Identity Expression, Social Bonding, and Centrality as Motivations for Participation in LGBT-focused Community Sport

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BACKGROUND: Identity formation and expression help people understand their roles in the world and provide a framework for social interaction (Stryker & Burke, 2000). A key function of identity formation is to help us fulfill social and psychological needs (e.g., belongingness, competence, autonomy; Deci & Ryan, 2003). For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults (LGBT), homophobic stigmatization interferes with positive identity formation and fulfillment of those needs by creating a sense of alienation, internalized homophobia, and poor self-concept known as minority stress (Meyer, 2003). However, belongingness and support from others who share a stigmatized identity helps to counteract the minority stress process (Frable et al., 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Community-level sport provides not only recreational and competitive sport opportunities for youth and adults, but also provides an opportunity for participants and volunteers to accrue social capital benefits such as friendship, support, and trust (Misener & Doherty, 2012). Research on LGBT issues in sport continues to reveal devaluation of LGBT identities (e.g., Griffin, 2012; Melton & Cunningham, 2012). However, the benefits of sport participation (e.g., social support, positive self-concept) evident in the broader community sport literature can also be realized through a community sport model specific to the LGBT community where sport is organized by and for LGBT individuals (Jones & McCarthy, 2010). Thus, participation in LGBT-focused sport groups provides a promising context for leisure involvement that may help to restore and enhance identity formation and expression.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the current study is to examine identity expression through LGBT-focused sport participation and its motivating role in diverse sport-related behaviours (e.g., degree of participation in team practices, social outings, and volunteering). We also examine the mediating roles of attraction to the sport group, centrality of the sport group in participants’ lives, and social bonding among adult LGBT sport group participants to better understand how identity expression is linked to participation behaviours in this potentially supportive context. The study is shaped by a leisure involvement model (Jun et al., 2012; Kyle et al., 2007) grounded in ego involvement theory and social judgment theory (e.g., Sherif et al., 1973). As used in the present study, this model encompasses: (1) a consideration of the role of sport in identity expression and the motivation to meet identity expression needs by participation in the sport group, and (2) the specification of various psychological factors (e.g., attraction to the sport group, centrality of the sport group in one’s life, and social bonding) that may mediate the association between identity expression and degree of participation. Sport psychologists have advanced our understanding of ego involvement and identity expression in a competitive sport context (e.g., Chi & Duda, 1995; Duda 1988, 2007), however, these concepts have received less attention in sport contexts that are primarily recreational (i.e., non-competitive), despite the mass participation opportunities available at this level (e.g., Havitz & Dimanche, 1999; Havitz & Howard, 1995).

SAMPLE: Study participants were recruited from LGBT-focused sport groups in a large Canadian city and were then sent individualized online links to a web-based survey that assessed their degree of involvement in the groups, affiliation with the groups, availability of support, wellbeing, and management of LGBT identity in everyday life. Among the 320 participants, the average age was 37 (SD = 9.91; min = 20, max = 68). Approximately 60% of the participants were male, 37% were female, 0.6% were transgender, and 1.6% gave diverse responses (e.g., genderqueer, not defined). Regardless of gender, 67% were gay, 27% were lesbian, 2% were bisexual, 2% were heterosexual, and the remainder were unlabeled or not defined. Participants took part in a variety of individual and team sports.

ANALYSES: Identity expression through sport was measured with the mean of three items from the identity expression subscale drawn from a larger leisure involvement measure (e.g., “Participating in this sport group says a lot about who I am”) (Kyle et al., 2007). Behavioural participation outcomes were measured in terms of attending...
practice sessions, attending social outings, and participating in club volunteer work. Finally, mediating variables were assessed with attraction (e.g., “Participating in this sport group is one of the most enjoyable things I do”), centrality (e.g., “I find a lot of my life is organized around participating in this sport group”), and social bonding (e.g., “Most of my friends are in some way connected with this sport group”) scales (Kyle et al., 2007). Linear regression and the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011) were used to test main effects and indirect effects through the multiple mediators.

RESULTS: The results indicated that identity expression was linked to higher levels of participation. Specifically, higher levels of identity expression were linked to more frequent practice attendance (B = .47, SE = .14, p < .001) and this association was mediated by centrality (effect = .25, SE = .10, p < .01). Also, higher levels of identity expression were associated with greater attendance at LGBT sport social outings (B = .35, SE = .14, p < .05) and this was mediated by social bonding (effect = .16, SE = .07, p < .05). Finally, identity expression was not significantly associated with participating in club volunteer work, however, higher levels of centrality were significantly associated with more volunteering (B = .59, SE = .19, p < .01).

DISCUSSION: The results suggest that identity expression motivates greater participation, in particular attending practices and social outings. In other words, the more that someone feels that the sport group is part of who they are, the more likely they are to engage in behaviours consistent with that identity (i.e., taking part in activities on and off the ‘field’). Interestingly, attraction (e.g., enjoyment of the activity) which is often a dominant motivating characteristic (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997) never mediated these associations, but centrality and social bonding did. This suggests that identity expression through LGBT-focused sport participation is more closely focused on social ties (e.g., bonding) and investment in the sport group (centrality) than enjoyment alone. These findings are consistent with research that shows the importance of support from others who share a similar identity for those who may be coping with stigmatization (Frable et al., 1998) and potential mechanism and motivation that enhances participation in an identity supportive context.

CONCLUSION: This study broadens research on LGBT issues in sport by considering community sport -- a different context from intercollegiate or professional sport which has been the focus of much of the sport research to date (Griffin, 2012). Our findings suggest identity expression motivates participation in LGBT-focused sport and this association is explained by social bonding and centrality of the LGBT sport identity in participants’ lives, thus supporting participation in a context that helps counteract minority stress (Meyer, 2003).