All Families Can Play: Building Inclusive Experiences for LGBTQ Parents and Their Children in Youth Sport

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The increase in youth sport participation in North America since the 1950s has occurred primarily in adult-organized and agency-sponsored programs such as little league baseball, minor soccer, and particularly in Canada the development of minor hockey programs (Coakley, 2006; Donnelly, 1997). Research has examined how young people are socialized into sport participation, the outcomes or benefits that parents hope their children will receive, and the relationship between parental support (emotional, physical, financial) and children’s continued involvement (e.g. Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003; Green & Chalip, 1997; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Shakib & Dunbar, 2004; Wuerth, Lee, & Alferman, 2004).

Within the delivery of community youth sport programs, the contributions of parent volunteers are particularly noteworthy and instrumental (Cuskelly, 2005; Nichols, 2005). Youth sport volunteers are more likely to become involved because their children participate in the community sport league (Doherty, 2006). Volunteers are the ‘life-blood’ in community-based sport organizations and fulfill many different positions and responsibilities including coaches, referees, umpires, judges, trainers, and other roles that assume off-field positions such as commissioners, board members, treasurers and secretaries (Cuskelly, 2004; De Knop, Martelaer, Van Heddegem & Wylleman, 1999; Kim, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010).

Key qualitative studies have pointed to volunteers’ social identities and how it may shape the volunteer experience; for example, gendered dimensions of volunteerism within the youth sport organization (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003; Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009; Thompson, 1999; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). Although there is limited research on LGBTQ social identities, family structures and community-based youth sport participation, we can garner a sense of the potential significance of diverse insights. For example, organized sport has a long history of preserving the gender order through a culture of homophobia that limits diverse sexual identities from fully participating in sport (Davison & Frank, 2007). In turn, a gap remains in the literature examining how parents who identify as LGBTQ (re)negotiate the sport domain to support their children’s involvement in a culture that may not have been inclusive in their own childhood.

Previous research indicates that parents who identify as LGBTQ fear that their children may experience discrimination and harassment due to the parents’ sexual identity (Luzia, 2010), and indeed, research within the school-system tells us that this becomes a reality for some children (Pennington & Knight, 2011). As Gerouki (2010) points out, non-conforming behaviors are stigmatized, regardless of whether the behaviors are by the children or their parents. Moreover, often teachers do not challenge the stigmatization of such behaviors unless they are deemed to be a ‘dangerous’ situation, in which cases the teachers tend to handle the issue secretively (Gerouki, 2010).

Within the school system, researchers have argued that there is a need for secondary schools to be more proactive in their involvement when dealing with homophobia – rather than acting reactively and intervening only when a problem has already been identified (Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004). This is particularly evident when beliefs about sexuality collide with professional and personal commitments to equity and human rights (Goldstein et. al., 2007). In turn, what do policies and procedures to address homophobic bullying look like in the organized sporting culture? What mechanisms are in place to help administrators and coaches proactively identify and support the young athletes and their families within the community-based setting?

Purpose & Research Aims

This project seeks to understand the complexities of diverse family structures within organized youth sport organizations, notably families of LGBTQ parents. This research will examine how parents who identify as LGBTQ
navigate community-based youth sport organizations to support their children’s involvement. Specifically, we aim to understand:

(a) what are the lived-experiences of LGBTQ-identified parents with respect to inclusivity in the youth sport culture (e.g. volunteer roles, relations with other parents and children);

(b) what initiatives, programs and/or adaptations organized youth sport service providers should consider to help meet the needs of diverse family structures.

Theoretical Framework/ Method

For this study, general concepts of feminism provided the guiding framework. Feminism seeks to challenge social conditions of oppression that stem from patriarchy that marginalize people (Parry & Johnson, 2015). Similar to many North American feminist scholars, we used a critical social constructivist lens (Henderson & Shaw, 2006) that believes that human activity is constructed through dialogue, discourse, and social practices (Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson, Bialeschki, 2013). A feminist constructivist lens interrogates how dominant “discourses or ideologies, such as those associated with femininity, ‘the family’ or sexuality, are socially constructed and reproduced” (Freysinger et. al., 2013, p. 73). Central to this perspective is the idea that social action and social justice “relates to ways in which embedded discriminatory and disempowering beliefs and actions can be challenged at the individual or group level” (p. 73)

With the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on the subjective experiences of the participants, an inductive qualitative approach was used. Further, with what is considered hard-to-reach marginalized populations, qualitative methodological innovations like social media are gaining popularity (Baker, 2013; Lunnay et al. 2015), and were the primary source of data for this paper. Data collection is currently under way through the use of a social network platform (e.g. Twitter) directed at parents who identify as LGBTQ. A trained community facilitator is moderating weekly on-line discussions whereby questions are posed at the start of the chat – prompting interactive discussion with those following the chat. Participants are also able to contribute to the chats throughout the week (albeit, not in a moderated format). The data is aggregated for analysis at the end of each week.

As outlined by Charmaz (2006), the strategies of memoing, coding, and comparative method will provide the guiding principles for analysis. Each researcher will develop a general sense of the information and engaged in preliminary analysis of the data through initial, line-by-line coding. Reflective notes will be made on each moderated session to develop an overall meaning as well as begin the early states of the coding process. The research team will then met to discuss the initial analysis and combine their insights. Effort will be made to identify salient themes shared among the research team as initial codes will be accepted, altered, or eliminated to determine key themes. In turn, these key themes will guide the researchers as they engage in focused coding procedures. The final phase will involve what Charmaz describes as theoretical coding whereby the focus of analysis is to reach larger theoretical representations of the data.

Implications/ Conclusion

The findings are expected to uncover the lived-experiences of LGBTQ-identified parents with respect to inclusivity in the youth sport culture (e.g., volunteer roles, relations with other parents and children). Moreover, it will uncover what stigmatization might the children experience within the community sport context and how could youth sport organizations make it a more inclusive environment that is void of censor and judgment. The potential outcome of this initiative is that it will create opportunities that enhance the lives of families of LGBTQ parents. The findings will provide cultural competence (Johnson & Waldron, 2011) for youth sport organizations and educators to reduce stigmas, oppression, and heterosexism for parents who identify as LGBTQ and their children.