A Pervasive Silence

Lesbophobia

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Attempts to "mainstream" famous lesbian sport personalities in the media has led to an ironic twist: the perception that lesbianism is "a homosexuality of no importance" (Armstrong 11). Although the visibility of lesbians in sport may have improved, equating visibility with a positive shift in attitude toward them is premature. One need only ask a group of contemporary varsity athletes about the issue of homosexuality and sport participation, and their answer is inevitably the same—"It doesn't matter."

Our research question is designed to investigate the 'other side' of this silent denial in terms of the real costs that this strategy may have on the perceptions of athletes—both lesbian and heterosexual—who share the athletic team experience. As Vicki Krane suggests, this study is designed to investigate the belief that personal reactions to homonegativism, or purposeful, not irrational, negative attitudes and behaviors toward nonheterosexuals, may include distrust and isolation from the team (238, 242); specifically, whether lesbophobia adversely affects social cohesion (i.e., social bonding) among team members.

Group dynamics, team cohesion and homonegativism in sport

Group dynamics is an important area of investigation that has received considerable attention in the social and sport psychology literature (Carron, Coleman, Wheeler and Stevens). Team cohesion is believed to be an important factor in the successful execution of a group task or performance. Cohesion has been defined as "a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of members' needs" (Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer. 213). Research has documented the role of situational and personal factors in the development and maintenance of team cohesion (Carron and Hausenblas). These factors include physical and functional proximity (Festinger, Schachter and Back), individual satisfaction (Widmeyer and Williams 1991), and similarity in personal attributes of individual team members (Zander). More recent research examined 32 different personal attribute antecedents of cohesion (Widmeyer, Silva and Hardy 1992).
and Team Cohesion in Sport

Results of this research indicated that personal attributes most often identified, such as social background and race, were not important to the development of cohesion in sport. Sexual orientation and homonegativity, however, were not investigated.

This study surveyed 106 female varsity athletes. The purpose of this analysis was threefold: to investigate the incidence of homonegativity in varsity team contexts; to determine whether a correlation exists between homonegativity and perceptions of social cohesion in sport; and finally, to determine whether homonegative attitudes exert a significantly negative influence on perceptions of social cohesion.

Method

Participants were 106 female athletes competing in team sports at the intercollegiate level. These students ranged from year one to year four in their academic program.

Two vignette scenarios were created. In the first scenario the hypothetical team encounters a hostile crowd where homophobic statements are heard. The sexual orientation of one of the players is manipulated (i.e., in one vignette the athlete is identified as either a lesbian or a heterosexual). In the second scenario, the attitude of the head coach towards lesbian athletes is manipulated whereby either the coach has made repeated negative or supportive comments regarding lesbian athletes. In each scenario one team member revealed to the team that she is a lesbian.

The Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) (Caron, Widmeyer and Brawley) was used to assess cohesion. The GEQ is an 18-item questionnaire based on a conceptual model in which cohesion is viewed as a multidimensional construct comprising individual and group aspects, each of which has a task and social orientation. For the purposes of this investigation, only two measures of social cohesion were used. Attraction to Group Social (ATGS) reflects a member's perception of togetherness, closeness, and affiliation to the group. Group Integration Social (GIS) assesses a team member's feelings about the similarity, closeness and bonding of the team as a social unit. Instructions for the questionnaire were modified to direct participants toward perception of cohesion based on the vignette. Cronbach alphas for each of the four scenarios ranged from .72 to .76 (ATGS), and .70 to .73 (GIS).

The Modern Homophobia Scale-Lesbians (MHS-L; Raja and Stokes, 1998) is a 24-item survey designed to measure attitudes toward lesbians across three factors: Personal Discomfort (PD; 10-items), Institutional Homophobia (IH; 11-items), and Deviance/Changeability (DC; 3 items). Items were rated across a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored at the extremes by 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores on the subscale PD and IH indicate greater personal comfort with lesbians and belief in their rights respectively. Higher scores on the measure of DC indicate that female homosexuality is deviant and changeable. Cronbach measures of internal consistency indicated acceptable values for PD (a = .89) and DC (a = .78). The measure of Institutional Homophobia was dropped from further analyses due to poor internal consistency (a = .66).

Intercollegiate coaches of female sport teams were contacted for permission to survey their teams. Once granted, athletes were assembled to request their participation. Athletes were informed of the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was assured. Upon completion of an informed consent form, participants received the packet of questionnaires. Participants received two of four possible hypothetical team scenarios. Vignettes were counterbalanced to control for ordering effects.

To assess the incidence of homonegativity in intercol-
legiate athletes, descriptive statistics were computed on
the two MHS-L subscales. Responses indicated a relatively
high degree of personal comfort with lesbians (M =
4.03, SD = .75) and little belief that lesbianism is a disease
or changeable (M = 1.53, SD = .80).

A point-biserial correlation was conducted to assess the
relationship between the scenario presented (homonegative
or homoneutral) and the measures of social cohesion.
Results indicated no significant relationship between scen-
ario and cohesion (p > .05). As such, social cohesion did
not increase or decrease as a result of environment.

A paired samples t-test was conducted to determine
whether social cohesion differed as a function of the
scenario presented. For the purposes of this analysis, only
those receiving one homoneutral and one homonegative
scenario were selected. Results indicated no significant
differences across measure ATGS (t (53) = -.58, p > .05)
or GIS (t (53) = -1.29, p > .05).

Discussion and implications

Despite expectations to the contrary, the results of the
study did not illustrate the presence of lesbophobia in
sport, nor did it demonstrate a connection between
lesbophobia and team cohesion. In fact, the sample popu-
lation self-reported a relatively high degree of personal
comfort with lesbians as their teammates. They also
indicated the belief that lesbianism was neither a dysfunc-
tional or a changeable behaviour. These results suggest
that the perceptions of the sample population were,
generally speaking, homopositive. The second aspect of the
analysis examined the relationship between the responses
to the homoneutral and the homonegative vignettes to
measures of social cohesion. Specifically, whether athletes
believed that homonegative attitudes, behaviour and com-
ments had an adverse affect upon feelings of team cohe-
sion, expressed via a team member’s perception of togeth-
eriness, closeness, and bonding. The results of this analysis
indicated no statistical significance. The participants did
not perceive a significant relationship between the effect
of lesbophobia and indicators of team cohesion in their
sport context. Finally, the last aspect of the analysis
examined whether responses to social and team cohesion
indicators differed as a function of the scenario presented.
In this analysis, once again, the results indicated no
significant difference.

The interpretation of this data must be considered
within the wider context of research on lesbophobia and
sport, and within the context of the methodological
limitations of the study. The initial reading of the results
indicates that this sample of varsity athletes did not reflect
any evidence of homonegativity, nor did they believe that
any evidence of homonegativity would adversely affect
team cohesion or performance on their team. One inter-
pretation of this result might lead to the conclusion that
in the contemporary sport context, lesbophobia is no
longer an identifiable concern—and that discriminatory
behaviour and practices are not an issue in the twenty-first
century.

An alternative interpretation of the data, however, must
also be considered. The final statistical analysis of the
study compared the homonegative and homoneutral re-
sponses of the respondents. Again, these results indicated
no difference—namely, that respondents did not identify
any difference between vignettes in which homonegative
behaviour and comments were made and cases where
neutral comments were offered. This finding, when con-
sidered within the context of the previous results, raises a
critical question: why would a group of self-identified
homopositive varsity athletes not perceive homonegative
comments and behaviour as negative? Why would this
group not identify discriminatory behaviour as problem-
atic? One explanation offered by researchers in the field of
gay and lesbian studies points to the phenomenon of
external and internal homonegativism—namely, that years
of socialization in which homonegativism is tolerated and
homonegative practices are common and often not pun-
ished lead to desensitization and denial of the problem
(Krane; Lenskyj 1999). Indeed, presuming that the sam-
ple of 106 athletes included a percentage of both gay and
straight athletes, research in the developmental process
of ‘coming out’ suggests that internalized homonegativity
is considered a normal step in the developmental process
of self-acceptance (Krane; Sophie). As such, it is entirely
possible that this sample of varsity athletes—both straight
and gay—may not have identified homonegativity as a
problem. If this is the case, then the analysis that indicated
their self-identification as homopositive and the analysis
that indicated no significant correlation between
homonegativity and team cohesion must be called into
question.

Clearly, the results of this study warrant a re-examina-
tion of the research question and a re-design of the
research method. What is not known is whether behav-
ior is consistent with cognitions. Thus, identifying
homonegativity as irrelevant for group cohesiveness is not
equivalent to behaving as if it were so. If homonegativity
is as pervasive as these results appear to suggest, then the
research question needs to be addressed within a sample
that includes both a general population, and a population
of lesbians who have achieved a positive self identity.

Conclusion

Critical to the success of ending lesbophobia in sport is the
demonstration that discrimination disadvantages all mem-
bers of a sport team—not simply lesbians. Lesbophobia
and homonegativity, both within sport and our broader
social context, continues to exist at a cost—a real cost—
both in terms of personal validation and in terms of group
cohesion and sport performance. Transforming this si-
lence by demonstrating this cost, however, continues to be
elusive. Working toward an environment that affirms positive lesbian visibility addresses one aspect of the problem; demonstrating how equity benefits everyone is equally critical.

Lesbophobia is not a form of discrimination that will simply 'go away' by virtue of silence, invisibility or the pretense that sexuality "doesn't matter." More research is warranted to push the parameters of this denial. As Lenskyj observes, "The vicious cycle of invisibility and homophobia in women's sport needs to be interrupted in a number of levels, both individual and institutional, before social change can be affected" (cited in White and Young 76). Only then will the pervasive silence that sexuality "doesn't matter" be transformed.

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References