

**Free to be Me: The Influence of Psychological Safety on Athletes' Personal Sexual Orientation Identity**

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**Diversity**

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(including questions)**

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**(Room 412)**

Sexual prejudice and heterosexism are prevalent in many areas of sport (see Griffin, 1998, 2012), and this is particularly the case for women. In many cases, lesbians and women presumed to be lesbian have negative work experiences and face various forms of discrimination from their supervisors and coworkers (Gill et al., 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). As a result, many lesbian coaches, administrators, and athletes are reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation to others. For instance, one coach in Krane and Barber's (2005) study indicated: "It's a really strange issue within coaching...There are so many lesbians in coaching, and yet it's not somewhere that people can be comfortable with that being openly known about them" (p. 71). The same dynamics are present among lesbian and bisexual female athletes, as many report not disclosing their sexual orientation to others or facing negative consequences if they did (Gough, 2007; Krane, 1997; Melton & Cunningham, 2012).

This research points to the importance of one's personal sexual orientation identity and the freedom to express it. As Brewer (1991) notes, one's personal identity signifies "the individuated self—those characteristics that differentiate one individual from others in a social context" (p. 476). It represents the part of the self that is perceived as a key part of one's self-image or who that person is. As might be expected, feeling compelled to hide an important part of one's self, such as personal sexual orientation identity, can have negative consequences. For instance, self-verification theory suggests people have a desire to express their identity and have others recognize and value it within a given social context (Swann et al., 2004). When this does not occur, people will likely psychologically withdraw and experience stress (see Pinel & Swann, 2000). In a similar vein, related research shows that sexual minorities who do not disclose their sexual orientation to others experience self-stigma (Herek et al., 2009) and negative psychological consequences at work (Ragins et al., 2007).

While the extant research suggests that lesbian and bisexual athletes might feel compelled to hide or minimize the importance of their personal sexual orientation identity, this might not be the case in all situations. Instead, a psychologically safe team climate is likely to influence this pattern. As Edmondson (1999) describes, psychological safety in teams and groups refers to the degree to which group members feel (a) they can take risks, (b) others value their ideas and perspectives, and (c) other group members are respectful and supportive of their efforts. Thus, when people sense psychological safety within a team environment, they might be more likely to openly express themselves and the identities important to them. Indeed, others have recognized the importance of inclusive, safe environments within the context of diversity (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999) and sexual orientation diversity in particular (Cunningham & Melton, 2011).

Based on this review, we hypothesized that perceptions of psychological safety would moderate the relationship between sexual orientation and expression of one's personal sexual orientation identity, such that lesbian and bisexual women would have a stronger personal sexual orientation identity when perceiving psychological safety than when they did not. On the other hand, as heterosexual women might take their sexual orientation identity for granted, psychological safety is unlikely to influence the manifestation of this construct.

To examine this hypothesis, we gathered data via an online questionnaire from 229 NCAA Division I women's basketball players. The sample was almost evenly split between White (54.1%) and racial minority players (43.7%). We measured sexual orientation using Herek's scale from 1 (completely homosexual) to 5 (completely heterosexual) and then categorized responses into lesbian or bisexual (1-3) or heterosexual (4-5). We measured psychological safety using Edmondson's scale (7 items;  $\alpha = .74$ ) and personal sexual orientation identity using an adapted version of Cunningham et al.'s scale (3 items;  $\alpha = .76$ ). We also included control variables, including age, race, and team identification (Cunningham et al., 2008; 3 items;  $\alpha = .78$ ).

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We tested the hypothesis through moderated regression analysis, following Cohen et al.'s (2003) guidelines. The control variables accounted for 8% of the variance ( $p < .01$ ). The first order effects accounted for an additional 2% of the variance ( $p = .52$ ). Finally, the sexual orientation-by-personal sexual orientation diversity interaction term was significant, accounting for an additional 4% unique variance ( $p < .01$ ). To understanding the nature of the interaction, we computed a simple slope analysis, again following Cohen et al.'s (2003) recommendations. Results indicate that lesbian and bisexual women's personal sexual orientation identity significantly increased when they perceived psychological safety on the team ( $B = .93, p < .01$ ), but psychological safety did not influence heterosexual women's identity ( $B = -.32, p = .43$ ). Thus, the study hypothesis was supported.

Consistent with theoretical models related to diversity (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999), and sexual orientation diversity in particular (Cunningham & Melton, 2011), results of this research demonstrate the importance of inclusive, safe climates for people who might differ from the typical majority. When lesbian and bisexual female athletes believed their team was characterized by psychological safety, they were more likely to have a strong personal sexual orientation identity. Being able to express one's personal identity (or identities) is important considering the psychological and physical costs associated with not being able to do so (Ragins et al., 2007; Swann et al., 2004). Thus, sport managers and coaches are encouraged to create psychologically safe environments as a way of ensuring a diverse and inclusive space for sexual minorities.