noted that they did not think about sexual minorities or LGBT issues. For instance, one person noted that sexual minorities and issues related to “gay rights are really not at the forefront of my mind.” Persons with Qualified Attitudes voiced indifference or support for sexual minorities, but added conditional statements. For instance, one woman noted, “my attitude is that people can live the way they want to as long as they don’t promote it.” Finally, others expressed unconditional Support for
sexual minority coaches (e.g., “I am perfectly comfortable with the idea of an LGB coaching”).

Turning to the next research question, I identified six themes shaping people’s attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches: Discrimination, Etiology and Background, Fear of LGBT Individuals, Normality of LGBT Status, Moral and Biblical Foundations, and Stereotypes. In the Discrimination theme, participants saw opposition to LGBT individuals as a form of discrimination, and they frequently likened the negative attitudes to other forms of prejudice. They used these parallels to discuss why they did not express sexual prejudice themselves. In Etiology and Background, participants pointed to the way they were raised as shaping their attitudes, whether they were positive or negative. This upbringing also influenced their ideas about whether sexual orientation had genetic or social learning foundations. Responses in the Fear of LGBT Individuals most frequently focused on LGBT coaches hurting children, and also included fear of the unknown. Comments in the Normality of LGBT Status reflected both positive and negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals. For some, homosexuality was seen as natural and sexual minorities viewed as “people just like the rest of us,” but for others, LGBT status “as something to be ashamed of or something that needs to be hidden.” Similarly, comments in the Moral and Biblical Foundations theme were both positive (e.g., “if you take the fundamental position that we were created as ‘very good,’ then it’s a lot harder to stigmatize subgroups as not ‘very good’”) and negative (e.g., “a lot of people will point to their religious beliefs as a reason for their prejudice”). Finally, comments in the Stereotypes theme focused on how prevailing ideas about who LGBT individuals influenced people’s attitudes toward them. Comments in this theme encompassed both prejudice founded in sexism (e.g., gay men take on feminine roles) and the stereotypes related to sexual minorities’ deviance.

The results have several implications. First, in relation to the first research question, the findings illustrate that while several people expressed outright support, others qualified their support with conditional comments. Thus, people’s attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches are complex and layered. This sentiment is further solidified when examining the second research questions, as several factors influence people’s attitudes toward LGBT youth coaches. Furthermore, selected antecedents that researchers have traditionally considered a source of prejudice (e.g., religious beliefs) also served as the basis for some participants’ positive attitudes. In short, this study demonstrates the complex nature of heterosexism and sexual prejudice in sport.