The Risk of Expressing Your Authentic Self in Sport: The Impact of Identity Covering on Hiring Decisions

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Over the past decade, support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) equality has increased considerably. In the United States, for example, the federal government has enacted the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act and the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which made marriage equality legal in all states. Progress is not limited to the United States, as several European countries have legalized same-sex marriage in recent years as well (e.g., Germany, France, Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland). National opinion polls also show signs of greater acceptance. According to Pew Research Center (2017), 62% of Americans support same-sex marriage while 32% oppose it, and survey results in Australia indicate similar levels of support among citizens who recently cast votes in the national postal survey for marriage equality (Murphy, 2017).

Signs of shifting societal attitudes toward LGBT inclusion and equality are also apparent in the sport industry. Several athletes, teams and leagues have partnered with nonprofit organizations such as the You Can Play Project and Athlete Ally to demonstrate their commitment to creating safe and accepting sports spaces for all people—regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Griffin, 2012; Hudson, 2015). In addition, an increasing number of LGBT athletes, coaches, and sport employees have publically disclosed their sexual orientation. For instance, in a 2014 interview with Outsports, Drew Martin, an Associate Athletic Director for Marketing at Texas Christian University, described how when he applied for the position he disclosed his sexual orientation and the athletic department completely embraced him and his then-fiancé (Zeigler, 2014). While these trends are encouraging, reports of sexual minorities facing prejudice and discrimination continue. For example, a year later Outsports published in-depth interviews with five (closeted) gay male collegiate basketball coaches who described their fear of being open about their sexuality due to the homophobic and heterosexist culture of men’s basketball (Zeigler, 2015). These examples demonstrate that the experiences of LGBT sport employees can vary widely and may be related to the type of position they hold. Therefore, it would be valuable to understand whether or not these differing experiences are indicative of a stigma that varies based on one’s particular role, and if such stigma influence other elements of the LGBT employment experience in sport, such as the hiring process.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore these issues in greater depth by considering how sexual prejudice and identity covering techniques may influence how gay men are perceived during the hiring process.

We will draw from sexual stigma and prejudice theory (Herek, 2007, 2009) and the covering literature (Yoshino & Smith, 2013) to investigate potential bias in hiring preferences for gay men in sport. Sexual stigma is defined as “the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any nonheterosexual behavior, identity, relationship or community” (Herek, 2007, p. 2). Sexual stigma manifests at the individual level in the form of sexual prejudice. Research suggests enactments of sexual prejudice are more prevalent in hyper-masculine sports such as football or basketball (Hudson, 2015). And, though overt forms of sexual prejudice are declining, recent studies suggest implicit bias still can negatively impact the experiences and opportunities for LGBT coaches and administrators (Cunningham & Melton, 2015; Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010). As such, we expect gay males applying for a basketball coaching position will receive poorer hiring recommendations than gay males applying for a sport marketing position (H1).

Given the sexual prejudice gay men encounter in the sport setting, many engage in identity management techniques to avoid discrimination (Melton & Cunningham, 2014). Yoshino and Smith (2013) describe these identity management techniques as covering, which describes when individuals downplay their stigmatized identity in the workplace. There are four types of covering: appearance-based, affiliation-based, advocacy-based and association-
based. Marginalized individuals may cover along one dimension or multiple dimensions, and how and when covering is deployed may vary by situation. Based on past research that shows LGBT sport employees use covering techniques to gain acceptance in the workplace (Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Walker & Melton, 2015), we anticipate gay males who cover (or downplay) parts of their sexual orientation during the interview process will be rated more positively than those who do not cover parts of their identity (H2).

Using MTurk, we will survey approximately 300 participants who have held a supervisor role. We will conduct a 2 (job type position: coaching, marketing) x 2 (degree of covering: minimal, high) experiment in the study. Participants will be randomly assigned to review one of four application packets, which vary based on type of position (college basketball coach or sport marketing associate) and degree of covering. To manipulate the job type, participants will read the online job posting describing the position and required qualifications. The participants will also review the applicant’s resume and listen to a short interview the applicant completed with a human resources director. To manipulate the level of covering, the applicant will talk about his husband and plans to support LGBT inclusion efforts after being hired (in the minimal degree of covering condition). In the high covering condition, the applicant will only disclose his sexual orientation. Once participants review the application materials, they will respond to items that assess demographic variables and provide a hiring recommendation. We will perform ANCOVA to test the hypotheses. The rater’s gender and race will serve as control variables, the job type and degree of covering will be the independent variables, and the hiring recommendation (adapted from Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) is the dependent variable.

From a theoretical perspective, this study addresses multiple gaps in the literature on diversity and inclusion in sport. First, there are relatively few empirical papers which use gay male sport employees as their target population, as it is more common to study gay male athletes (for similar arguments see Cavalier, 2011) or to study lesbians, which creates challenges due to the fact that lesbians and gay males in sport can experience sexual prejudice and have sexual prejudice manifested against them in different ways (Griffin & Taylor, 2012). Second, while the work experiences of sexual minorities in sport have been studied extensively, less is known about the hiring process of these individuals. From a practical standpoint, this research can serve to educate practitioners about the importance of being aware of how stigma and prejudice may impact hiring decisions when dealing with sexual minorities. This awareness can help organizations improve their sexual orientation diversity by ensuring that the hiring process is as objective as possible and that sexual minorities have a fair chance at obtaining employment with a sport organization.