Examining the Workplace Experiences of Sport Employees who are LGBT: A Social Categorization Theory Perspective

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The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to explore the work experiences of sport employees who are LGBT, and examine how these individuals negotiate their multiple social identities in a sport context. Considering the growing interest in sport, and sport management in particular, it is important for scholars to gain of better understanding of why people choose to work in the sport industry, and understand how employee identity may influence career decisions and subsequent work experiences. Thus, the researchers only interviewed employees who did not fulfill coaching or player roles, as these individuals could potentially work in other industries. Analysis of the data revealed how working in a sport context may present sexual minorities with certain advantages, such as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem and gain social acceptance. When confronted with unjust treatment because of their sexual orientation, employees used coworker social support and social mobility techniques to cope with these negative situations. Although the employees did not always view their sexual orientation as salient to their identity, they had all disclosed their sexual orientation, to varying degrees, to others in the workplace. Finally, though the participants did not engage in social change activities, some of their supportive coworkers attempted to proactively create a more inclusive work environment. Implications of these findings are discussed and practical suggestions are provided.

For many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) persons, sport can be an unsupportive and even hostile environment (Anderson, 2005, 2009; Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Griffin, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b, 2010). In this heterosexist atmosphere, LGBT individuals are perceived to violate sport’s traditional norms and ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality, and are subsequently relegated to an out-group or devalued status (see Goffman, 1963; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Due to their out-group status, sexual minorities tend to have a markedly different work experience than their heterosexual counterparts. These differences become apparent when they are negatively stereotyped, forced to conceal their sexual identity, denied leadership positions, socially excluded, provided with limited organizational support, and receive poor performance evaluations—experiences in-group members do not usually encounter (Anderson 2002, 2005; Griffin 1998; Cunningham, et al., 2010; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a, 2010). As a result of this differential treatment, LGBT employees are more likely to report lower levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career success when compared with heterosexual coworkers (Ragins, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Furthermore, these varied experiences also contribute to increased instances of work-related stress and poor psychological health (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001).

A review of the extant literature in sport management points to two trends:

(a) A focus on coaches and players
(b) An almost singular investigation of people’s LGBT identity to the exclusion of other identities.

Both trends are noteworthy for several reasons. With respect to the first trend, understanding the experiences of coaches and players is certainly significant, but their roles require them to be in sport. This is not the case for
professional staff members who are LGBT. Thus, the question arises as to why LGBT professionals choose to work in heterosexist sport environments. The type of work in which they engage is transferable to other settings, such as marketing and promotions, academic services, business operations, or information and technology departments. Indeed, these employees could seek employment opportunities in one of the many companies that have implemented nondiscrimination policies for LGBT workers (over 85% of the Fortune 500; see King & Cortina, 2010), yet they elect to remain in the sports arena. Researchers have failed to consider or answer this paradox.

Second, researchers have largely focused on people’s LGBT identities while not examining the role of other identities. This is an unfortunate omission because the saliency of and people’s commitment to a particular identity is likely to fluctuate depending on the particular context (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In one notable exception, Gough (2007) found that involvement in sport provides unique benefits that can act as a buffer against the negative outcomes associated with having a stigmatized social identity. In his qualitative analysis, Gough showed how sport offered gay male athletes a therapeutic place of refuge where they could escape the personal struggles they faced outside of the sport context. These men explained how their athlete identity afforded them greater social acceptance, which enabled them to develop positive self-concepts. Gough’s work shows that context can play a meaningful role in determining how people negotiate various identities, but researchers have ignored these dynamics among professional staff members.

Thus, the purpose of this study was threefold:

(a) Explore the unique work experiences of LGBT sport employees;
(b) Understand the reasons why these employees work in sport environments that have traditionally been characterized as heterosexist; and
(c) Examine if and how the sport employee identity influences personal and work outcomes.

Toward this goal, we draw primarily from a social categorization framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Richer, & Wetherell, 1987), to understand how various social identities influence personal perspectives and work experiences. Researchers have drawn from the social categorization framework extensively to examine how sexual minorities (and other marginalized groups) negotiate their stigmatized social identity in a sport context (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2003, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b). In the current qualitative analysis, we contribute a new perspective to the literature by investigating how other social identities—in addition to sexual orientation—influence work experiences. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the theoretical framework and present specific research questions that guided the investigation.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity

The social categorization framework, which includes “social identity theory” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and “self categorization theory” (Turner et al., 1987), assists in understanding individual and group processes in various social settings. According to these two theories, people will categorize themselves and others in terms of social groups. When determining group membership, a variety of characteristics can be used to distinguish one group from another, including demographic variables (e.g., race, sex), religious beliefs (e.g., Muslim, Christian), political views (e.g., progressive, conservative), or other distinct affiliations (e.g., Yankees fan, Boston Red Sox fan). In general, people consider others similar to the self as “in-group members,” while classifying those who differ from the self as “out-group members.” Within the sport management literature, several scholars have noted how sexual minorities typically occupy an out-group status in sport. For example, Sartore and Cunningham’s (2010) interviews reveal how LGBT individuals believe their sexual orientation identity is generally stigmatized in sport organizations.

The social categorization framework contends that individuals hold multiple social identities and, depending on the context, certain identities will be more significant than others. Furthermore, a social categorization will influence behavior when it is psychologically salient to the person’s self-concept. Oakes (1987) suggests social identity salience is determined by two factors—accessibility and fit. In regards to accessibility, people draw from readily available social categorizations (chronically accessible) that are valued, important, or represent one’s self-concept (e.g., sex, race), or they rely on those that are self-evident and only salient in specific situations (situationally accessible). The accessible categorizations help people comprehend their social surroundings and determine how well their social identities fit in with the norms and expectations of a specific social context (Hogg, 2006). At times, the perceived fit will be poor, and individuals will not feel part of the in-group. When this happens, people may cycle through their various social identities (e.g., those based on religion, political affiliation, profession, favorite team) to achieve an optimal fit in the specific context (Hogg, 2006). This process is not completely involuntary; rather, the social categorization framework holds that people consciously strive to make social categorizations that improve their in-group fit and enhance their self-concept. Indeed, research suggests that when in-group membership is valued, one is motivated to achieve optimal fit because of the status, prestige, and social recognition group membership affords the person (Hogg, 2006). Thus, people use their in-group status as a means to maintain or boost personal self-esteem.

In regards to the current study, research suggests that sexual minorities are members of a devalued or
stigmatized social group, and this is especially the case in sport contexts (Anderson, 2005, 2009; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). As such, sport employees who are LGBT have oftentimes concealed their sexual orientation to “pass” as in-group (i.e., heterosexual) members (Krane & Barber, 2005). However, LGBT employees might also use other strategies to align more with in-group characteristics and subsequently reap the benefits associated with in-group membership (Ellemers, et al., 2002). Specifically, sexual minorities may emphasize one of their other social identities that are shared among the work group.

Though sexual minorities clearly negotiate a host of social identities (e.g., organizational identity, religious, etc.), past researchers have largely ignored these complexities, instead focusing solely on their LGBT identity. In this study, therefore, we draw from the aforementioned literature to explore how employees’ various social identities interact with their LGBT identities to affect their work experiences. Specifically, we investigate how interviewees’ salient social identifications influences various work experiences in a sport setting. Toward this end, we examined the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivates professional staff members who are LGBT to work in sport settings?
RQ2: What are the experiences of LGBT sport employees?
RQ3: Are LGBT sport employees’ work experiences influenced by their social identities?

Methods
A Qualitative, Case Study Approach

In this study, we adopted a multimethod qualitative approach so that we might gain a greater understanding of the employees’ work experiences. This included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of secondary document sources to examine the specific case. By adopting the case study method, we were better equipped to capture a holistic understanding of the phenomena, while also allowing for the uniqueness of the participants and the setting to be taken into account (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2005).

Research Setting

As articulated in the theoretical framework, context plays a vital role when examining the influence of social identities; therefore, it is important to discuss the research setting for this study. Participants were all employees at a Division I state university (DISU; a pseudonym for the actual university), located in the United States. By many accounts (e.g., participant perspectives, observing public websites, and reading online press releases), it was evident that the athletic department makes no formal attempt to support LGBT inclusiveness.

In contrast to similar, nearby universities, DISU does not include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination employment statement, and they do not offer domestic partner benefits. In addition, online biographies of heterosexual coaches and staff included the names of their significant others (i.e., wife, husband, fiancé) and children, while there was no mention of the significant others of coaches and staff who are LGBT. Participants also shared emails that contained invitations to department social gatherings, in which inclusive language was not used. Instead, employees were invited to bring their husbands or wives, with no mention of partners or significant others. When asked if they would still bring a significant other to these functions, such as a holiday party or team banquet, most of the participants said they would not feel comfortable doing so.

In regards to the community culture, the university ranks as one of the most conservative public institutions in the country, and has been criticized for its lack of diversity. Recently, however, programs have been implemented to ensure the campus becomes more welcoming for minority students and faculty. Collectively, these objective and subjective measures characterize the research setting as conservative, homogeneous in terms of diversity, and unsupportive of LGBT inclusiveness.

Participants

The first author conducted interviews with nine athletic department employees who worked in a variety of departments. The participants were mostly female (55.6%), White (77.8%), and had earned an advanced degree (55.6%). They ranged in age from 25 to 43 years ($M = 32.33; SD = 6.06$) and had all worked in the athletic department for a meaningful amount of time ($M = 6.89; SD = 3.69$). Seven of the participants were in committed relationships and two were single. They identified as lesbian ($n = 4$), gay ($n = 4$), or bisexual ($n = 1$). All of the employees had disclosed their sexual orientation to at least two other staff members, and one participant was completely open to all athletic department employees. Given the sensitive nature of the interview questions and the participants’ concern for anonymity, pseudonyms are used and specific job titles and tenure are not provided.

Procedures

Identifying employees who were willing to participate in the study was somewhat of a challenging endeavor. As previously noted, most sexual minorities in sport generally conceal their sexual orientation so to avoid prejudice and discrimination. Thus, it was necessary to use a snowball sampling technique (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) to identify potential participants. The initial participants consisted of the first author’s personal contacts who worked in the athletic department and had disclosed their sexual orientation to her personally. These individuals
were e-mailed a letter (to a private account) which the Human Subjects Review Board had approved describing the purpose of the study. The letter emphasized that should they choose to participate, their identity and personal information would remain confidential. In addition, those who received the e-mail were given the opportunity to suggest other employees who (a) currently, or had recently, worked for the athletic department, and (b) identified as LGBT. In sum, nine people were willing to participate and subsequent face-to-face interviews were scheduled. All interviews were conducted in a comfortable, off-campus location chosen by the participant.

It is interesting to note that the employees were eager to share their experiences with the authors, and saw their participation as a way to show others that there are LGBT people working in sport—even within conservative environments. Some viewed their involvement with the study as their own version of an “It Gets Better” video, or a way to demonstrate to other LGBT employees that they could enjoy positive experiences in a context that traditionally has not welcomed or accepted sexual minorities (Anderson, 2002; Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Although none of the participants were willing to disclose their name or job title, collectively they felt it was important for athletic departments to be aware that they had LGBT employees; and as such, efforts should always be made to make the work environment inclusive and hospitable for all people.

To ensure theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the interview guide included questions that appropriately reflected the theoretical framework as well as personal and professional experiences in collegiate sport—a qualitative design technique used extensively in the sport literature (see Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005). Participants responded to semistructured, open-ended questions regarding: (a) their personal and social identities (b) the work atmosphere, (c) employee-supervisor/coworker relationships, (d) ways their minority status influenced work experiences, (e) reasons why they worked in a sport setting, (f) personal and external perceptions of the organization, and (g) ways they or others could improve the workplace. The formal interviews were digitally recorded and ranged between 60–90 min in length. Throughout the entire research process, the first author documented personal observations and perceptions in a personal journal (Glesne, 2006). Reflexive journaling allows researchers to understand how their own biases influence the research process (Schwandt, 2007).

**Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed continually during the entire research process. The first step of data analysis involved reading each interview several times to gain familiarity with the data. Next, in a process of open coding (Berg, 2001), we identified common patterns and categories by meticulously examining the data line by line. A number of categories initially emerged during this process, including self-ascribed personal identity, employee or organizational identity, valued social identities, strategies to enhance acceptance and self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. Each individual interview was first analyzed in this way, and then broader connections were made among all open coding categories—a process known as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Integrating the categories and experiences of all the participants allowed higher order themes to emerge.

Though researchers use thick description (Geertz, 1973) to present the unique experiences of the participants, Fine, Weis, Wessen, and Wong (2000) contend researchers must “refrain from the naïve belief that these voices should stand on their own, or that the voices should (or do) survive without theorizing” (p.120). Thus, in the final step, we compared the higher order themes to concepts found in the theoretical framework—an approach consistent with previous research in sport (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Krane & Barber, 2005). Applying a theoretical framework is imperative to understanding the work experiences of LGBT individuals, as it enhances understanding and application of the research findings (for similar arguments see Krane, Andersen, & Strean, 1997; Smith & Deemer, 2000). In this vein, the findings and interpretations are related to the study’s theoretical framework.

We took several steps to improve credibility and trustworthiness, including the use of, reflexivity and member checking. As mentioned earlier, the first author kept a reflective journal to monitor personal positions. This allowed her to recognize when the participants’ words deviated from previous research findings in sport that pertain to LGBT individuals, and challenged her pre-conceived expectations about their experiences. Finally, participants reviewed the interpretations and conclusions drawn to confirm their thoughts and experiences were correctly portrayed in the study (Schwandt, 2007). Fortunately, the participants were quite vocal during this process and ensured their voices were clearly and accurately heard in the final paper.

Finally, we also believe it is important to note our position as researchers. Both authors are active in promoting LGBT equality, as evidenced by our teaching, service activities, and research. For instance, we are both members of the Allies group on campus, with Allies representing individuals “willing to provide a safe haven, a listening ear, and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people or anyone dealing with sexual orientation issues.” We also conduct research aimed at understanding sexual prejudice (Cunningham, et al., 2010; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), the experiences of sexual minorities (Melton &Cunningham,2012), and the ways in which sexual orientation diversity influences group and organizational outcomes (Cunningham, 2011, in press; Cunningham & Melton, 2011). This study represents a continuation of this research stream.
Findings and Discussion

Despite working in a sport organization that had no formal LGBT-inclusive policies, most of the participants expressed high levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall life satisfaction. Though all the employees identified with their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, they did not perceive their sexual orientation to be a central feature in their work environment. Rather, through the data, it appeared that other social identities were more salient in their lives, and played a significant role in shaping their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Higher order themes consistent with the theoretical framework include:

(a) Personal and social identification
(b) Motivation to work in sport
(c) Coping strategies
(d) Social change

Personal and Social Identification

As previously noted, a social categorization perspective holds that people have multiple social identities, and different identities become more or less salient in various contexts (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, to begin each interview, the participants responded to questions regarding their personal identities, and the importance they place on specific identities. Participants were also asked how they would describe themselves to those who worked within the athletic department. Consistent with a social categorization approach, those interviewed tended to describe themselves in terms of their respective social identities. Surprisingly, though all the participants knew the study was examining the experiences of sport employees who are LGBT, only one person mentioned sexual orientation during the initial questioning. Instead, participants identified themselves in terms of their sex, personality (e.g., hard-working, conscientious, caring, etc.), or other social identities (e.g., organizational, Christian, Democrat, mother). It was only after participants were specifically asked about their sexual orientation did they discuss their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. Given the purpose of the study, participants may have thought their sexual orientation was evident, and as such did not feel the need to focus on this aspect of their identity during the interview. However, it did not appear this was the case considering the participants continuously expressed how they did not want to be known solely by their sexual orientation. Rather, they viewed their other social identities to be more representative of how they saw themselves. Furthermore, they explained how their other salient identities had greater influence on their attitudes and actions in life in general. As such, analysis of the data revealed that participants displayed a low-level of commitment toward their sexual orientation identity and high commitment to their organizational identity.

Low Commitment

Despite the fact that all the participants identified as being LGBT, none of them considered it a highly salient aspect of their work or personal life. In particular, Samantha explained how her other identities took precedence over her sexual identity:

> Well, yes, (pauses) I do consider myself a lesbian. I just don’t think about it every second or minute of the day, kind of like I don’t think about the fact that my blood type is O positive. It’s just not that important in my daily activities. But, I do get up every morning and know I’m a mother and I need to take care of my kids. When I’m done getting them ready and off to school then I focus on what I need to accomplish at work that day, and that’s about all I have time for (chuckles). That’s me, a mom and a [job title].

Troy provided similar comments, but also suggested his sexual orientation may be more significant if he worked in a different setting or profession:

> I don’t think of myself that way, and I wouldn’t want others to think of me like that. Well, I mean, it’s fine if they know I’m gay, it’s just, (pauses) well I just want them to acknowledge everything about me, not just concentrate on that one aspect [sexual orientation] of me. I’m not a gay [specific job title], I’m just a [specific job title]. I don’t want to be known for being gay; I want to be known for how I do my job and the kind of person I am, period.

Though not quite as fervent, Jill held a similar opinion:

> I sort of think of it like, yeah, I’m gay, so what? It’s not a big deal, and I don’t think people should make an issue of it, gay or straight. They should be more concerned about performance. Were we able to sell more season tickets, or reach new attendance records? Not, who [sic] does she go home to at night.

According to the social categorization framework, categorization into a group may be threatening to an individual’s self-concept when the person is not committed to that particular social group (Ellemers et al., 2002). The
findings seem to support research that suggests people will resist categorization when they:

(a) Want to maintain a degree of individual uniqueness (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999);
(b) Deem the categorization to be irrelevant in the specific context (Ellemers, 2001); or
(c) Want others to consider other categorizations (Ellemers Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999).

The identity negotiation literature may also aid in understanding why the participants overtly, and continuously, expressed they did not want to be defined by their sexual orientation. Specifically, this literature suggests two processes regarding how self-concepts or identities are constructed in relation to social environments: behavior confirmation and self-verification. Those who favor behavioral confirmation argue that during the identity negotiation process, individuals behave in manners that meet the expectations of relevant others in their social setting (McNulty & Swann, 1994). Considering DISU lacked public signs of acceptance (e.g., offering domestic partner benefits, or having a nondiscrimination hiring statement that included sexual orientation), employees may have been reluctant to openly express their sexual orientation at work. Similarly, if LGBT employees believed their coworkers expected them to act in ways consistent with the stereotypical sport employee (i.e., White, heterosexual male; see Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2001), they may have been more likely to downplay their LGBT identity. On the other hand, the theory of self-verification holds that people engage in various behaviors in an effort to bring others to see themselves as they perceive their identity (Swann, 1987). As revealed in the interview data, the participants did not want their coworkers to think of them solely as the “gay” employee, and thus made it explicitly clear, through their words and low commitment to their LGBT identity, that they were a complete person—with an array of qualities, characteristics, and social identities.

It is important to emphasize that though the participants displayed a low commitment to their sexual orientation identity, they did recognize their sexual orientation was a part of their identity and did not always reject being labeled as such. For example, none of the participants expressed dismay with the fact that the study’s recruitment letter identified them as being LGBT sport employees. Thus, their low commitment seemed to be a way to convey to others how they wanted to be viewed in the workplace, and not as a means to conceal or deny their sexual orientation.

**Organizational Identity** When explaining their identity, most of the responses began with descriptions of the position the person held, the department in which she or he worked, or DISU’s team name. When asked how she would describe herself to others, Maya proudly said, “I’m a [team name]. I bleed [the school color].” Considering people hold multiple social identities, it is interesting that eight out of the nine participants initially described themselves in terms of their occupation or organization. Drawing from a social categorization framework, Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest that organizational identification is one form of self-categorization that people use when defining their self-concepts. Employees are likely to identify with their organization when they perceive the organization to be attractive, or they believe the organization presents a positive external image to relevant outsiders (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). On several occasions, participants alluded to how the surrounding community viewed the athletic department in a positive way. Maya’s words adequately convey the collective opinion expressed during the interviews:

> The town eats, breaths, and sleeps [DISU team name] athletics. They love their [DISU team name] and can’t get enough of it. A ton of old [alumni] move back here so they can go to all the games. When they find out I work for the [sports team] they get all excited, they want to talk for hours, even take me out to dinner. It’s awesome, makes ya feel special, you know…

Furthermore, employees who are highly identified with their organization view their organizational identity as more salient than other social identities and believe the defining characteristics of the organization closely resemble their personal characteristics (Dutton et al., 1994). Though Jill was previously a student-athlete at a rival university, she is now highly identified with DISU’s athletic department:

> I’m a [DISU team name]. My old teammates would kill me for saying that, but now that I’ve worked here so long, I’m more of a [DISU team name] than a [alma mater’s team name] … I guess I feel that way because I really believe in our philosophy here, I like what we’re doing, like the direction we’re taking.

Similar to Jill, all of the employees used the words “we”, “us”, or “our” when referencing organizational initiatives. They seemed to view the organization’s mission as their personal mission, and they shared many of the same goals. Chuck, who works in student-athlete services, expressed:

> I really enjoy helping others, and my job lets me do that. Our mission is to give kids [student-athletes] the skills they need to be successful after their athletic career ends … In my mind these [skills] are the most important things they need to learn while they’re in college … That’s why I love my job so much. I get to make a difference in their lives … by teaching them what they don’t learn on the field, or by just being there for them when the coach isn’t … Sometimes, well lots of times, they [student-athletes] frustrate the heck out of me … But when they do well in a class for the first time, or when they graduate, or when they get their first job … it’s pretty rewarding.
Having a strong organizational identification can engender a host of positive outcomes for the employee and the organization as a whole. For instance, when the organization is viewed in a favorable way, by the employee or the public, employees are more likely to use their organizational identity as a means to positively distinguish themselves from others, and enhance their self-concept (Dutton et al., 1994). Overall, the employees were reluctant to identify with their stigmatized social identity (i.e., sexual orientation), but were quite willing to draw upon their organizational identity when describing themselves.

**Motivation to Work in Sport**

It is worth noting that, though the participants exhibited a low level of commitment with their sexual orientation identity and a high organizational identity, they were completely aware of their heterosexist work environment. Similar to findings in previous studies, employees did not feel as if they could invite significant others to department functions or display pictures of their significant others at work. Employees also feared that certain less-accepting coworkers would view them negatively, or use their sexual orientation against them in the workplace. Consequently, most of the participants only disclosed their sexual orientation to trusted coworkers and supervisors. These findings are consistent with those from past research, where employees were reluctant to fully disclose their sexual orientation, especially given the negative consequences sometimes associated with doing so (Krane & Barber, 2005; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007).

Furthermore, all of the employees acknowledged that they could hold similar jobs in other, more supportive, industries; yet, despite these experiences, they preferred to work in sport. One participant, who previously worked as an account manager in a nearby metropolitan area, expressed his eagerness to work for the athletic department:

> Yeah, I liked it [previous job] and I made a nice living, which doesn’t hurt. I really liked where I lived. I wish DISU was [sic] in [metropolitan area]. But, I jumped at the opportunity when my friend told me there was an opening here [DISU].

Even when presented with alternative and attractive job opportunities, employees still exhibited strong organizational commitment. Troy seemed almost amused when he stated:

> I could leave if I wanted to, sure. I’ve had other job offers in other departments, all actually offered more money. But I like being part of the athletic department. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I don’t think I’ll ever leave (laughs).

Like Troy, several participants noted how their commitment to the organization was difficult to understand, especially considering the athletic department made no attempt to support LGBT-inclusiveness. Mitchell explained:

> I know it doesn’t make sense, or maybe I’m a bad gay (laughs), but to be completely honest, even if I was offered the AD [athletic director] job at [participant’s alma mater], then not offering insurance (domestic-partner) benefits wouldn’t be a deal breaker. It just wouldn’t. Would it be nice? Do I think they should have it? Yeah, of course. Would I turn down the job because they didn’t have it? No.

When elaborating on why they work in sport, analysis of the data revealed two significant benefits employees experience by being members of the sport organization: enhanced self-esteem and social acceptance.

**Enhanced Self-esteem** According to the social categorization framework, when a group is valued in society, an individual’s membership in the group can significantly enhance her or his self-esteem (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). In the current analysis, employees used their affiliation with the athletic department to bolster their personal self-concept and improve their status among others. Hayden works with several teams in the athletic department and said:

> It’s sad (laughs), but I live vicariously through the team. When the [team at DISU] win, I feel like I win … It’s terrible, but I’ll even catch myself saying we are [conference] champions, like I was out there playing (laughs) … After the women’s [DISU team] won [conference championship] last year, I rode on an emotional high for at least a month. I still get excited when I just think about being there. I’m not just a fan, I feel like I’m part of the team (laughs) … Not many jobs can make you feel that way.

Though Hayden found her feelings somewhat humorous, her experience highlights an exciting aspect of her job that is relatively unique to sport.

Being associated with the athletic department also enhanced participants’ self-concept even when they were not in work settings. Wearing clothes embossed with the athletic department logo was one method employees used to display their organizational affiliation outside the work environment. James explains:

> My friends joke that I only wear [team name] stuff. They (the athletic department) don’t make us wear the [sport logo] gear. It’s just easy, and I guess I prefer wearing it … Especially when I have to go to other departments on campus, or when I go out to lunch or somewhere else in town. Because it’s [sport logo] and it says [specific DISU team] on it, people know I work for the athletic department … Not everyone, but a lot people in town treat you better if they know you work for the athletic department. It’s a good feeling, you know … My gay pride t-shirt doesn’t elicit the same response (laughs).
James’ final comment draws attention to the distinctly different response one can receive as a result of displaying a devalued social identity. When wearing athletic department gear, James described how he is met with smiles and warm greetings at local businesses; however, when he wears clothing that signifies his gay sexual orientation, he typically receives poorer customer service.

A social categorization framework also posits that associating with groups that represent values or characteristics that an individual considers similar to their personal identity, and distinguishes them from others, has the ability to enhance self-esteem (Hogg, 2006). Being a member of a group that possesses these positive qualities (i.e., an athletic department) gives individuals an additional opportunity to view themselves in a positive way. This subsequently increases the likelihood that a person will like herself or himself (Dutton et al., 1994). Illustrative of this, Hayden explains how being an athletic department employee improves her self-esteem by shielding her from negative stereotypes:

I think when I say I work for DISU, people are less quick to judge me, you know. I don’t know (pauses). Maybe I just like saying I work for DISU. Like, I’ve volunteered and coached a rec (recreational) youth basketball team for the past few years … Being a former player, and working for the athletic department, people think I know what I’m talking about and give me more respect than the other volunteer parents. I think if I didn’t work at DISU they would only see me as being gay. If that happened, I’m almost positive they would go hide their children, and I would be asked to vacate the premises (laughs) … I laugh, but I’m serious, you know how people in this town can be.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate how being associated with the athletic department offers employees a means to enhance their self-esteem. This may be particularly salient for sexual minorities, as their disadvantaged social identity does not always afford them with the same benefit.

Social Acceptance People who hold unfavorable attitudes toward sexual minorities may avoid contact with individuals who are, or they perceive to be, LGBT (Herek, 2009, Sartore, & Cunningham, 2010). Maintaining a distance from people who are LGBT ensures that the person will not be associated with this stigmatized social group. However, this behavior can cause sexual minorities to feel socially isolated at work or in their community (Herek, 2009; Ragins, 2008). A person behaving this way was not uncommon in the participants’ lives; however, the data revealed that participants’ affiliation with the athletic department (i.e., organizational identity) reduced these occurrences and encouraged others to be more accepting. Mitchell described how his job alleviated tensions with his neighbors:

My neighbors knew I was gay. They saw my partner and me all the time. They never talked to me, avoided eye contact if we happened to get the mail at the same time. Then, at a game last year, the husband saw me on the sideline. I guess their curiosity forced them to talk to me. Probably couldn’t understand why a gay guy was standing on the sideline (laughs). I told him what I did for a living, and ever since then, it’s like I have new neighbors. They’re always smiling and waving. They offer to keep an eye on my house when I travel, and even invited me to the 4th of July block party.

Similar to Mitchell’s experience with his neighbors, other participants explained how working in sport provided them with a way to connect with people. Beth stated, “everyone loves sport, it gives you something to talk about, makes people think you have something in common with them.” Working for a sport organization also gave Troy an opportunity to improve his relationship with his father:

I’m not an athlete, you know that. I don’t even get into sports that much. I only started working for DISU because I needed a job after I graduated. But I love the people I work with and I like my job… There was one unexpected surprise that came from taking this job… After I started working at DISU, my dad and I actually had something to talk about… When he found out I was gay, he just stopped speaking to me… except when my mother made him. But now, he calls me up and asks about my job and how the team looks. He’s really into college football… He doesn’t seem to understand that I don’t work for the football team, but it still gives us a way to bond.

In many respects, an affiliation with the athletic department allows individuals to recognize other qualities the participant possesses, and not focus solely on her or his sexual orientation.

Coping Strategies

The findings presented above demonstrates how working in the athletic department provided sexual minorities with unique benefits, which they may not have received in other settings. However, as we discussed earlier, not all aspects of the sport industry are advantageous for employees who are LGBT. Indeed, participants expressed how they face prejudice and discrimination at work, and must alter their behavior to adhere to sport’s heteronormative principles. Analysis of the data suggests employees used two main coping mechanisms when responding to these negative situations. They include social support at work, and social mobility.

Social Support at Work Having social support in the workplace can positively relate to work and personal outcomes for employees who are LGBT (Huffman, Watrous, & King, 2008). Past researchers have emphasized organizational support and specific policies which
an organization can implement (i.e., nondiscrimination policy, domestic-partner benefits) to demonstrate LGBT inclusiveness (see Ragins, 2004). However, support can also emanate from informal relationships with supervisors or coworkers. In the current analysis, participants drew primarily from these latter forms of support to cope with the negative consequences associated with their minority status (i.e., LGBT identity). Supportive coworkers created a safe place at work for these employees—a place where participants felt their identity was affirmed and accepted. In Beth’s words:

My department is small; we have about 10 full time staff … I think all my coworkers know I’m gay, but I only talk about it with the two people I’m really close to … They’re great. They just act like nothing’s different. They’re always there for me … they helped me so much last year when I broke up with my girlfriend … They just treat me like they would any other friend. And what’s really nice is they never ask me those dumb questions … You know, like, “why are you gay? So you’re really not attracted to guys?” Or, my favorite, “who’s the man in the relationship?”

Beth’s coworkers provided a sense of normalcy, such that she could feel comfortable with her sexual orientation. Coworkers, who are also close friends, can be a source of tremendous support during the coming out process (Ragins, 2008). Mitchell’s experience demonstrates how important coworker support can be for employees who are LGBT:

I struggled with accepting the fact I was gay … For several years I basically just convinced myself there was no way I was gay … And even if I was, I decided I would never act on it … So I was really scared … I’d say terrified to tell [name of coworker] I was gay. We had worked together for five years … he was my best friend and my roommate. I figured he would want to move out immediately and never be seen with me again … But when I finally told him, he just said it was alright [sic], nothing was going to change between us, and then he hugged me. That was huge for me (pauses) … Just to know people would still love me and I wasn’t going to lose all of my friends because I was gay. Him being there for me helped a lot during that time in my life … He was more okay with me being gay than I was.

The emotion Mitchell displayed while recounting this experience made it overtly evident how significant this event was in his life.

Not only were coworkers a source of acceptance for the participants, but they also acted as advocates and shielded participants from adverse or discriminatory situations. Jill was one employee who benefited from this type of support:

Some of my other coworkers found out I was gay, and took it upon themselves to tell several of my other coworkers. I didn’t know this was happening at all until I asked one of my coworkers why she never went to lunch or worked out with Krista [pseudonym for another coworker] anymore. She told me it was because Krista had a problem with gays … She [Krista] was basically telling everyone how disgusting it was that I was gay. My coworker said she wouldn’t associate with anyone who would act like that … She [the supportive coworker] even told my boss about it and our boss made Krista go to some kind of sensitivity training (laughs).

These examples point to how significant and beneficial social support in the workplace can be for sexual minorities, similar to the safe havens Ragins (2004) has discussed. It is also encouraging that Jill’s supervisor did not ignore the issue. The supervisor was under no formal obligation to address the problem, but responded to Krista’s actions by requiring her to attend diversity training. Since the training, Jill describes her relationship with Krista as cordial and believes the negative gossip has ceased.

Social Mobility Within a social categorization framework, social mobility is a process by which individuals attempt to escape negative outcomes related to their disadvantaged social identity by associating themselves with high status groups (Hogg, 2006; Ellemers et al., 2002). Past research suggests sexual minorities will use the practice of passing (attempting to appear heterosexual) or distancing to evade discriminatory treatment (Krane & Barber, 2005; Ragins, 2008). Only one of the participants made an overt effort to appear homosexual to certain coworkers. Instead, employees drew from many of their other social identities to achieve in-group status at work. For instance, Chuck uses his “angler” identity to blend in with his male coworkers, “we all love fishing and go on a big fishing trip once a year … so we always have something to talk about … It makes me seem like I’m just one of the guys.” Others gained in-group status by emphasizing their religious or political affiliation. Samantha noted, “I’m a Republican and a Christian, so I’m just like everyone else here [at DISU].” Similarly, Jill attributed her in-group status to her religious faith:

Religion is important to a lot of people here [at DISU] … about a year ago I mentioned something about my church … I think my coworkers were surprised to hear I was a Christian (laughs). I guess you can’t be a Christian and gay (sarcastically) … I could tell if I talked about my faith they would like me, or at least think I wasn’t completely evil. And I was right. I guess being a Christian makes me “okay” in their mind.

These strategies are consistent with what Clair, Beatty, and MacLean (2005) described as a “normalizing approach” to disclosing one’s sexual orientation. In this case, people reveal their LGBT status while also highlighting the similarities they have with heterosexuals.
In the current study, employees stressed several similarities, including the love of fishing, religious beliefs, and political affiliation. Irrespective of the approach taken, all of the similarities were geared at reducing the perceived dissimilarity between the staff members who were LGBT and their coworkers.

Another normalizing approach was to emphasize the common identity with others. As James recounted:

> When I started working here [at DISU], a lot of my coworkers had a real problem with me being gay, and being out … It wasn’t real fun. But I wanted to work in sport, and I wasn’t going to let them get me down. I just committed myself to working harder than anyone else. I was always working … When I wasn’t working, I was at a [DISU team name] game (laughs). I think people began to respect my work ethic and commitment to the department … I think they started to accept me more when they realized we all do the same thing [in relation to a profession]… We have the same goals… We’re all [DISU team name].

The coping strategies these employees used lend support to the notion that society, and sport, is becoming more accepting of persons who are LGBT. The support employees received from coworkers and supervisors demonstrates how small steps are being taken toward acceptance and equality, even within a conservative climate. It is also encouraging that none of the employees felt compelled to hide their sexual orientation completely. However, it is important to note that only one of the participants held a highly visible position within the athletic department. These dynamics might differ for persons who are in the public eye, such as an athletic director, coach, or player.

**Social Change**

As previously highlighted, as a way of coping with a devalued or stigmatized identity, some employees chose other identities to make salient within the sport context, while others engaged in various coping mechanisms. According to the social categorization framework, another approach is to engage in social change strategies to improve the social standing of their group (Hogg, 2006; Turner et al., 1987). In the current study, employees detailed several obstacles sexual minorities face because of sports’ heterosexist culture. However, none of the employees felt it was their responsibility or place to enact a drastic social change. Mitchell commented, “Yes, things need to change, but I’m not going to be the poster boy for gay rights.” Hayden expressed similar sentiments, “It would be great if they [the athletic department] offered support, but I’m not going to go demand they change the policy… just so I can be seen as some power dyke pushing a gay agenda, no thanks.” This reluctance to take a stand may derive from signals they received from fellow employees. Beth’s supervisor, acting under good intentions, explained she should not disclose her lesbian identity to top athletic directors, “he [the supervisor] said people shouldn’t be that way, but they [the athletic directors] just don’t understand…” if I just pretended like I had a boyfriend they’d like me.” These “helpful suggestions” were meant to protect participants from discrimination, but they reinforced the idea that acceptance is the exception, and not the norm, in sport contexts.

Other responses from the employees seemed to justify heterosexist attitudes present in sport. For instance, Troy expressed, “it’s not the athletic department’s fault, it’s a societal problem.” Chuck explained, “People were raised this way, they’re taught it’s a sin. It’s hard to change deep-rooted beliefs.” Instead of holding the athletic department accountable for implementing inclusive policies, employees criticized federal and state governments for not taking action. Samantha contended, “I don’t think they [DISU] can do anything until the laws change. It’s a state school in a state that doesn’t allow gay marriage … the government has to step in.”

Organizational identity literature might explicate why the employees held these opinions. From one perspective, if employees derive a high self-esteem from membership in a particular group (i.e., member of DISU Athletics), it is unlikely they will arrive at explanations that reflect poorly on that group. Doing so would not only reflect poorly on that entity, but as members of that entity, such negativity would reflect poorly on them, too. In a related way, when individuals are highly identified with their organization, they believe negative aspects of the company derive from external, rather than internal, forces (Dutton et al., 1994). This is also the case when highly identified fans attribute their team’s loss to poor officiating instead of the players’ performance.

It was evident that employees did not see themselves as change agents. However, participants’ behaved in certain ways that challenged taken-for-granted norms and improved general attitudes toward persons who are LGBT. For example, being “out” at work is one way to promote LGBT inclusiveness (Martinez & Hebl, 2010). Specifically, research suggests heterosexual employees are more likely to consider LGBT issues when they have coworkers who have “come out.” Furthermore, being honest and open about one’s sexual orientation can improve interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Martinez & Hebl, 2010). Disclosing their sexual orientation to coworkers enabled employees to challenge negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Participants revealed how being out allowed heterosexual coworkers to realize the shared similarities, and changed coworkers’ unfavorable view of persons who are LGBT.

Although those interviewed lacked confidence in initiating change, their supportive coworkers took steps toward creating a more LGBT-inclusive work environment. Several of the coworkers showed their commitment for LGBT inclusiveness by becoming certified allies. After completing ally training, these individuals secured a place card on their office doors, which publically stated that their office was a safe and accepting environment for LGBT individuals. Requiring Jill’s unsupportive
coworker to attend diversity training also demonstrated a positive change, and exemplified the supervisor’s intolerance for prejudice and discrimination. If it were not for these employees’ willingness to be out in the workplace, these relationships and inclusive measures may not have materialized.

The willingness of heterosexual employees to speak out for LGBT rights is also highlighted here. Heterosexuals have power and status in sport organizations. They can also advocate for equality and social change without being accused of pushing their agenda or being self-serving (Lassiter & Barret, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). On the other hand, employees who are LGBT might face these and other forms of resistance. As previously noted, Hayden recognized this possibility in expressing that she did not want to be viewed as “some power dyke pushing a gay agenda.” These words point to the importance of those with status and power to speak out for organizational justice and social change.

Conclusion

Working in a sport context presented sexual minorities with certain advantages, such as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem and gain social acceptance. The desire to attain these benefits motivated individuals who are LGBT to work in sport settings, and may explain why the participants identified more strongly with their organizational identity than their sexual orientation. When treated unfairly because of their sexual orientation, employees relied on social support at work and social mobility tactics to help them cope with these negative situations. Although the employees did not view their sexual orientation as salient, they were all out, to varying degrees, in the workplace. For heterosexual employees, establishing close relationships with coworkers who were LGBT inspired social change within some sections of the athletic department. Most encouraging, supportive heterosexual employees displayed intolerance for prejudice and discrimination, and began proactively advocating for LGBT-inclusiveness.

Findings from this study provide several theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, previous research on organizational identity primarily focuses on how organizational identity relates to organizational outcomes (e.g., employee productivity, turnover, or job satisfaction); whereas, this study examined how organizational identity may enhance personal outcomes (i.e., self-esteem, life satisfaction, social acceptance). Specifically, the findings in this study point to how a sport employee identity can counter the negative effects of having a devalued social identity (i.e., LGBT identity).

In terms of practical implications, supervisor and coworker support significantly related to the participants’ job satisfaction and overall life satisfaction—a finding consistent with previous research (Huffman et al., 2008). Offering LGBT-support or ally, training may lead to increased satisfaction and well-being among employees who are LGBT, which can relate to improved organizational outcomes (Ragins, 2008). In addition, considering sexual minorities are given limited opportunities to freely express their sexual orientation identity at work, it may be advantageous for sport organizations to establish formal or informal LGBT social networks. Forming relationships with others allows sexual minorities to view their devalued social identity in a more positive light (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, offering these programs creates a more inclusive work atmosphere, which can positively relate to enhanced organizational outcomes for athletic departments (see Cunningham, 2011). This type of support also reduces minority stress and increases the likelihood that sexual minorities will feel confident to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace (Meyer, 2003). Finally, to truly promote inclusiveness, sport organizations need to implement formal policies that foster equality, such as posting a nondiscrimination statement or by offering domestic-partner benefits. These strategies not only encourage social change, but also can significantly impact organizational outcomes (King & Cortina, 2010). In fact, empirical evidence suggests that when athletic departments combine a proactive diversity management strategy with valuing sexual orientation diversity, they significantly outperform their rivals on objective measures of success (Cunningham, 2011b).

Although this study provides several contributions, it is also important to recognize its limitations. Considering the qualitative nature of the study, these findings may not generalize to other settings. However, similar patterns might be expected in similar work contexts, but more research is needed on sport organizations that are more or less inclusive than the one studied in for this paper. Furthermore, the findings from this analysis serve to enhance understanding regarding the unique experiences of sexual minorities in sport, and may help athletic departments become work environments that are more hospitable for all employees. Future research should continue to explore specific ways sport organizations can support their diverse employees so that both the individual and the organization achieve success.

References


LGBT Workplace Experiences


