Negotiating the Triple Threat: The Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Women’s College Sports

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Though attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals are improving (Herek, 2009), sexual minorities still face considerable prejudice in sport—this is particularly the case for women in intercollegiate athletics. For instance, in 2007, media reports revealed that Pennsylvania State University coach, Rene Portland, had implemented a “no lesbians allowed” policy on her women's basketball team and openly discriminated against players she perceived to be lesbian (Newhall & Buzuvis, 2008). Unfortunately, players are not the only ones who experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation, as lesbian coaches readily encounter instances of sexual prejudice. In fact, in 2010, Belmont University soccer coach, Lisa Howe, was pressured to resign after she announced that her and her female partner were expecting a baby (Pearlman, 2010). That same year Kathryn Brenny, associate head women’s golf coach at the University of Minnesota, filed a lawsuit against the athletic department claiming she was not allowed to coach, travel with the team, or recruit after she revealed her sexual orientation (Gotlieb & Born, 2010). In addition to these recent events, sport management researchers have documented how sexual minorities are often harassed, denied leadership positions, stigmatized, and sometimes face physical abuse because of their sexual orientation (Krane, 1997; Griffin, 1998; Anderson, 2005). Consequently, persons who are LGBT are reluctant to reveal their sexual identity and feel compelled to adopt identity negotiation and impression management tactics in order to avoid prejudice and discrimination (Anderson, 2002; Krane & Barber, 2005).

Some sport scholars have examined the ways lesbians negotiate their marginalized identity in sport. Specifically, based on qualitative interviews with college coaches and professional athletes, Griffin (1992) developed a continuum of identity-management strategies used by her participants when deciding whether to disclose their sexual identity. In a similar investigation, Iannotta and Kane (2002) examined how intercollegiate college coaches dealt with heterosexist work environments. In their investigations, the authors introduce the concept of radical normalization, which describes how coaches consciously create a tolerant environment for their sexual identity through subtle behaviors (Iannotta & Kane, 2002). Finally, Krane and Barber (2005) observed how some lesbian coaches validate their sexual orientation identity by openly disclosing their sexual orientation; however, women rarely feel as though they can use this identity negotiation technique when working in Division I athletics.

A review of the aforementioned literature points to two trends. First, past research has failed to consider the influence of race. This is a regrettable omission, as the situation may be worse for lesbian women of color who work or participate in sport. These women not only face discrimination because of their sexual orientation, but also because of their race and gender—creating a “multiple jeopardy” effect (Collins, 2000; King, 1998). Second, researchers have not examined how identity negotiation tactics may change as an individual moves from a player to coach role. Given the added pressure and visibility of being a Division I coach, these women may view their sexual orientation identity differently in this context.

Thus, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, to explore how lesbian coaches of color negotiate their identities in the context of intercollegiate athletes. Second, to examine how negotiation techniques may change in different contexts. Toward this end, we drew primarily from the sexual prejudice literature (Herek, 2009) and intersectionality literature (Cole, 2009) to understand how multiple marginalized identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) may influence one’s work experiences. This study offers a new contribution to the literature, as it is the first to focus on lesbian coaches of color. Specifically, our goal is to shed light on the unique experiences of an often forgotten group of sport employees: the Black, female, lesbian.

Preliminary data have been collected from 15 participants (seven more interviews have been scheduled). All participants identified as lesbian and ranged in age from 25 to 51 years (M =31.81, SD = 6.36). Racially, the sample is reasonably diverse. Of the 15 participants, 8 identified as African American/Black, 5 identified as White, 1 identified...
as Asian American, and 1 identified as being of mixed ethnicity (i.e., Latina and African American). Participants have played, coached, and lived in the Northeast, Southeast, West Coast, and Midwest.

A phenomenological approach was administered in the data collection process (Creswell, 1998), which consisted of semi-structured interviews. Following methods proposed by Moustakas (1994), data was transcribed, clustered, condensed, and compiled into thematic groups using NVIVO 8 (Lee & Koro-Ljungberg, 2007; Walker & Bopp, 2011). Analysis of the data reveals four higher order themes: (a) feelings of marginalization, (b) lack of inclusive polices and language in intercollegiate athletics, (c) lack of visibly open lesbians, and (d) a Triple Threat Phenomenon. The intersectionality of identities were heavily influenced by policy, how long participants have been “out”, and if they chose to stay in college sports. Those individuals who have been out the longest, and were no longer working in college sports felt the most comfortable expressing their sexual orientation in the workplace. Also, participants claimed if the language used in college sport was more inclusive (i.e., using the terms partner or significant other as oppose to spouse, husband, or wife) they would feel more comfortable in college sports and perhaps be more satisfied, happy, and have less intentions to leave college sports. African American (i.e., Black) women felt they had a more difficult time working in college sports because as one participant stated, “we have it worse because not only are there very little black women in sports, but Black lesbian women who identify as such are non-existent”. Other Black women said, “it’s sometimes hard to distinguish if we are being treated unfairly because we are Black or because we are lesbian, but then a closeted lesbian or a White or Black straight coach comes along and beats you out of a coaching job and you realize its because you are a black lesbian”.

Although these results are preliminary, they still provide practical implications and theoretical contributions. This research expands the theoretical knowledge of intersectionality and identity negotiation, while providing mangers with first-hand feedback on current policy and norms that may increase turnover intentions and decrease satisfaction. The final presentation will include finalized results, with conclusive analytical themes, implications, limitations, and suggestions for how future research may build on this study.