A Multilevel Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBT Sport Participants

Abstract

The purpose of this theoretical article is to present a multilevel model for understanding the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sport participants. The author argues that macro (i.e., cultural norms, institutionalized practices), meso (i.e., leader behaviors, organizational culture, group support), and micro (i.e., sexual identity, salient identities, sex) level factors influence the attitudes toward and experiences and behaviors of sexual minorities within the sport context. Research and policy implications are discussed.

Diversity has been, and promises to continue to be, one of the most important issues in sport organizations and for sport managers. Its pre-eminence stems from a host of factors, including dramatic changes in US demographics that correspond to changes observed in sport organizations and on teams, shifts in the nature and organization of the workplace, legal mandates, social pressures for equality, and the realization that differences among employees can substantially impact sport organizations (Cunningham, 2008b; Cunningham & Fink, 2006). As a result, every major sport league or governing body has adopted diversity management policies and procedures aimed at increasing the representation of marginalized groups and/or reaching out to underserved communities (see Cunningham, 2011b, for a review).

At the same time, scholars have increasingly focused their efforts on understanding diversity in the sport and physical activity context. A review of this literature suggests that most of these efforts have focused on race (e.g., Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Nadeau, Jones, Pegoraro, O’Reilly, & Carvalho, 2011; Singer, 2005), gender (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Kampa-hoff, Armentrout, & Driska, 2010; Shaw & Frisby, 2006), or organizational diversity strategies (e.g., Chelladurai, 2009; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). Interestingly though, examinations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons (LGBT) have lagged behind considerably. To be sure, scholars have examined this research area for several decades (e.g., Griffin, 1998), and interest has increased of late, as a recent special is-
sue in the *Journal of Homosexuality* illustrates (Anderson, 2011). However, compared to other diversity forms (e.g., race, gender), systematic investigation of LGBT athletes, coaches, and administrators is lacking.

This omission is unfortunate on a number of fronts. First, LGBT persons represent 4–17 percent of the US population (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991), making them more numerous than several racial minority groups. Second, prejudice directed toward sexual minorities has the potential to negatively affect their psychological and physical well-being due to the minority stress they incur (Herek, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Third, the extant research in sport has offered somewhat equivocal findings: sexual prejudice is commonplace in many sport professionals and in many ways cemented as part of the sport culture (e.g., Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010), yet there are some sport contexts where sexual minorities are fully accepted (Anderson, 2009) and where sexual orientation diversity results in meaningful organization performance gains (Cunningham 2011c; Cunningham & Melton, 2011). Thus, there is a need for more critical, systematic examination of LGBT issues in the sport and physical activity context to more fully flesh out and understand these issues.

Therefore, in addressing this need, the purpose of this special issue is to explore and critically analyze the lived experiences of and issues pertaining to LGBT persons participating in sport. In this introductory article, I diverge somewhat from the traditional “introduction to the special issue” format; that is, rather than introducing and providing a summary of each article individually, I draw from the contributions in this special issue to offer a framework for understanding the experiences of LGBT sport participants. In doing so, I adopt a multilevel perspective and argue that examination of factors at the macro (i.e., cultural norms, institutionalized practices), meso (i.e., leader behaviors, organizational culture, and group support), and micro (i.e., sexual identity, salient identities, sex) levels provide a fuller understanding of LGBT issues in the sport and physical activity context.

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Sport organizations, by their very nature, are complex, multilevel systems (Chelladurai, 2009). This means that there are factors at various levels, such as societal level norms and activities, competitor’s actions, the organization’s culture, and employee attitudes, to name a few, that all influence the activities within an organization and the decisions managers make. And, the reverse is also observed, such that the experiences and behaviors of individuals collectively influence outcomes at the organizational and environmental level. As Kozlowski and Klein (2000) argue, “fundamental to the levels per-
The benefits of multilevel theorizing is also evident when seeking to understand the experiences of LGBT sport participants. That is, factors at the societal (i.e., macro), organizational (i.e., meso), and individual (i.e., micro) levels all influence the prejudice they encounter and their opportunities for meaningful sport experiences. An illustrative summary of the model is presented in Figure 1. In the following text, I outline these factors and explain how, why, and when they might influence the experiences and opportunities of sexual minorities in sport.

**Macro-level factors**

Macro-level factors are those elements in the external organization environment that can influence sport participants and their behaviors. The articles in this special issue point to two macro-level factors: cultural norms and institutionalized practices.

**Cultural Norms.** According to Coakley (2009), a norm “is a shared expectation that people use to identify what is acceptable and unacceptable in a social world” (p. 157). They have the potential to shape how people view LGBT individuals and the attitudes they hold toward them. Cultural norms also provide a backdrop for understanding what behaviors, preferences, and attitudes are acceptable in a given place and time, and what are not. These norms can influence activities at national, state, and local levels.
As an illustrative example, data from large-scale national polls suggest that attitudes toward LGBT individuals have improved over time, such that, today, a majority of Americans polled have favorable attitudes toward sexual minorities. This represents a marked improvement from as recently as 20 years ago, when the majority of Americans disapproved of same-sex relationships (see Herek, 2009, for a detailed overview). The more positive attitudes expressed at a national level was manifested several ways, including the policies and procedures to which American businesses adhere. For instance, according to the Human Rights Campaign, in 2009, 94% of Fortune 100 companies had non-discriminatory policies directed toward sexual orientation, 60% had policies directed toward gender identity, and 88% provide partner benefits. These represent improvements in provisions allotted for sexual minorities, and they correspond with the aforementioned national attitudinal changes (i.e., the changing cultural norms).

This discussion suggests that cultural norms regarding sexual minorities, whether at the national or local level, will also influence attitudes toward LGBT sport participants (see also Sartore, 2012). Indeed, Anderson’s (2009, 2011) work suggests that attitudes toward gay male athletes has improved over the past decade—a shift that parallels the improved attitudes toward LGBT individuals observed in Western countries. Staurowky (2012) makes similar arguments, and points to the more frequent and positive depictions of LGBT individuals in the media today—artifacts of cultural norms. Empirical work also supports this connection, as Bush, Anderson, and Carr (2012) observe that British university male athletes held very positive attitudes toward gay men who might be participating on their teams. However, the pendulum swings both ways, and persons in less progressive cultural settings are more likely to experience sexual prejudice (Melton & Cunningham, 2012) or to express prejudice themselves (Shang & Gill, 2012). These studies suggest that the cultural norms and standards within a given context can shape the prevalence of heterosexism and the specific sexual prejudice athletes encounter.

**Institutionalized Practices.** Institutionalization refers to the process whereby “social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). Over time, various activities, mindsets, or ideals can take on a taken-for-granted status such that people unquestioningly accept them. As they are repeated over time, the activities, mindsets, and ideals become reinforced and sedemented (Oliver, 1992). Further, people and organizations within a given context will reinforce these institutionalized norms because of the legitimacy associated with doing so (see Washington & Patterson, 2011). As an example, Cunningham (2008a) argued that, because of history, tradition, prevailing stereotypes, and a lack of legal enforcement, gender discrimination has become institutionalized in sport.
Within the context of the current discussion, institutionalized norms and rules related to gender, sport, and participation can influence the experiences and opportunities for women and sexual minorities. As one illustrative example, transgender athletes in Lucas-Carr and Krane’s (2012) qualitative analysis had to negotiate ways to “fit in” to traditional sport settings that have been organized by gender. That is, the athletes were seen as outsiders or others because their gender identity did not match the institutionalized ways that sport has traditionally been organized. The struggles they encountered manifested in several ways, including the decisions related to for which teams to play, displaying the “appropriate” level of physicality and aggression on the field, and behaviors in the locker room.

As Staurowsky (2012) notes, institutionalized norms related to gender and sport participation also influenced Caster Semenya—a female sprinter from South Africa who, largely based on her physical appearance, was required by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to be sex tested (Staurowsky, 2012). Thus, even though her time was not among the fastest ever run, her dominating performance in that particular race, coupled with “masculine” physical features and attire, resulted in her woman-ness being questioned. Representative of the prevailing dialogue associated with the event, *Sports Illustrated* ran an article on the story with the ethically questionable headline that read, “Well, Is She or Isn’t She?” (Epstein, 2009). As these examples show, institutionalized practices have the potential to negatively influence the experiences of women and LGBT sport participants.

**Meso-Level Factors**

In addition to macro-level factors, meso-level factors can influence the experiences and opportunities of sexual minorities in sport. These factors operate at the organizational or team level of analysis and include leader behaviors, organizational culture, and group support.

**Leader Behaviors.** Leaders have a substantial impact, both positive and negative, on the diversity-related activities within organizations. They set the strategic objectives related to diversity, allocate time and resources to diversity-related initiatives, and provide behavioral and attitudinal cues for others to model. Social learning theory speaks directly to these dynamics, as Bandura (1986) argued that “virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (p. 19). Thus, when a leader actively supports diversity, it is likely that others in the organization will, too; on the other hand, ambivalence or hostility toward diversity will also be mirrored, resulting in people who differ from the typical majority being marginalized and organizational diversity initiatives failing (see Cunningham, 2009b; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004).
These dynamics were also observed in several of the studies included in this special issue. In some cases, top management displayed antipathy toward LGBT issues in general and sexual minorities in particular. For instance, in Melton and Cunningham’s (2012) qualitative analysis of lesbian athletes of color, they found that some coaches displayed overt forms of sexual prejudice. In one case, the coach threatened to tell a player’s parents that she was gay (an act that would have had negative repercussions for the player) unless she complied with his demands related to the team and her schoolwork. Thus, consistent with the notion that sexual prejudice is used to intimidate people (Sartore, 2012), the coach’s hostility permeated throughout the team, and heterosexism took on an institutionalized nature. In other cases, support from athletic administrators made a meaningful difference in the lives of LGBT athletes. For instance, Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker (2012), in their study of LGBT athletes who had disclosed their sexual identity, illustrated how coaches and athletic counselors provided strong support for the athletes. This encouragement was particularly helpful, considering it came at a time when other persons in positions of power (e.g., administrators, parents) were antagonistic toward them.

Organizational Culture. According to Schein (1990), organizational culture refers to the pattern of values, assumptions, and beliefs that have developed over time and are widely shared by organizational members. An organization’s culture serves to direct behaviors and is taught to newcomers as a model for what is valid and appropriate.

A number of researchers have pointed to the importance of organizational cultures characterized by diversity and inclusion (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). In such workplaces, diversity is seen as a source of competitive advantage, employees come from different backgrounds and have varied perspectives on issues, a diverse group has decision making power, people value differences and what they can learn from others, there are open lines of communication, and the strategic aims of the workplace are in line with principles of inclusion (see also Ely & Thomas, 2001). Empirical investigations suggest that organizations with proactive and inclusive cultures outperform their peers in a number of areas, including opportunities to be creative, workforce satisfaction, and attraction of talented employees (Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2001, 2003). More recent research shows that these benefits are best realized when coupled with a workforce marked by racial diversity (Cunningham, 2009a) or sexual orientation diversity (Cunningham, 2011a, 2011c).

Researchers in this special issue also illustrated that organizational culture influences the attitudes toward and experiences of sexual minorities. Sartore’s (2012) interview with LGBT activist and scholar Pat Griffin provided evidence of this. According to Griffin, athletic departments that imple-
ment diversity training programs (a component of a diverse and inclusive workplace) realize a significant improvement in athletes’ attitudes toward sexual minorities. Some athletes in Fink et al.’s (2012) study also pointed to the efficacy of such programs, as they encouraged open and constructive dialogue among athletic department members. At the same time, they also expressed frustration that their current athletic departments were not more inclusive and felt like it diminished their overall experience. Athletes in Melton and Cunningham’s (2012) study voiced similar concerns, and in their case, the non-inclusive culture was strong enough that the athletes chose to hide their sexual orientation from most persons in the athletic department.

**Group Support.** A final meso-level factor influencing the experiences and opportunities for sexual minorities in sport is group support. Group support can take several forms, including emotional, instrumental, and structural (Vaux, 1988), and research suggests that LGBT employees who have supportive coworkers are likely to have high life satisfaction (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008) and express less fear in disclosing their sexual identity (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007).

In addition to the generalized support previously described, group members can also express support for diversity and inclusion. Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977) suggests that when a group is perceived to collectively endorse a certain mindset or behavior, members of that entity are likely to do the same. As Salancik and Pfeffer note, “the social context, through informational social influence processes, can affect beliefs about the nature of jobs and work, about what attitudes are appropriate, and, indeed, about what needs people ought to possess” (p. 233). Illustrative of these dynamics, research suggests that people are more likely to actively support diversity in their workplace when they believe their coworkers also do the same (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010).

The articles included in this special issue suggest that not only is team support for LGBT athletes generally high (Bush et al., 2012), but that it is critical to the well-being of those athletes. This was the case for transgender athletes (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012), British male athletes (Bush et al., 2012), and female athletes who had disclosed their sexual identity to others (Fink et al., 2012). This support was most strongly exhibited from the other players on the team and frequently stood in contrast to the coaches’ sexual prejudice or the athletic department’s norm of heterosexism. Thus, the teams came to be seen as a safe space for the athletes, similar to Ragins’ (2004) notion of safe havens.

The research presented in this special issue also highlighted the importance of vanguards in setting the norm of respect and support on the team. Two contributions in particular highlight this point. First, Fink et al. (2012) noted the importance of athletes they referred to as “trailblazers.”
These represented veteran women on the teams who had already disclosed their sexual identity. These “trailblazers” provided counsel and support for younger lesbian players, showing them what life was like if/once the younger teammates chose to disclose their sexual identity. This support was instrumental in the development of the young players, and as a result, as the players matured, they in turn, took on “trailblazer” role on their teams. Pat Griffin (as quoted in Sartore, 2012) also pointed to the importance of key leaders on the teams. But, while Fink et al.’s participants discussed the role of other lesbians, Griffin alluded to the positive impact heterosexuals could have in providing support and creating inclusive environments. Examples include Scott Fujita and Brendon Ayanbadejo of the National Football League (NFL) and Steve Nash in the National Basketball Association (NBA), to name a few.

Micro-Level Factors
Finally, micro-level factors are also likely to influence the experiences and opportunities for sexual minorities in sport. These represent factors specific to the individual players, coaches, and administrators or the person with whom the interaction takes place. I highlight three micro-level factors here: sexual identity, salient identities, and sex.

Sexual Identity. Attitudes toward sexual minorities are generally not uniform; instead, researchers have consistently shown that people express more positive attitudes toward lesbians than they do toward gay men (Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Gill et al., 2006; Herek, 1988; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Fink notes that sport is a “powerful mechanism by which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed” and a context that “privileges all things male and masculine” (Fink, 2008, p. 146). These norms are important, as prevailing stereotypes of gay men (e.g., feminine, flamboyant) run counter to the norms of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Bernstein, 2004). Put another way, ideas about who athletes should be and how they should act might be contrary to the preconceptions of gay men, and as a result, sexual prejudice against gay men is high. On the other hand, stereotypes related to lesbians (e.g., aggressive, masculine; see also Kauer & Kane, 2006), while potentially running counter to ideas of femininity, are congruent with the attributes of successful athletes. Thus, within the sport context, these stereotypes serve to lessen the prejudice lesbians might otherwise experience in society.

The contributions in this special issue shed further light on these dynamics, as they show that sexual identity interacts with factors at other levels to influence sexual prejudice. One example is the interaction between cultural norms and sexual identity. Shang and Gill (2012), in their analysis of sport in Taiwan, found that gay men were more likely to experience hostile climates
than were lesbians. On the other hand, Bush et al. (2012) observed that athletes held very positive attitudes toward gay men in the British sport context. Thus, cultural norms are likely to influence the degree to which gay men differentially experience sexual prejudice. As another example, group support influences the acceptance of lesbians. Some of the participants in Fink et al.’s (2012) articulated that J214 stereotypes about lesbians and sport did not hinder their experiences or decisions to disclose their sexual identity. This was particularly the case when they felt support from their teammates (i.e., group support), in which case the otherwise stigmatizing effects of the stereotypes lost their potency.

Salient Identities. The focus of this article and the overall special issue is on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, the social categorization perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) holds that people do not have a single identity; instead, they possess multiple identities, such as that of athlete, African American, woman, daughter, student, Episcopalian, and the like. All of these identities can, but will not necessarily always, vary in salience depending on the situation. Thus, the importance of being transgender might be particularly important in one situation but potentially minimized in others, in which case the athlete identity might be most salient. Recognition of these dynamics is important because, to date, most of the research focusing on LGBT persons in sport has solely examined their sexual orientation or gender identity. But, as the previous example illustrates, other identities might also influence the experiences of or attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Two studies in the current special issue focus on the influence of identities. Melton and Cunningham (2012), in their qualitative investigation of lesbian athletes of color, found that the athletes’ sexual identity was frequently devalued, while others, such as their racial identity or athlete identity, were valued. The differential worth assigned to each identity influenced the athletes’ behaviors, such as efforts they made through their dress and makeup to emphasize femininity, and hence, presumed heterosexuality. It also forced them to engage in passing behaviors (see Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005) when around persons who either did not know about or who devalued their sexual orientation.

The second example in the special issue comes from a different perspective, as Bush et al. (2012) examine how raters’ athletic identities influence their attitudes toward gay teammates. The authors found that athletes expressed more sexual prejudice when their athlete identity was also high. As previously noted, the dominant norms and values in sport privilege masculinity and heterosexuality; thus, it is not necessarily surprising that as people more closely identify as an athlete and are more wholly immersed in the sport culture, their sexual prejudice increases. Collectively, these studies
demonstrate the importance of considering people’s multiple identities and how they shape their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences.

Sex. One of the more consistent findings in the LGBT literature is that men express more sexual prejudice than do women—a pattern observed in studies of adults in the US (Herek, 2002), Chilean students (Nierman, Thompson, Bryan, & Mahaffey, 2007), parents of US sport participants (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), and college students in the US (Cunningham et al., 2010; Herek, 1988; Whitley, 2001). These differences stem from several factors. First, heterosexual men have traditionally enjoyed power and privilege in Western countries, and from a social dominance perspective, they are likely to take steps to ensure this dominance remains (Sidanius, Sinclair, & Pratto, 2006). Thus, they are likely to express sexual prejudice as a way of subordinating LGBT individuals and ensuring their power is secured. Others have argued that the sexual prejudice manifests from the link between heterosexuality and masculinity (Herek, 1988); thus, men express prejudice as a way of demonstrating how masculine they are. On the other hand, women do not express sexual prejudice because the association between femininity and heterosexuality is more tenuous (Herek, 1988). Finally, men are more likely than women to endorse traditional gender roles (Whitley, 2001). Given the link between sexual prejudice and support of traditional gender roles (Herek, 2009; Whitley, 2001), differences between women and men in their expression of sexual prejudice becomes apparent.

Shang and Gill’s (2012) analysis of sexual prejudice in the Taiwanese sport setting provides further evidence of sex differences. They found that male athletes expressed more sexual prejudice than did women, particularly when the target was a gay man. Interestingly, the male athletes also believed that their attitudes toward sexual minorities were more negative than the general sport climate. The authors suggest that though the men in their sample might be cognizant of the cultural norms related to LGBT inclusiveness, they simply do not share those beliefs. They further argue that this could be due to a lack of contact with sexual minorities (see also Allport, 1954).

Conclusions

In drawing from the contributions in this special issue, the purpose of this theoretical article was to articulate a multilevel model to understand the experiences of LGBT sport participants. In doing so, I argued that factors at various levels of analysis—macro (cultural norms, institutionalized practices), meso (leader behaviors, organizational culture, group support), and micro (sexual identity, salient identities, sex)—influence the attitudes toward
and experiences and behaviors of sexual minorities within the sport context. Moreover, while I primarily presented the factors individually, I also highlighted the ways in which factors at various levels either collectively or interactively affected LGBT sport participants. Kozlowski and Klein (2000) refer to these relationships as mixed determinants and moderator cross-level models, respectively.

Sport managers can also draw from the articles in this special issue to address sexual prejudice and heterosexism in sport. First, a review of the articles suggests that there are places where sexual prejudice is minimal, particularly among players on teams in more progressive areas (Bush et al., 2012; Fink et al., 2012; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012). This suggests that efforts to reinforce progressive climates of diversity and inclusion for all persons, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, are needed. Diversity training programs (Sartore, 2012) and championing behaviors from influential persons within the team or sport organization (Fink et al., 2012; Sartore, 2012) appear to be particularly effective. Athletes, coaches, and administrators would all benefit from participation in these programs.

Second, and related to the first point, support for sexual minorities, whether from leaders or teammates, is crucial. The encouragement can come from sexual minorities (e.g., the “trailblazers” in Fink et al.’s, 2012, study) or heterosexuals (e.g., the NBA’s Steve Nash). It is the responsibility of all persons, both LGBT and heterosexual, to provide support to sexual minorities, thereby ensuring that they enjoy sport to the fullest. After all, fairness and equality are not gay issues or transgender issues—they are people issues.

References


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