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Out of the Closet and into Sport: An Analysis of Openly Lesbian Athletes

by

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ABSTRACT. Coming out refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals disclosure of their sexual orientation. Coming out literature has often focused on the implications of coming out to family. Although there has been some research conducted on being out in sport, much of the research conducted on LGBT athletes has either been conducted before the twenty-first century or has been conducted solely on gay men. As a result, very little is known about the coming out experiences of lesbian athletes today. Since sport is rooted in masculine ideals and heterosexuality, it would be likely that lesbian athletes face rejection from their teammates. However, the recent cultural shift that views LGBT individuals more positively, would posit that lesbian athletes have a much easier time coming out today than they did decades ago. To examine the coming out experiences of lesbian athletes, this paper uses a discourse analysis to study eleven online interviews of lesbian athletes. Interviews were coded by hand and common themes emerged across these women's accounts. Key themes found were, (1) fear of being rejected by teammates; (2) lesbian appearance; (3) feelings of self-doubt and loneliness; (4) coming out to the team was hard, but rewarding; and (5) sport as a platform for LGBT rights. Discussion centers on the change in perception towards lesbian athletes as well the challenges these women still face.

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, LGBT, athletes, coming out, feminism, culture, homophobia, discourse analysis, qualitative, interviews, outsports.com

Introduction

Coming out refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals disclosure of their sexual orientation. Coming out literature has focused on coming out to family (Carrion & Lock 1997, Cox et al., 2011; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2001) and the implications of being out in one's work environment (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Schneider, 1987; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). While there has been some research conducted on coming out in the sport realm (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016; Griffin, 1992), this literature often excludes the experiences of lesbian athletes. Much of the research conducted on LGBT athletes has either been conducted before the twenty-first century (Lenskyj, 1990; Louganis & Marcus, 1995) or has been conducted solely on gay men (Anderson, 2002; Gough, 2007).

This paper highlights the social environment and experiences that lesbian athlete's deal with and how their environment and experiences may differ from their heterosexual counterparts. Although there has been a change for the better through a decrease in homophobia in recent years, this does not mean that lesbian athletes participate in their sport without difficulties (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013). Homophobia has not decreased evenly across geographical sporting spaces and is very much an uneven social process (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). Lesbian athletes still experience inequality when it comes to equal opportunity and acceptance in sport (Griffin, 1992). Nevertheless, with these large changes in social perception towards LGBT individuals, it is likely that the coming out process has become easier in recent years.

The main research question of this paper is, do lesbian athletes coming out experiences today reflect the positive change in social perception of LGBT populations or do they still reflect themes of social inequality that were extremely prevalent before the twenty-first century? A discourse analysis of eleven previously conducted interviews with female lesbian and gay athletes from outsports.com was conducted to explore this question. These web interviews consist of detailed accounts of coming out experiences of female lesbian and gay athletes. These accounts were analyzed in order to determine if similar challenges, experiences and themes emerged within several accounts. I will begin by discussing the epistemological framework that helps guide this research project, which is an integration of feminist and lesbian standpoint, feminist cultural studies and queer theory. Then an overview of what is currently known about the coming out process in sport. Followed by a review of literature that highlights conventional views of femininity in sport and how lesbian women often do not fit the mould. Then, an analysis and discussion of the findings will be conducted in order to establish whether lesbian athletes today are received better than in previous years, as well as examine the benefits and consequences to coming out in the sport world for lesbian athletes.

Literature Review

Coming out

Coming out can be a difficult process, and LGBT youth are more susceptible to many mental health issues such as anxiety, mood disorders (Bostwick et al., 2010), depression (Adelson Stroeh, & Warren, 2016), hopelessness, and suicidality (Safren & Meinberg, 1999). As well as more likely to suffer from family rejection (Fuller, 2017; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2010), substance abuse (Aromin, 2016) and poor academic performance (Kosciw &

Palmer, 2013). As discussed above, some individuals chose not to come out because they had not yet fully come to terms with their own sexuality. A division has been made in the literature between coming out to oneself and coming out to others (Green & Herek, 1994). Even though the two are interconnected, coming out to oneself is illustrated as a personal struggle to come to terms with feeling different and dealing with the self-devaluation process of homosexuality that is often times internalized (Gough, 2007). For that reason, it is not surprising that those who are unable to fully accept their sexuality were also unable to come out to others.

Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that all gay individuals struggle to come out. Even so, if individuals do struggle to come to terms with their sexuality it does not mean that they will have a negative coming out experience. It is imperative to find out why lesbian athletes chose to stay closeted, as well as discover why some athletes chose to come out.

One way to measure homophobia and homophobia in sport is to determine how many athletes chose to stay closeted and how many feel comfortable coming out to their team members, coaches and officials. Although there is very little research conducted in this area, an international report examined the percentage of lesbian, gay and bisexual individual who were out to their team or some of their team. This report found that the majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals chose not to disclose their sexual orientation to their sport team and that only 26% of lesbian athletes under the age of 22 were out to everyone on their team (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). Although this number is low, the study demonstrates that this number is a significant increase in comparison to older participants. For instance, only 14% of lesbian athletes who were over the age of 22 said they were out to everyone when they played sports during their youth (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). Unfortunately, the study found that in primarily English speaking countries, Canada was one of the top countries where lesbian athletes chose to

stay closeted, finding that 89% of lesbian athletes under the age of 22 were in the closet from at least some of their teammates (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). When asked, athletes chose to stay closeted because they were worried they would be bullied (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003), they were worried they would not be accepted by their team (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Hekma, 1998) and they feared they would be discriminated against (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Halbert, 1997; Krane, 1997).

Homophobia in Sport and the Lesbian Stereotype

Sport and physical activity have constantly been male dominated fields in North American culture. Even with the progress made in recent years, women's sport and athletics continues to be trivialized in comparison to men's sport (Griffin, 1994; Ponterotto, 2014). Sport is an important way in which boys learn to separate themselves from girls by disassociating themselves from feminine qualities, while simultaneously associating themselves with traditional masculine qualities, such as strength, power, competitiveness and toughness (Griffin, 1994). Therefore, it is unsurprising, that many people see male athletics as the definition of the traditional masculine image. Often heterosexuality is an assumed aspect of this image, making a masculine gay athlete a contradiction to the stereotypical feminine gay man. This contradiction has caused sport to be a very homophobic realm among male athletics (Pronger, 1990).

Considering the function athletics serve for men, gender norms can be challenged by women in athletics. If women and gay men can be athletes with similar skill, intensity and power as heterosexual men, then these traditional gender norms and ideas of femininity and masculinity may be called into question. This means that in order for men to ensure the status of sport and athletics be conserved for men alone, women's participation in sport and physical activity must not be encouraged, and when they do participate, these woman will be marginalized. The most

common way in which women have been discouraged from athletics has been to call into question their femininity. The way this has often been done is by giving these female athletes the label of “lesbian”. This not only discourages woman from participating in sport and physical activity, but through further stigmatization, lesbian athletes may choose to stay closeted.

Unfortunately, research on gay athletes is small and even smaller for lesbian athletes, but is beginning to grow. Much of the research on female athletes, without reference to their sexual orientation, focuses on how these female athletes react to homonegativism in sport and the “lesbian” label (Blinde & Taub, 1992). Consequently, very little is known about the lesbian experience in sport and even less is known about how coming out in one’s sport realm affects the individual. Even more, much of the research conducted on lesbian athletes before the twenty-first century is less applicable today due to a significant decrease in homophobia in North America. Nonetheless, previous findings and assumptions of past research helps to demonstrate the social climate and experiences likely faced by lesbian athletes several decades ago.

Several themes emerged in previous research on lesbians in sport. These themes are: (1) sport encourages compulsory heterosexuality (Lenskyj, 1990), (2) sport is patriarchal (Griffin, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990; Messner, 1994) and (3) negative views of lesbians are maintained in sport (Blinde & Taub, 1992, Griffin, 1994). As for the second point, Messner (1994) discusses that sport is a controlled structure in which women are underrepresented, as well as misrepresented as sex objects. The third point is emphasized by Blinde and Taub (1992), who discuss how negative societal stereotypes of lesbian athletes are often internalized by these athletes which helps to further perpetuate negative views of lesbian athletes. These three themes together created a hostile environment for lesbian women in sport. Although these conditions were seldom

examined in the twentieth century, this hostile and discriminatory environment is demonstrated in the lives of openly lesbian athletes in the 1980's.

Before the turn of the century there was a significant amount of resistance towards lesbians in sport. In the early 1980's Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King, two of the biggest female tennis celebrities, came out. Billie Jean King did not come out by choice, rather an ex female partner outed her. The reception they received was of hostility, hatred and a loss in earnings (Hargreaves, 2000). Both King and Navratilova lost all their endorsements and sponsorships after coming out (Hargreaves, 1994). The extreme homophobic and homonegative culture at the time of their coming outs caused sponsors to not want to be associated with athletes who challenged heterosexual views (Griffin, 1992, 2012; Rich, 1980).

These negative and off-putting views of lesbians were maintained in the realm of sport (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Griffin, 1992) because sport and physical activity promote required heterosexuality (Griffin, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990; Rich, 1980). This means that heterosexuality is accepted and put forwards as the only suitable sexual orientation. As previously stated, female athletes often automatically challenge the norms of femininity, simply through participating in competitive sport and as a result, work to distance themselves from the lesbian label (Lenskyj, 1991).

Research suggests that homophobia has significantly declined since the 80's and 90's (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013; Loftus, 2001), and one study demonstrated that between 1981 and 2000 there was a significant decline in homophobia in United States and Canada and this decline was present among all cohorts (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). This research is supported as in recent years, more athletes, both male and female, have begun to publicly come out, and generally the reception has been more positive than in the past, although, this is not always the

case (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013). Although the level of homophobia has decreased and the number of high school, university and professional athletes who have come out has increased – the number is still quite low. This begs the question, are there other reasons why lesbian athletes may be choosing not to come out and what other challenges do they still face?

Theoretical Contribution

Feminist Standpoint

Feminist standpoint is a useful theoretical framework to help distinguish different social identities that affect women in sport. For one, feminist research allows for a critical analysis of the social and cultural construction of gender (Harding, 1989). Feminist standpoint makes the assumption that people have different standpoints that are based on societal position, and women have a specific standpoint because of the differential power between men and women in society (Krane, 2001). More specifically, feminist standpoint theory emphasizes that women are a marginalized group, and because of this marginalization, they have a different view on the world than men. Aida Hurtado (1997) discusses how privileged groups hardly ever question why they are privileged. As a result, it can be suggested that heterosexual, white, male athletes rarely question how their social identity affects their participation in sport. Rather, these dominant social identities (white heterosexual male), are those that are considered normal and the rest are considered abnormal and ultimately trivialized.

Feminist standpoint theory allows the experiences of women to be central and embrace people who get differentiated as the “other”. The other is often viewed as someone who does not possess qualities that are valued in society (Hartsock, 1990). Therefore, women’s participation in

sport is often trivialized in comparison to male participation (Kane & Parks, 1992) and because of this trivialization women in sport are often categorized as the “other”.

Lesbian Standpoint

Lesbian feminism developed in response to the heterosexism of the feminist movement and the sexism of the gay movement (Seidman, 1995). These lesbian feminists argued that male dominance is supported by heterosexuality because heterosexuality focuses women’s lives around the needs of men. A driving point of lesbian feminism was the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, the thought that heterosexuality is constructed and enforced by a heteronormative, patriarchal society (Rich, 1980). Rich (1980) discusses how heterosexuality is often defined in critical opposition to homosexuality, which works to marginalize and stigmatize those who are a sexual minority.

So, as put forward from feminist standpoint, if we consider all women in sport to be the “other”, then lesbian athletes have an even greater likelihood of being “othered” in athletics. A recurring topic within the literature is that lesbian athletes usually experience prejudice and discrimination in athletics, and consequently their standpoint in sport is quite different from heterosexual athletes (Griffin 1998; Krane, 1997). Harding (1991) states that using this perspective will allow for many unique contributions to understanding the sport world. She posits that it will allow us to (1) see women in relation to men, as well as in relation to other women; (2) examine women independent of men; (3) view how compulsory heterosexuality has impacted the lives of women; and (4) reveal both the sexism and oppression of lesbians in sport.

Collin’s (1991) states that closeted lesbian athletes are “outsiders within”. For instance, lesbian athletes who pass as heterosexual enter the typical sport realm, but their lesbian position

gives them a unique standpoint that is atypical of the insiders or dominant group. Conveying a lesbian standpoint in athletics will result in very different accounts of women in sport. Lesbians will be affected by heterosexism and homophobia in ways that heterosexual women would likely not (Sykes, 1996).

Feminist Cultural Studies

Standpoints and identities are created within our culture, and these cultural forces impact the way we experience things, such as sport. Cultural studies helps one recognize the relationship between social forces and the way individuals behave. More specifically, feminist cultural studies observe how gender interacts with culture and how gender inequality is produced or reproduced (Hall, 1996). Using feminist cultural studies to examine the lived experiences of women in sport participation can help unfold the cultural circumstances that confront them (Hall, 1996). Media portrayals of female athletes tend to reinforce this heterosexual feminine ideal by showing images of feminine, fashionable, women with the “ideal” body (Hargreaves, 1994). Furthermore, the realm of sport is built upon a patriarchal structure that establishes heterosexism, which creates fear among lesbian athletes. This perspective offers background for understanding the role heterosexism has on the experiences of lesbian athletes by understanding the cultural pressures lesbian athletes’ experience. For example, it helps explain why some athletes chose to stay closeted, when others may not. This is often in part due to the location and timing of the individuals coming out. In previous years, professional lesbian athletes coming out were not received well, and these individuals were persecuted by the media and lost endorsements (Hargreaves, 1994). However, in more recent years, where the levels of homophobia present have significantly declined, lesbian athletes have been received more positively, and are more likely to come out.

Queer Theory

Queer theory suggests that the ideas we have about what constitutes being heterosexual, homosexual, male, female, and normal, are all socially constructed and we are continuously performing these narratives of being male and female or heterosexual and homosexual. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), she states that through continual repetitive "stylized" acts, these seemingly "natural" categories of gender, sex and sexuality are actually culturally and socially constructed. However, people view these stylized acts as a manifestation of a core gender, sexuality, and sex. Butler argues that these acts are not a representation of an essential gender, sexuality, or sex, rather they are a performance. She further posits that the performance of gender and sexuality are not voluntary; rather, borrowing from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979), she suggests that these aspects of an individual are constructed with "regulative discourses". These discourses include disciplinary devices that make people act a certain way that assists in upholding the illusion of a core gender, sex or sexuality.

Butler's critique of feminist's classification of gender mirrors a similar critique of early gay theorists. She argues that feminists were reinforcing the gender binary by attempting to make "women" a distinct group that all have the same characteristics. Similarly, early gay theorists were reinforcing the sexuality binary when they tried to make "homosexual" a distinct group that all had the same characteristics. Consequently, she argues that both feminists and early gay theorists would have fared significantly better if they showed how power functions have created our understanding of womanhood and homosexuality. She also attempted to let sexuality be viewed as flexible by diminishing the connections between gender and sex. These ideas of sexuality as flexible and gender as a performance are imperative as they are foundational to queer theory.

One of queer theory's goals is to challenge expectations of femininity, gender, sex and compulsory, hegemonic, and normative heterosexuality. It also further works to explain intersecting identities beyond sexual orientation such as race. This helps avoid privileging one aspect of an identity over another. By allowing for an all encompassing view of how people see themselves supplies a stronger more encompassing understanding of marginalized athletes in their sport. For instance, one may view the way in which lesbian athletes are excluded and discriminated against in sport as a result of strict sexuality binaries that reinforce heterosexuality.

Integrating Theoretical Frameworks

Although these perspectives can be seen as somewhat contradictory to each other, they were chosen because where one theory lacks, the other makes up for. For instance, standpoint theorist's have different epistemological problems than postmodernists (queer theorists). For instance, standpoint theorists convey a collective understanding and common identity about others in similar social instances. Whereas postmodernists emphasize that identity is fluid, and that differences between women should be embraced. Nancy Hirschmann (1998), discusses "the apparent conflict between embracing and addressing 'difference' among women and yet being able to hold onto a concept of 'woman' which retains some conception of commonality across various differences leaves many feminists who are attracted to standpoint theory on the horns of a seemingly irresolvable dilemma (p. 79)".

Although many standpoint theorists might appreciate the idea of one standpoint, the idea of several feminist standpoints can help answer some of the differences among women. Standpoint theory can allow for redefining knowledge (Hirschmann, 1998), understanding social situations and experiences, and it can be an influential tool to understand reality. As a result, only adopting one feminist standpoint may allow for a clear understanding of the situation, but it may

not be a “truthful” understanding. For example, Haraway (1991), discusses that using different standpoints can discover different “truths”, to create a much fuller picture when brought together. Additionally, Collins (1991) discusses how a Black feminist standpoint can demonstrate the stress experienced by any marginalized group. Gamson (2000) describes how marginalized sexual identities allow for an outside outlook on sexual identity. Therefore, it can be argued that by using several feminist standpoints, postmodern and standpoint theory are more similar than thought before (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Lennon, 1995). Using the term “standpoints” may be a more accurate representation of the standpoint perspective, and focusing on several standpoints would be more consistent with postmodernism (Hirschmann, 1997). However, unlike standpoint, queer theory and postmodern evasion of labels may consequently overlook an imperative role that a queer identity may have for individuals lived experiences. More specifically, Estenberg (1997) suggests that the label may give an individual confirmation about their identity which could result in momentum and drive for positive social change.

Furthermore, postmodernism disputes the notion of human nature, and rather highlights differences among people. By disputing the idea of human nature postmodernists are taking the stand that identity is socially constructed, which is also core to standpoint theory. For instance, feminist standpoint is based on the logic of materialism, which requires acknowledgment that structures have changed culturally and historically over time and are a result of different forms of patriarchy (Hartsock, 1984). Hartsock further discussed how feminist standpoint theory recognizes how the activities that women participate in have been given to them from men, instead of being “monopolized” by women (1984).

Cultural studies draw on feminism and queer theory to give a comprehensive understanding of the lesbian athlete (Frow & Morrow, 2000). The outsider within construct

(Collins, 1991) was framed in accordance to the cultural forces that makeup the experiences of Black women and recognize their different standpoint. Queer theory is positioned in the historical trivialization and marginalization of sexual minorities who have a unique perspective in sport participation (Krane, 2001). Therefore, queer theory is still in line with feminist standpoint epistemology. This queer theory application is enriched in feminist foundation, as a solely feminist or solely lesbian perspective would not be all encompassing of the experiences faced by lesbian athletes. More specifically, neither a queer or feminist perspective on its own can fully tackle heterosexism, sexism the oppression caused by masculinity (Rubin & Butler, 1997).

Subsequently, these perspectives are used and intersected to help guide and give understanding to my research on lesbian experiences in sport participation. Furthermore, a cultural feminist queer perspective, stresses the interaction of gender, sexuality and culture within the realm of sport. This allows for the epistemological framework needed to further engage and understand the effects of heteronormativity and masculinity in sport and how it manifests and affects the experiences of these women.

Methodology

Data collection

Qualitative research methods were chosen because “qualitative research is based on a constructivist epistemology and explores what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive” (Yilmaz, 2013). This is beneficial as it allows the subjects to give their own description of the phenomenon in question. This research will work to understand how lived

experiences of lesbian athletes are created and given meaning. As a result, qualitative methods were chosen because this research looks to provide an analysis of lesbian identity construction within the heterosexist world of sport.

This study makes use of previously conducted media interviews with lesbian and gay female athletes. This paper works to situate these individuals' accounts within a social framework of sport and sexuality. A discourse analysis was conducted to locate these professional athletes' lives within a wider social context to advance understandings of lesbian experiences in sport. Discourse analyses focus on the analysis of language throughout the text-based materials (Gergen, Chrisler, & LoCicero, 1999). A discourse analysis was chosen instead of a content analysis because a content analysis is often used to determine the presence of certain words within a text. Those who conduct content analyses often establish categories and count how many times the text fits into those categories. Whereas a discourse analysis focuses on how conversation can be used to create meanings (Gubrium & Hostein, 2000). A discourse analysis allows for the text to be examined in accordance to the cultural context in which these individuals describe their lived experiences. This research is less focused on how many times a theme comes up, but rather how significant a theme may be. Therefore, a discourse analysis will allow for more than a basic analysis of what was said in order to take into consideration the surrounding social and historical contexts.

The interviews collected and analyzed below were retrieved from outsports.com, a website created and run by gay sports fan which are dedicated to celebrating the achievements of gay athletes. The website provides a range of services such as, fan posts, chat rooms, athlete profiles, information about upcoming events that feature LGBT athletes, and coming out stories. These coming out stories supply a rich source of data for exploring lesbian (and gay) women's

experiences in sporting contexts. These interviews were taken from the “coming out stories” section which is a compilation of interviews of LGBT athletes recounting their coming out experiences. While the majority of these are stories of gay male athletes, there are also stories of many individuals who identify within the LGBT+ spectrum. The website included 33 lesbian/gay female athletes coming out stories. For the purposes of this study, I randomly selected a third of those coming out stories (n=11). These interviews range from three pages to 10 pages in length. Interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2018.

List of athlete’s names, sport played, level of play, age and country.

Athlete	Sport	Level	Age	Country
1. Rebecca	Soccer	University	22	USA
2. Emma	Basketball	High School	17	USA
3. Charline	Hockey	Olympic	31	Canada
4. Mara	Soccer	Swiss football (UEFA)	21	Sweden
5. Lauren	Swimmer	University	21	USA
6. Meleana	Soccer	National Women’s Soccer League	22	USA
7. Liz	Mixed martial artist	UFC	29	USA
8. Madison	Lacrosse	High School	18	USA
9. Agata	Soccer	University	22	USA
10. Abbie	Cross-Country	University	22	USA
11. Rosie	Gymnastics	Olympic	23	Canada

Data Analysis

The data utilized for this method is previously conducted interviews published online. These interviews were coded through a thematic analysis, creating themes based on the eleven interviews. This thematic analysis made use of grounded theory by constructing theories that are grounded in the data themselves. This approach was used as it allows emphasis on the participants own perception and description of their thoughts and feelings. This was done inductively, as there are no pre-existing frameworks or themes in which the data is expected to fit into.

The data was coded by hand by analyzing the interviews line by line creating themes straight from data. For instance, specific phrases were pulled from the interviews and used as themes, as all themes produced are grounded from the interviews provided. Additionally, some text may be coded into different categories. This allowed for many different themes at the beginning which will eventually be grouped together to create larger, more concrete themes.

For instance, a line of text that read “when I was on the field, I was engrossed in the game; I was happy, rather than worrying about whether I was queer” could be coded as “sport as positive space” or “sport as distraction from sexuality”. As you can see, this one line could be coded into many categories. To narrow the codes down they will be grouped into themes that represent a common idea. Once codes have been condensed into appropriate themes, they will be accompanied by narratives that give examples of those themes.

Findings

The themes found throughout these accounts mirror and move beyond findings discussed throughout the coming out literature. The literature emphasizes the challenges LGBT

individual's face accepting their sexual orientation, as well as disclosing their identity to others. These challenges are followed by feelings of isolation, which underline the limited space available for lesbian athletes to negotiate their identity within sport. This analysis focuses on interlocking themes throughout the eleven accounts. These themes are (1) fear of being rejected, (2) lesbian appearance, (3) self-doubt and loneliness, (4) coming out in sport was hard, but rewarding, and (5) sport as a platform for LGBT activism.

Fear of Being Rejected by Teammates, Coaches and Athletic Organizations

Among these accounts, all athletes feared being rejected from their teammates, coaches or athletic organizations in some way because of their sexual orientation. Some of the athletes discussed the distress caused by thinking about how their teammates may no longer accept them if they knew of their sexuality, which can be demonstrated by Agata's account:

“As connected as I felt to the Drew University women's soccer team, I always felt different, which had caused a lot of distress. Coming out as a lesbian was an incredibly stressful time for me. Being an athlete meant the world to me and I was afraid that if I was rejected by the team that I gave my heart to, I would lose a big part of my identity. Coming into college I was still struggling with my sexuality, which made coming out as a gay athlete that much more difficult (Agata, 22, soccer, university)”.

It can be noted here that both her identity as an athlete and as a lesbian were extremely important to her and she feared that revealing her sexual identity would ruin her athletic identity. Even more, these feelings were enhanced by her own internal struggle with her sexuality. Coming out literature has suggested that the process of coming out is made much more difficult

when the individual has not fully accepted their sexuality themselves, often due to internalized homophobia (Frost & Meyer, 2009). From a cultural feminist queer perspective, Agata's account of having conflicting identities demonstrates the purpose of having several standpoints – one as a lesbian and another as an athlete. This is mirrored by Emma, who feared that her teammates that she had grown so close to over the years may reject her if they knew her sexuality:

“The thing that held me back the most was my basketball team – we had played together for three years, and had grown eerily close. I was most worried about instances in the locker room – of course, I was not attracted to anyone on my team, but only I knew this for certain, and paranoia about lesbians was prevalent at my school back then. In short, this team of girls had become a place where I felt truly and genuinely at home, and I was not prepared to sacrifice that for my sexuality (Emma, 17, basketball, high school)”

In Emma's account, she brings up the uncomfortable topic of navigating the locker room as a lesbian. Research on non-professional gay and lesbian research has shown that many athletes who know their teammate is a lesbian do not feel comfortable with them in the locker room and that in many cases athletes have quit their sport due to locker room discrimination, despite their love of the sport (Hekma, 1998). Emma later discusses in her account how she had heard pretty negative opinions about her sexuality from her Catholic school teachers, as well as some classmates and worried that these views would also be held by her teammates. Emma's account from a cultural feminist queer standpoint can be used as an example of an “outsider within”. Emma is assumed to be heterosexual from her teammates because she had yet to disclose her sexual identity to them; however, her lesbian identity allows her a distinct standpoint

from the rest of her team. For instance, she is affected by homophobic and heterosexist actions that are likely gone unnoticed by her religious heterosexual teammates.

The theme of feeling uncomfortable disclosing their sexual orientation due to religious beliefs of others was prevalent among a few of the athletes, including Meleana, who wrote:

"There were a lot of very religious girls on my team, some of them had a hard time with lesbians, to be honest (Meleana, 22, soccer, WNSL)."

Meleana further went on to discuss how she believed that there are still many coaches and organizations that do not want the lesbian image to be associated with their team. She discusses how these coaches and organization think that this image goes against family values. While Emma, Meleana and a few others feared rejection due to religious beliefs, a couple athletes actually feared for their safety. For instance, Charline discusses the social climate during the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia:

"The new Russian laws, including the anti-gay "propaganda" laws, created a malaise that was felt by most people around me, gay or straight. Were we afraid? Of course! Were we in danger? No idea. We never had the intention to protest or talk about being gay. We were in Sochi for a single reason and that was to compete at the highest level of our capacities. We worked too hard to let any outside distractions separate us from our ultimate dream. However, the idea of not being completely free during the Games left me with a bitter taste (Charline, 31, hockey, Olympics)."

Fear of being rejected by teammates is already present among lesbian athletes, but adding another variable such as strongly religious teammates or participating in sport in States or Countries that have negative opinions and laws against LGBT individual's further enhanced fear

of being rejected. For Emma, it was because she had already heard harsh comments directed towards her based on her sexuality from school faculty. Whereas Charline discusses her fear as a result of laws and negative public opinion of LGBT individuals.

These accounts demonstrate the love these athletes have for their sport and their attempt to negotiate their sexual identity with their athletic identity in order to find a balance between the two without being rejected. Using a cultural feminist queer perspective is useful because lesbian athlete's have a unique or "othered" perspective from their heterosexual athletes, who do not have to worry about being rejected or fear for their safety due to their sexual orientation. It is imperative that these athlete's standpoints as both a woman and a lesbian are taken into consideration with their cultural and environmental surroundings.

Lesbian Appearance

Using a cultural feminist queer perspective has worked to highlight the experiences these women face as a result of their gender and sexual orientation in sport. The interviews demonstrated that many of the athletes felt pressure to conform to a heterosexist view of femininity by wearing dresses, and hiding their sexual identity. For example, one athlete discusses the pressures of heteronormative expectations in sport:

"The epitome of sports masculinity for male athletes is football. No sport embodies the traditional roles of men more than America's most popular sport. Conversely, no sport embodies stereotypical femininity of women like rhythmic gymnastics. Girls in the sport are supposed to put on pretty make-up, tie their hair with a bow, wear lovely dresses and like boys (Rosie, 23, gymnastics, Olympics)."

She further discusses the expectations had about her appearance by her coaches and teammates:

“My coach would ask me why I wasn't wearing a dress. She seemed disappointed. My other teammates would get excited about getting dolled up and I just didn't care (Rosie, 23, gymnastics, Olympics).”

This quote helps to demonstrate that when those expectations of femininity were not met, she was not received as favourably as her more feminine teammates. However, unlike her, most of the other women discussed how they felt obligated to dress and act feminine. Further application of a cultural feminist queer epistemology puts forth that these athletes choosing to act feminine is actually a “heterosexual performance” (Butler, 1990) that was done in order to avoid prejudice and discrimination from teammates.

On the other hand, some lesbian athletes felt that their feminine appearance hindered them. For instance, Meleana, discusses how despite her “100%, certifiable gayness” she often grappled with the frustrating dynamic that was her feminine appearance. She discusses that due to her long hair and feminine dressing appearance, she did not fit the bill of what a lesbian should look like, stating:

"In some ways, I wish everyone knew I was gay. I wish I was more apparently gay. I get hit on by men all the time, and lesbians don't hit on me because they don't think I'm interested (Meleana, 22, soccer, NWSL)."

Judith Butlers heterosexual matrix helps explain this account, where sex, gender, and sexuality are intrinsically linked, people make assumptions based on what they see. For instance, if one see's a feminine woman, they will automatically see them as heterosexual

(Butler, 1990), which is the case for Meleana. Meleana's experience is more of a rare occurrence, especially within these women's accounts, where the majority of woman tried to hide their sexuality through feminine appearance before they were publicly out.

Self-doubt and Loneliness

Through a cultural feminist queer perspective one can better understand how these athletes experienced a conflict between their sporting identity and their sexual identity. This conflict between their inner experience and their exterior sporting experience is highlighted throughout these women's accounts. What is further highlighted is the personal price of suppressing their lesbian identity, while portraying a heterosexual identity to others. Negotiating these identities proved difficult for these athletes, often experiencing feelings of self-doubt and loneliness as they dealt with the apparent incongruity between "lesbian" and "athlete".

"The fact that I was the only gay athlete on my team and the lack of support from others made my coming out a time of loneliness and self-doubt (Agata, 22, soccer, university)".

Agata explains her coming out to her teammates as an extremely difficult time as she had a lack of support from them. This was further emphasized by being the only gay athlete on the team. She does not express her coming out as filled with blatant discrimination, but rather it was more concealed and subtle. For instance, none of her teammates used discriminatory language against her or physically or verbally assaulted her. Rather she struggled with feeling excluded from the team because of a lack of support and understanding of her sexuality. A cultural feminist queer perspective allows emphasis to be put on the fact that heterosexual athletes often use homophobic language and actions in order to emphasize their heterosexuality. It could be

inferred that Agata's teammates distanced themselves from her in order to protect their heterosexual identity. The experience Agata faced was not an isolated experience, for instance, Mara dealt with her teammates asking inappropriate questions about her sexuality and the experience of being the only out player had her questioning whether she should continue in soccer:

"I started wondering if what I was feeling really was unique. I wondered if I was the only one, even though I knew I couldn't be. I wondered where there were other people like me. I thought about quitting football (Mara, 21, soccer, UEFA)".

Unlike Mara and Agata's account's where their self-doubt and loneliness stemmed from being the only gay athlete on the team, Lauren's account of feeling self-doubt and loneliness occurred due to her hiding her sexual identity:

"There were multiple times when someone I really wanted to get to know would express interest in spending time with me. I remember wondering, I want to give myself a chance to have this person in my life, but am I burden because I'm not someone that this person would truly approve of? I would come up with some other reason in my head about why they wouldn't like having me around. If I thought someone was rejecting me for being annoying, or if I thought maybe they just plain didn't like me, it was easier for me to deal with than the realization that someone could reject me because I like other women. This brought me a lot of pain, uncertainty and resentment towards myself (Lauren, 21, swimming, university)".

In her account she discusses turning away potential friendships because of her inability to come out to her teammates. She feared that she could become close with these women, just for

them to turn against her when they found out the truth about her sexuality. However, Lauren states that she so strongly feared rejection because of her sexuality that it prevented her from coming out:

“As a couple of years went by, and I witnessed the hate towards people of different genders and sexualities, the encouragement faded into the background. Every fear I ever had about being myself was running through my head louder than thunder. Over that time, my self-doubt reached a point at which it was impossible to suppress (Lauren, 21, swimming, university)”.

Cultural feminist queer framework highlights that watching a culture of discrimination towards other LGBT individuals over the years, may have caused Lauren to fear the reactions she would receive from her peers. This self-doubt directed at her sexuality caused her to retreat from others. Research has suggested that experiences of heterosexism and homonegativism are strong societal stressors for LGBT individuals (Meyer, 2003). These societal stressors can include hearing homophobic remarks, seeing negative treatment of LGBT individuals or physical abuse. These stressors have been shown to increase self doubt among LGBT individuals (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1992).

Similar to Lauren, others stated that they were afraid that if they disclosed their sexual orientation to others they would be rejected, because the only response they had ever heard about lesbians, was negative. For instance, Rebecca discusses her experiences living in small town:

“I became angry at the cards that I had been dealt and had many days were I wondered how I would make it to tomorrow. I was sickened by the racial and homophobic comments that stretched through the locker rooms, the town's social

media and the lunch tables at school. When you live in an area so void of diversity you begin to think that ever living a different life does not seem like a possibility. (Rebecca, 22, soccer, university).

Rebecca's experience highlights that although some individuals live in areas where their coming out was met with positive reactions, there are still places rampant with homophobic views. These homophobic views caused conflict for Rebecca and her athletic identity. For instance, she further discusses how she feared little about the game she played, but she eventually began to fear herself. She began to internalize the derogatory meaning that "lesbian" had in her team's locker room. This resulted in Rebecca choosing not to reveal her sexual orientation for a very long time, as she states, "I was afraid to be an outcast. I chose to blend in the best that I could".

Coming Out to Teammates was Hard but Rewarding

As demonstrated by these accounts, these women feared coming out to their teammates, coaches, as well as family, often fearing that they would be rejected. This fear of rejection caused a lot of anxiety, stress, doubt and loneliness among these women. With all this fear and knowledge of previous hostile and discriminatory reactions towards lesbian athletes, coming out was a massive decision for these women, in which they did not know how they would be received. However, all of these women, albeit in different ways, found coming out to be very rewarding eventually.

One of the worst experiences of navigating their sexuality comes from mixed martial artist Liz, and it came before her time as an athlete. Before Liz begun her athletic career she was a U.S Marine stationed in Iraq. She explained that not only did she fear the enemy outside, but

also her friends and colleagues that made discriminatory comments about LGBT individuals. She discusses that her best friend even made the comment that “if gay soldiers came out they should be put on the front lines and be the first killed.” After that comment, she decided it would be best if she hid her sexuality while she was stationed in Iraq. Eventually she got into professional mixed martial arts and chose to disclose her sexuality to the public.

“For so long I was closeted, so to finally be out is great for me. To do so in such a mainstream [sport] is so rewarding, since I went from one extreme to another extreme (Liz, 29, mixed-martial arts, UFC)”.

Liz further discusses that although in the public light she does not always receive positive opinions about her sexuality, most of her fans, friends, and family are supportive and she has heard positive feedback from many marines and others in the military. Specifically, the friend who had originally stated that gay marines should be the first killed – backtracked, apologized and changed her viewpoint not only on lesbians in the military, but in general. Applying a cultural feminist queer epistemology to Liz’s account, one can better break down her experiences. For instance, when in the Marine’s, the culture and atmosphere was very homophobic, causing her to hide her sexual identity. However, the culture and atmosphere as an athlete was very different than her time as a Marine, and it allowed her to express her sexuality with less fear.

Unlike Liz, where she felt it was necessary for her safety to stay closeted, Madison realized that hiding her sexuality was putting strain on her relationship with teammates and family and that although she was reluctant to come out she knew she had to.

“I knew that coming out was going to open a new door for me, one that would lead me to happiness and allow me to genuinely be myself. After three years of carrying the immense weight of pretending to be someone else, I knew I had to let myself breathe (Madison, 18, lacrosse, highschool).

Madison’s family and teammates reacted to her coming out with support and love, which she says allowed her to achieve many things she feels she could not have done if she had stayed closeted. This account follows what research suggests, that LGB individuals who “come to terms with coming out,” and disclose their sexual orientation to family and are received positively (whether that be immediately, or within a short period of time), are better equipped to deal with all aspects of their sexuality and are more productive in school and work settings (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Emma experienced similar reactions to her coming out:

“I spent three years in the closet. I know the fear every gay teenager faces right before they come out to someone important to them – I felt it in that gym. Fortunately, I was greeted with the love every family should give to one another, and therefore will never regret my decision to tell my team when I did. If I could offer anything to the LGBT community, it would be to take a deep breath and be exactly who you are to those who matter. You might be surprised at the response (Emma, 17, basketball, high school).”

Later in Emma’s account she further discusses how her teammates are now so open to her sexuality and that they even discuss her taste in women and are able to joke around about her sexuality. She discusses how the reactions she received were so positive that she has no regrets about coming out to her teammates and wants other LGBT individuals to be unapologetically themselves.

Sport as a Platform for LGBT Activism

Many of the athletes within this study discuss how their experiences as a lesbian in sport have led them to use their sport a platform for LGBT rights, some going as far as to consider a career in LGBT activism. This is further demonstrated in Lauren's account:

“There are a lot of reasons why it's important to come out and I realize that now that I don't have weight on my shoulders to keep my head down. What most people don't understand is that being in the closet doesn't just restrict your love life. It can impact your relationships with your teammates, friends and coaches. People throw around some really hateful words without realizing what they're doing. The harshest impact though, can be the strain on your perspective of yourself. I used to lie about my sexuality and even express the same hateful things about homosexuality that other people talked about in front of me. I felt like it was the only way to avoid being a target. It confused my self-image and put me in a bad place for a long time. That's why it's important to me to try to reach out and help people. Since coming out, I've had a lot of friends express interest in making the NCAA and the swimming community a more accepting place (Lauren, 21, swimmer, university).”

In her account she discusses reaching out to help others because of how detrimental hiding her sexuality was in different aspects of her life. In her account she discusses how the majority of people treated her no differently once she came out and coming out had led others to understand how sport is not always the most accepting place for LGBT individuals. This example is a demonstration of how a lesbian athlete coming out led heterosexual individuals to see the divide in how LGBT individuals are treated in comparison heterosexual individuals.

Unlike Lauren who had an immediate positive reaction to her coming out, Agata's experience was more difficult, she came out early to her teammates and it was not for quite some time that she felt a part of the team. However, Agata discusses the positives that came from the challenges she faced as an openly lesbian athlete:

“Coming out as an athlete has definitely been the most difficult thing I have done. Being an out athlete taught me a great lesson about the importance of my identity. I believe that my journey helped me learn to embrace who I am and be proud of being a lesbian. My experiences made a great impact on my career goals as an LGBT activist (Agata, 22, swimming, university).”

Agata's less welcoming coming out experience made her see how sport is not always inclusive to LGBT individuals. This resulted in her wanting to find a career that will help ameliorate the negative consequences associated with being an out-athlete. Conversely, Mara chose to use her position as a professional athlete to make sure others know they are not alone:

“I want to talk publicly about this now because no one should ever go through the same things I did. Loneliness is a difficult place to live. The pain, tears, sleepless nights. I hope that by sharing my story it will inspire others to be their true selves. I'm inspired to make a difference, and I'm so proud of being a lesbian athlete. Being out and being my true self with the world has helped my self-confidence grow tremendously (Mara, 21, soccer, UEFA).”

Mara further discusses quite evocatively how as an LGBT individual in sport she needs to fight harder against all those who discriminate against her and it is the same for all other LGBT athletes out there. She discusses how they have to work extremely hard for others to understand

their sexual orientation. Additionally, they have to fight for their place in the game, to be accepted by others, but most importantly to accept themselves. Similarly, Rebecca discusses how living in a small town with little diversity had caused her to seek refuge in a different city at a university where she could be her true self:

“I am done apologizing for my passions. I am done living in fear of telling the world who I really am. I refuse to continue to lie to myself. I am done trying to convince myself that being me is not acceptable. I am a: daughter, sister, leader, honor student, athlete, employee, friend, competitor ... and lesbian. I fight for change. I believe in equality (Rebecca, 22, soccer university)”.

Rebecca joined the Women’s Leadership Academy and used prior lesbian athletes like Billie Jean King as inspiration for her to work to break down gender barriers and fight for equality. Through a cultural feminist queer epistemology these athlete’s choices to use their sport as a platform for LGBT rights can be better understood. For example, before these women came out in their sport, they feared the reactions they would receive from their teammates and coaches because of the homophobic culture that used to be so prevalent in sport. However, a decline in homophobia in the sport world is present in these women’s accounts and has resulted in easier coming out experiences for lesbian athletes. Nonetheless, these women still experience issues with coming out because of their sexual identity and due to that, they have a different standpoint from other athletes. Therefore, because these women still experience discrimination, they can use their “othered” perspective to help other LGBT athletes deal with the repercussions of a lesbian or gay identity.

Discussion

Throughout the accounts, the overall consensus was that staying closeted in their athletic world was difficult and caused considerable distress. However, for most, coming out to their coaches and teammates relieved a lot of stress and anxiety. This was because most of these athletes received support and were accepted by most. These positive elements demonstrate that openly lesbian athletes can have a positive experience in sport and physical activity. Furthermore, these athletes were received with much more positive reactions than those who came out before the twenty-first century. This suggests that sport is slowly becoming more tolerant to LGBT individuals. Nevertheless, these positive elements are shadowed by themes of inequality still faced by lesbian athletes. These accounts demonstrate that although being a sexual minority is received more positively now than in earlier years, these women still deal with rejection, self-doubt, and lack of support in some cases.

Some have suggested that gay teammates are more likely to be accepted by the team if they are imperative to the team's success (Anderson, 2002). Whereas, Messner (1992), has suggested that members of a team are accepted based on their sporting and athletic ability, not their sexual orientation. These suggestions hold merit in some instances, for example, Agata states that she was not fully accepted as a part of the team until they won the championship and therefore demonstrated her value to the team. However, the other athletes state instances of immediate acceptance by their teams regardless of their "value" to the team or the athletic skill set they possess. Further, these suggestions do not explain levels of acceptance or non-acceptance for athletes who play recreationally. As a result, future research needs to be directed at understanding what other factors are involved in lesbian acceptance in sport. More,

specifically looking at how playing at different levels, such as recreationally, competitively and professionally affect level of acceptance of lesbian athletes.

Nonetheless, these women are challenging social norms in sport through their gender, sexuality, and appearance. This study helps demonstrate why using several frameworks such as feminist and lesbian standpoint, cultural studies, and queer theory to create a more encompassing epistemology is so imperative. These women's accounts show that there are many aspects of their being, besides their sexuality that affects their participation in sport. One cannot simply remove the "woman" from the "lesbian" athlete, or remove the "lesbian" from their "culture". All of these aspects need to be considered to fully understand the experiences faced by lesbian and gay female athletes and using cultural feminist queer epistemology assists in highlighting many of the salient aspects of these athlete's identities.

Conclusion

Although each account was different and their coming out experiences were unique, common themes were found among the eleven accounts. Through a discourse analysis of eleven lesbian athlete's experiences, this paper has highlighted the social circumstances for several athletes and found that these women experience a fear of being rejected by teammates, trouble caused by their appearance, self-doubt and loneliness, coming out to the team is hard, but rewarding, and that their sport led them to pursue LGBT rights. These findings are important because it suggests that the decline in homophobia seen in Western society has also transferred into the sporting world that has been known to be extremely homophobic. However, these findings also demonstrate that there is still homophobia within the sport realm and interventions to reduce homophobia and homonegativism in sport should be implemented in order to create a safe environment for lesbian athletes.

This study has its limitations. For starters, although these accounts were rich with detail and gave insight into the experiences of lesbian athletes, more accounts from different sources would need to be analyzed in order to get more concrete themes. Specifically, more sources accounts from sources that are not dedicated to celebrating the achievements of lesbian athletes. Furthermore, these accounts are of women of different age, states, religious backgrounds, sports and competitive level. Future analysis would be more concrete if these categories were isolated and studied independently. For instance, if professional lesbian soccer player's accounts were examined independently of other sports or if catholic high school lesbian athlete's accounts were examined independently of other religions. This would help to highlight what age, competitive level, sport and religious affiliation were more likely to cause inequality among these women. Lastly, these accounts all have a positive undertone, or happy ending – which may not be an accurate representation of the experiences of all lesbian athletes because these stories are taken from a website dedicated to celebrating LGBT athletes and may be more likely to publish successful coming out stories.

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