

# A Pervasive Silence

## Lesbophobia

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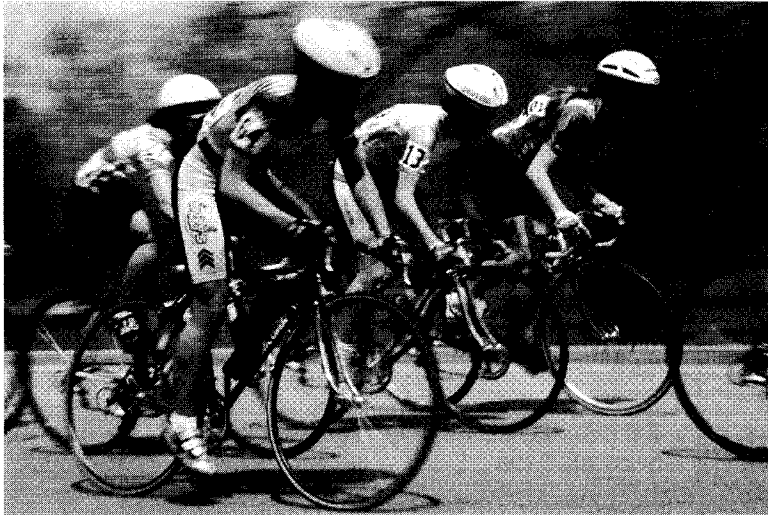


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*Cet article examine la relation entre la lesbophobie et la cohésion à l'intérieur d'une équipe dans les sports. Des athlètes universitaires ont complété des mesures d'homonégativisme et de cohésion sociale en réaction à des situations hypothétiques. Les résultats de cette étude ont remarqué aucune évidence significative d'homonégativité et aucune corrélation entre l'homonégativité et la cohésion dans l'équipe.*

Nearly two decades ago, Billie Jean King commented that the presence of lesbians in sport was a reality shrouded in silence—a “silence so loud it screams” (cited in Vealey). Since that time, academic scholarship and anti-homophobia education has slowly moved toward efforts to transform this silence—first, through scholarship that identified the important role of sexuality in the construction of gender and power relations in sport and physical activity (Birrell and Cole; Kidd; Lenskyj 1986, 1990; Messner and Sabo), and secondly, through the validation of a distinct lesbian presence in sport (Cahn; Griffin 1992, 1998; Palzkill). These investigations also revealed the hidden operations of compulsory heterosexuality, and challenged homophobic and discriminatory practices that have severely limited the participation of *all* girls and women in sport and physical activity (Blinde and Taube 1992; Griffin 1992; Lenskyj 1991). Despite these efforts, however, lesbophobia persists in sport (Fusco; Klasovec; Krane; Thorngren; Vealey). Indeed, as one scholar noted, efforts to normalize the presence of lesbians in sport through

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 of teammates and social 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 member affective 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.



*Photo: Marlene Hielema*

## 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 ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and DC ( $\alpha = .78$ ). The measure of Institutional Homophobia was dropped from further analyses due to poor internal consistency ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

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-bise-rial 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 scenario 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 population self-reported a relatively *high* degree of personal comfort with lesbians as their teammates. They also indicated the belief that lesbianism was neither a dysfunctional 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 comments had an adverse affect upon feelings of team cohesion, expressed via a team member's perception of togetherness, 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 interpretation 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 responses 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 considered 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 problematic? 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 punished lead to desensitization and denial of the problem (Krane; Lenskyj 1999). Indeed, presuming that the sample 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-examination of the research question and a re-design of the research method. What is not known is whether behaviour 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* members 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 silence 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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