E. Nicole Melton and George B. Cunningham

When Identities Collide

Exploring Minority Stress and Resilience among College Athletes with Multiple Marginalized Identities

Abstract The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to explore the unique experiences of lesbian athletes of color. Toward this goal, the authors interviewed 12 female student-athletes from racially diverse backgrounds. Analysis of the data revealed how certain aspects of the athletes’ identity (i.e., sexual orientation) were devalued, while others (i.e., athletic, race) were more welcomed in the athletic setting. In addition, the participants noted several instances in which athletic department coaches and staff members displayed overt forms of sexual prejudice, thereby compelling many of the participants’ to conform to heterosexist ideals in the sport context. Furthermore, the negative reactions these athletes received in sport and family settings, led many of the participants to feel socially isolated and experience feelings of guilt and shame because of their sexual orientation. Fortunately, many of the athletes were able to use social support and a common LGBT identity to cope with these negative situations.

Diversity represents one of the most significant issues in intercollegiate athletics today, and this will continue in the future (Cunningham, 2009). Accordingly, researchers have devoted considerable time and effort into understanding the impact of diversity for players, coaches, and athletic departments in general. While many strides have been made in this area, the research is predominantly limited to a focus on race and gender, to the exclusion of other, equally relevant diversity dimensions. Sexual orientation is one forsaken aspect of diversity. Consider that even though 4 to 17 percent of the population is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Lubensky, Holland, Wiethoff, & Crosby, 2004)—and similar proportions would be expected in the athletics setting—little research has examined how sexual orientation influences one’s subsequent experiences. Of the work done in this area, research has consistently shown that sexual minorities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals) suffer as a consequence of sport’s heterosexist and homonegative attitudes (Anderson 2002, 2005; Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010; Gill et al., 2006; Krane, 1997; Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). For instance, athletes
who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) are harassed, denied leadership positions, stigmatized, and sometimes face physical abuse because of their sexual orientation (Anderson, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Krane, 1997). Because of this non-accepting environment, persons who are LGBT oftentimes conceal their sexual identity and are forced to adopt identity and impression management tactics in order to escape prejudice and discrimination (Anderson, 2002; Gough, 2007; Krane & Barber, 2005).

This situation may be worse when we consider female LGBT athletes of color, as these athletes not only face discrimination because of their sexual orientation, but also because of their race and gender. There is some literature in sport to support this notion. Most notable is Bruening and her colleagues’ (Bruening, 2005; Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005) qualitative work with female student-athletes who are African American. Though the influence of sexual orientation was not examined, their work does demonstrate how these student-athletes face unique challenges, and have a markedly different college experience when compared to their African American male and White female counterparts. The authors’ findings show how these women encounter “a multiple jeopardy” in regards to discrimination (King, 1988), and as a result, their perspectives are oftentimes silenced (Bruening, 2005; Bruening et al., 2005).

Recently, this multiple jeopardy has been examined through the concept of intersectionality in psychology literature. Originally proposed by African American feminist authors (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), intersectionality represents the idea that the crossing of multiple forms of oppression with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality produces distinct sets of perspectives and consequences among individuals. The central tenets of intersectionality include: “(a) no social group is homogenous, (b) people must be located in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied by those structures, and (c) there are unique, non-additive effects of identifying with more than on social group” (Stewart & McDermott, 2004, p. 531-532). According to the concept of intersectionality, examining diversity dimensions in isolation paints an incomplete picture of these athletes’ experiences. As such, in order to further the NCAA's objective to fully support and value “all voices” in intercollegiate athletics, all diversity dimensions should be examined (NCAA Diversity and Inclusion, 2010).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how multiple identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) influence one’s educational and athletic experiences in college. Toward this goal, we drew primarily from the sexual prejudice literature (Herek, 2009) and the minority stress model (MSM; Meyer, 1995, 2003) to explore how lesbian and bisexual student-athletes of color negotiate their identities in the context of intercollegiate athletes. In the current analysis, we offer a significant contribution to the literature by qualitatively investigating how having multiple marginalized identities (i.e. LGBT,
African American, female) impact one’s experiences and overall well-being. In the following sections, we provide the theoretical framework and present specific research questions that directed the investigation.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Sexual Prejudice**

Though attitudes concerning homosexuality have improved, discrimination toward sexual minorities is still prevalent in today’s society (Herek, 2009), and sport is no exception. In fact, the sport context (e.g., youth leagues, intercollegiate athletic teams and departments, professional teams and organizations) is routinely characterized by patriarchal ideals of heterosexual masculinity and male hegemony (see Griffin, 1998; Messner, 1992; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). In this context, dominant group members, which include White, able-bodied, Protestant, heterosexual men (see Fink & Pastore, 1999), are typically afforded with power and privilege, while those who do not share these characteristics have their perspectives devalue and silenced. In fact, having a LGBT identity is considered a sexual stigma, or undesired attribute (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2009) in sport settings, which relegates sexual minorities to an inferior status relative to others. This type of stigmatization can appear at the institutional level in the form of heterosexism, and at the personal level in the form of sexual prejudice (Herek, 2009). When the stigma manifests in the practices and polices of societal institutions, it relates to heterosexism and is defined as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, relationship, or community” (Herek, 1990, p.316). On the other hand, sexual prejudice refers to the negative attitudes held toward an individual based on that person’s sexual orientation (Herek, 2009). This type of prejudice is typically negative and characterized by hostility or dislike toward people who are (or are perceived to be) LGBT. Furthermore, it can be enacted (i.e., explicit negative actions targeted at sexual minorities), felt (i.e., expectations about the outcomes associated with being a sexual minority), and internalized (i.e., the belief that negative societal evaluations are justified and represent one’s self-concept).

A review of extant literature reveals that sport is inundated with several examples of the forms of prejudice previously outlined. For instance, research suggests that future sport and fitness professionals hold negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Gill et al., 2006), and consistently rate heterosexual job applicants more positively than equally qualified applicants who are LGBT (Cunningham et al., 2010). These negative attitudes and poor evaluations also appear on sports teams, causing many athletes to believe they must portray themselves as heterosexual (Kauer & Krane, 2006), downplay their sexual orientation (Anderson, 2002), or perform better than their
teammates in order to gain acceptance (Gough, 2007). Furthermore, there is some evidence that suggests unsupportive sport environments negatively impact the health and personal well-being of athletes who are LGBT. For instance, Krane (1997) discovered that the athletic environment contributed to low self-esteem, low confidence, high stress, and substance abuse among lesbian student-athletes. Similarly, Rotella and Murray (1991) found that negative psychological conditions of athletes who are LGBT were associated with instances of sexual prejudice and heterosexism they encountered in their respective sports.

Cumulatively, these forms of prejudice and discrimination negatively affect sexual minorities and persons presumed to be LGBT (see Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a), through a process known as minority stress. We examine these effects in the subsequent section.

 Minority Stress Model

According to social stress theory, social stressors (e.g., poverty, high crime rate) produce negative effects similar to those created by individual stressors (e.g., career ending injury, failing a college course), which may lead to physical and mental strain in a person’s life (Allison, 1998; Meyer, 1995). Minority stress is an extension of social stress theory, and recognizes that members of stigmatized groups chronically encounter certain stressful events solely because of their devalued social position. Meyer’s (1995; 2003) minority stress model provides a framework for understanding the unique stressors minorities experience, the consequences of those stressful events, and coping mechanisms individuals use to help assuage minority stress and improve personal well-being. When applying the model to sexual minorities, Meyer (2003) discussed three stress processes that individuals who are LGBT face. Moving from the most distal to the most proximal, these include (a) the stressful events and activities that affect sexual minorities; (b) the expectations of such events on the part of the LGBT individual, including requisite accompanying vigilance; and (c) the sexual minority's internalization of heterosexism and sexual prejudice.

With regard to the consequences of minority stress, several trends have emerged in regards to the physical and mental health of sexual minorities. First, those who are LGBT (or presumed to be) appear to be at greater risk for anxiety or mood disorders than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran & Mays, 2006), irrespective of gender (see Herek & Garnets, 2007). Second, sexual minorities are more likely to display suicidal tendencies, especially among adolescences (Russel, 2003). Third, when compared to heterosexual women, lesbians tend to consume alcohol in larger quantities, which puts them at a greater risk for alcohol related problems (Cochran, Keenan, Schober, & Mays, 2000). Finally, experiencing three forms of discrimination (i.e., race, gender, and sexual orientation), significantly affects mental health
outcomes, and can drastically increase a person’s risk of substance abuse (McCabe, et al., 2010).

It is worth noting that not all sexual minorities report higher instances of stress, and many successfully cope with their minority stress (Herek & Garnets, 2007). Research suggests two possible reasons as to why this occurs. First, if a person views their sexual orientation identity as part of a collective, they are less likely to experience stress (Herek & Garnets, 2007). For instance, if people perceive themselves as part of a collective, affiliate with the sexual minority community, and derive enhanced self-esteem from membership in this group, they will be better able to cope with stressors associated with their minority status.

Second, multiple minority statuses affect how sexual minorities experience stress. Although having multiple minority statuses does increase one’s likelihood of experiencing stigma or discrimination, according to Herek and Garnets (2007) “integrating multiple identities may enhance a minority individual’s overall psychological resilience and increase one’s available resources for coping with stigma” (p. 363). Specifically, resources (e.g., social support, positive evaluations) individuals receive from other social group affiliations (e.g. African American or Latino community) help them manage, and strive in spite of negative situations they encounter because of their sexual orientation. Though Herek and Garnets (2007) make a compelling argument, it is still unclear if having a multiple minority status is actually advantageous for the individual. In fact, Szymanski and Gupta (2009) found that racial minorities were less equipped to handle the stress associated with sexual prejudice, and internalized heterosexism significantly related to psychological distress and low self-esteem among African Americans who are LGBT. These equivocal findings point to the need for additional inquiries into the topic. Thus, we draw from the aforementioned literature to gain a more complete understanding of how multiple minority statuses influence overall well-being and personal satisfaction. Specifically, through interviews with lesbian and bisexual student-athletes of color, we examine the following research questions:

\[ RQ1 \]: What are the experiences of minority female student-athletes who identify as lesbian or bisexual?
\[ RQ2 \]: Do these experiences influence personal perceptions of health and overall well-being?

**Method**

**Epistemological Perspective**

To truly understand the experiences of these student-athletes, it was necessary to adopt a feminist (Lather, 1988; Opie, 1992) or Black feminist (Collins,
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2000; King, 1988; Taylor, 1998) epistemology, which recognizes that knowledge is socially situated. These perspectives hold that (a) there are multiple “truths” emanating from the different sociopolitical situations faced by individuals, and (b) individuals with differing standpoints may perceive the same situation very differently. As such, lesbian athletes have a distinct standpoint or perspective that differs from the dominant group (i.e., heterosexuals and males). In the same way, lesbians and bisexuals of color offer a unique perspective given that they have multiple identities that are marginalized (Collins, 2000). As researchers, listening to these athletes’ experiences allows one to see things that might have otherwise gone unnoticed before (Harding, 1991), and significantly contributes to the understanding of the sport environment. Specifically, we can learn what steps need to be taken to ensure the sport environment is hospitable for all people.

Participants
Interviews were conducted with 13 current (n = 8) and former (n = 5) NCAA Division I student-athletes, who played basketball (n = 10) or softball (n = 3) at one of the three studied institutions. Participants were African Americans (76.9%) or Latinas (23.1%) who identified as lesbian or gay, and ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. We provide an overview of the participant demographics in Table 1. To ensure the anonymity of the student-athletes, pseudonyms are used and the names of the universities where they competed are not provided.

Procedure
A random sample was not feasible given the sensitive content of the interviews, and the fact that many LGBT athletes do not disclose their sexual identity (Bruening, 2005; Krane, 1997). Therefore, we used snowball sampling (Berg, 2001) to access lesbian and bisexual student-athletes who identified as racial minority. When initially contacted, participants received a letter, approved by the Human Subjects Review Board, detailing the purpose of the study. The letter assured the student-athletes that should they choose to participate all of their personal information would be kept confidential. In addition, the women were given the opportunity to suggest other female student-athletes who (a) were either African American or Latina, and (b) identified as lesbian or bisexual. In total, 13 student-athletes gave their consent to participate, and face-to-face interviews were scheduled with the first author.

Consistent with the epistemological approach used in this study, all interviews were approached as a potentially empowering experience for the athletes, as well as a way to provide research information. In all cases, great care was taken to ensure a supportive environment was created. Such an environment was developed through verbal support, acknowledgment of interest, and non-verbal cues such as nodding and making eye contact (Cote,
Salmela, & Russell, 1995). In addition, all interviews were conducted in a “safe space” chosen by the participant.

Based on the theoretical framework, a semi-structured interview guide was used to examine the participants’ athletic and academic experiences. Generally, the athletes were asked open-ended questions regarding (a) their collegiate sport and academic experiences, (b) if these experiences are (were) generally positive or negative, (c) relationships with their teammates, coaches, and athletic department administrators, (d) if they had disclosed their lesbian or bisexual identity to coaches and teammates, (e) if their coaches, teammates, and support staff acted in a supportive, prejudiced, or discriminatory manner toward them, and (f) their stress and overall well-being. Each interview was tape recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in length. During the entire process, the first author kept a journal where she recorded personal observations and perspectives concerning the athletes’ experiences. Keeping a personal journal allows the researcher to understand how personal decisions, attitudes, and biases impact the research process (Schwandt, 2007).

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data was analyzed throughout the full research process. Data analysis consisted of four phases: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) open coding, (c) axial coding, and (d) connection of higher order themes to the theoretical framework. Familiarization with the interview data included reading each interview several times to become

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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cognizant of the general content and ideas within each interview. Next, consistent with the procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the first author broke down, examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized the data during the open coding process. The patterns, themes, and categories derived during open coding were then subjected to axial coding whereby “data are put back together” by generating connections among the categories derived in open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At this stage in the data analysis, higher order themes emerged.

Thick description (Geertz, 1973) was used to ensure the unique experiences of these student-athletes were honestly portrayed in the themes and categories. However, these words should not be viewed in isolation (Fine, Weis, Wessen, & Wong, 2000); rather, applying these personal narratives to the theoretical framework permits a deeper understanding of the consequences associated with having multiple marginalized identities (for similar arguments see Krane, Andersen, & Strean, 1997; Krane & Barber, 2005). Thus, all higher order themes were compared to the theoretical framework in the final stage of data analysis.

Consistent with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations (see also Glense, 2006), additional steps were taken to improve credibility and trustworthiness, such as the use of qualified peer debriefers, reflexive journaling, bracketing, and member checking. Through bracketing, extensive probing is used to encourage participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences; this allows their words to be heard instead of the personal perceptions of the researchers (Schwandt, 2007). Finally, feedback was provided to all participants to confirm interpretations and conclusions drawn during the data analysis phase accurately reflected their feelings and experiences.

Findings and Discussion

During the interviews, each of the women described how their multiple minority statuses uniquely influenced their college athletic and academic experiences. Specifically, the participants discussed how it was necessary to repress, or deemphasize, distinct aspects of their identity in specific contexts in order to evade prejudicial and discriminatory treatment. They discussed how racism affected them in the classroom and community settings, which manifested in the form of derogatory comments and social isolation. In contrast, sexual prejudice (e.g., enacted, felt, internalized) persisted in all contexts, and negatively affected the athletes’ personal perceptions of stress and overall well-being. Higher order themes that emerged during the data analysis include: (a) enacted stigma, (b) felt stigma, (c) internalized stigma, and (d) signs of resilience.
Enacted Stigma
According to Herek (2009), enacted stigma refers to when people overtly express sexual prejudice through their comments and behaviors. This can include making anti-LGBT remarks, using negative stereotypes, publicly condemning same-sex relationships, or by committing violent hate crimes directed at persons who are LGBT. Analysis of the data suggests the participants encountered two forms of enacted stigma: lack of acceptance and harmful threats.

Lack of acceptance. Despite having multiple marginalized identities, the participants expressed how their racial and gender identities were generally accepted in most contexts. However, the athletes described how people were far more likely to display blatant prejudice regarding their lesbian identity, particularly among the participants’ family members. For instance, Natalie described her parent’s reaction when she told them she was a lesbian:

They cut me off (pauses) completely, just stopped talking to me. They took away my credit card, took the money out of my bank account . . . they came and got my car, and stopped paying my cell phone bill. Thank God for my scholarship (pauses), or I would have been living in the locker room.

In situations similar to the one above, athletes may need to rely on the support found on their teams and in athletic departments to help them get through this type of difficult and painful life event. Unfortunately, in the current analysis, athletes did not always view their coaches and athletic support staff as trusted allies, and recalled instances where these individuals were not accepting of their LGBT identities. In particular, one staff member adamantly tried to encourage the lesbian players to deny their sexual orientation. When discussing this staff member, Ravin stated, “she (strength coach) hates it if you’re gay, and always pushes you to go to her Bible studies . . .” Jade also added, “she says things like ‘God will get me’ and ‘I need to turn from my sinful ways’ . . . she makes you really uncomfortable.” Rather than promote the NCAA’s values of inclusiveness and acceptance (NCAA Diversity and Inclusion, 2010), this staff member purposefully created a hostile environment for athletes who are LGBT.

Harmful threats. A significant amount of research suggests how stressful the fear of disclosure can be for individuals who are LGBT. Thus, maliciously threatening to “out” a sexual minority can cause a significant amount of stress in that person’s life. Analysis of the data revealed two examples of this type of discrimination. First, Ashley described how one of her teammates responded unfavorably when she learned Ashley had earned a coveted starting position on the team:
It was just one girl, and she graduated . . . She made my life a living hell for a semester . . . I beat her out (for a position). She didn’t like that because she was a senior and I was a freshman . . . Somehow she found out how I didn’t want my parents to know I was gay . . . She started acting like she was going to tell them . . . like just to hurt me or something. That would have been the worst thing ever, so I had to tell (assistant coach) about it . . . They (coaches) had a meeting with her and told her she would be kicked off if she told my parents.

Even more appalling than the previous example was when one coach (from a different team than the one on which Ashley played) threatened to disclose a player’s sexual orientation as a form of punishment. Specifically, Whitney recalled a time she was struggling academically, and had to meet with the coach and academic advisor to discuss her academic standing, “My freshman year I was failing like three classes at midterms . . . In the meeting he told me he wasn’t afraid to pull the gay card.” Pulling the “gay card” meant the coach would call Whitney’s parents and inform them their daughter was a lesbian if she failed to raise her grades. This could have been a devastating experience for Whitney had the threat been carried out, especially considering Whitney’s parents (as well as most of the participants’ parents) viewed lesbianism as immoral and reprehensible. Whitney went on to say, “I guess it made me work harder, but I felt sick to my stomach just thinking about it . . . I was so nervous taking exams.”

Whitney’s comments support Meyer’s (2003) contention that the mere thought of being discriminated against because of one’s sexual orientation creates tremendous stress for an individual. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with Krane and Barber’s (2005) research among coaches, as the “gay card” was used in recruiting battles. Thus, in multiple sport contexts, women’s sexual orientation is used to subjugate and oppress them.

**Felt Stigma**

*Feeling welcomed but unwanted.* Consistent with the minority stress model and previous research with African American women who are LGBT (Bowleg, et al., 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2008), the participant’s never felt as if they could freely express all aspects of their identity. Depending on the context, they believed certain parts of their identity (e.g., race, gender, athlete) were accepted, but others (e.g., sexual orientation) were rejected. These women rarely described instances in which their identities were fully supported. The data revealed how several student-athletes generally enjoyed their college experience; however, they recognized that in order to gain acceptance, they had to present themselves in a specific manner. Naya noted several situations in which she was aware of how others perceived her multiple mar-
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... I like everything about it (college)... people are nice. You just have to know how to act around people. Like when I'm around some of my teammates, I just can't talk about it (being a lesbian), I just act like I'm not gay, you know... When I'm at home, I'm only a Black woman, being gay would get me kicked out. With (coach), he (pauses) just doesn't want to know (if a player is a lesbian). He just wants you to be a (sport) player, he doesn't want to know about anything else, unless it makes him or the team look good.

Though Naya originally explained that her coach only focused on the players' athletic identity, her later comments suggest that the coach may only ignore lesbian identities, “... I guess he does kinda (sic) talk about it (pauses) he jokes with them (heterosexual teammates) about their boyfriends (pauses). They're (the boyfriends) invited to the (team) banquet. (Naya's girlfriend) for sure isn't (invited).” Whitney also noted that her assistant coach emphasized the players' racial identity instead of their sexual orientation, “She (assistant coach) really cares about us, wants us to be successful Black women. Just ignores the gay thing.” This type of behavior (i.e., distancing oneself from lesbian players) is common among female coaches (Krane & Barber, 2005), as it reduces the risk that others will perceive the coach as a lesbian or that she is promoting lesbianism in some way. As seen in Naya's and Whitney's experiences, the coaches' actions and team policies demonstrate how implicit and explicit actions can act as powerful reminders that LGBT identities are not always valued in sport settings.

The feeling that only their athletic identity was welcomed became more pronounced in the classroom setting—this was especially true for Shana. She explained that the students in her classes, and college major, were mostly White men (whom she perceived to be heterosexual), from extremely conservative and religious backgrounds. As previous research suggests, people with these demographic characteristics are more likely to hold prejudice or negative attitudes toward minorities (see Cunningham, 2011; Herek, 2009), which may have contributed to the experiences Shana encountered. When discussing her classmates, she notes:

... they're (classmates) real closed-minded, act like they know everything, like what's right and wrong. I think I'd need to be a straight, White girl to fit in (laughs). They don't want to know me, or hang out (pauses). If I wasn't an athlete they'd never talk to me. They act like I don't know that, or I'm too stupid to see how they are... If (male basketball player) hadn't dropped (the class) they would've just talked to him and not me. And we're (women's team) ranked higher and win (conference championships).

In this brief comment, Shana's words highlight how all of her marginalized
identities (i.e., race, gender, and sexual orientation) were devalued by others in this context. Moreover, had a male athlete been enrolled in the class, she might have faced total social isolation in this class.

**Forced to conform.** In order to evade the negative outcomes associated with one's devalued social identities, many of the athletes felt forced to conform to societal norms of how they should appear and behave. As Briana expressed, “I’m not going to wear a flag around my chest, why would I do that? Just so they’ll hate me?” Jordon also indicated the benefits of meeting heteronormative expectations, “They (coaches, professors, boosters) like you more, or respect you more (pauses) or, in (Coach’s) opinion, give more money, when you dress nice, put on your make-up, do your hair, and smile big.” In addition, the athletes described times when team policies, though not explicitly stated, required them to conform to gender norms. In Ravin’s words:

> We had to look nice because boosters were going to be there . . . that meant you had to wear a dress or skirt, no exceptions. Even the straight girls didn’t like it. It’s ridiculous to have to wear a dress when it’s freezing outside (the event was in February).

Not only do these examples demonstrate how marginalized individuals are forced to conform to dominate group members’ norms, but they also support research that suggests female athletes must appear both feminine and athletic in order to achieve maximum success in the sport context (Coakley, 2009; Melton, 2010).

**Isolation.** Through the interviews, two athletes revealed how they felt there was no one they could confide in regarding their experiences. Both women expressed how they could not rely on their traditional sources of support (i.e., teammates and family) because they believed these individuals would not support their lesbian identity. It is important to note that these women had not disclosed their sexual orientation to any teammates, coaches, or family members while they were on their respective teams—a decision that could have contributed to their feelings of isolation. Regardless of their level of disclosure, their feelings are still noteworthy, as they highlight the negative effect of having limited social support. For instance, when Michelle’s girlfriend broke up with her she remembered, “. . . it was really hard, I felt completely alone. But I couldn’t talk to anyone about it. They didn’t even know I was gay. I just thought they (coaches, support staff, teammates, family) wouldn’t accept it.” In many respects, Michelle’s fear of disclosure inhibited her from forming relationships with supportive allies. To ensure other athletes do not share these same fears, athletic departments need to explicitly demonstrate their support and acceptance for athletes who are LGBT.
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Internalized Stigma
Analysis of the data also suggests that several of the participants had accepted dominant societal values concerning heterosexual behavior, and had integrated these views into their personal belief systems. The participants' feelings relate to Herek's (2009) concept of internalized stigma, which refers to when a person “embraces society’s denigration and discrediting of the stigmatized group” (p. 73). Specifically, the women believed that there were more costs than benefits associated with being a lesbian, and sometimes felt guilt and shame because of their sexual orientation.

More costs than benefits. All of the women identified as being a lesbian or gay, and did not see their sexual orientation as a choice. However, the women believed it was necessary, and oftentimes beneficial, to appear heterosexual in certain contexts. This sentiment was evident when Jordon apathetically reacted to being required to wear a dress to a team function, “It's fine, I'd rather them think I was straight than gay, that way it isn't awkward.” Stefanie also expressed similar feelings, “it’s better for people to just think I’m straight. It makes everybody feel more comfortable. I don’t want to offend anybody.” These comments demonstrate how these women accepted their devalued place in society, and were willing to conceal their sexual orientation to ensure the expectations of members of the high status group (i.e. heterosexuals) were met.

Others also explained how concealing their sexual orientation gave them an opportunity to escape prejudice and discrimination—an option their visible stigmas (i.e., race, gender) do not offer (see also Ragins, 2008). In Jade's words, “Everyday people see that I’m Black, and they immediately judge me because of it (race). If I was out, that’d be another strike against me.” Whitney held a related opinion, “When I walk through the door, I’m the Black girl. I don’t need to be the gay Black girl.”

Guilt and shame. Most of the participants simply expressed how they would prefer to be heterosexual, as this sexual orientation would afford them higher status. However, some felt guilt or shame for being a lesbian, and one woman shared the fundamentalist belief that her behavior was immoral. For instance, Michelle said, “I know my mom would be embarrassed to tell people, she thinks it’s the worst sin of them all.” When then asked how she viewed lesbianism, she responded, “I know it’s a sin. I just don’t think it the worst one, you know (pauses) I think God will forgive me, just like He forgives everyone.” The other 11 participants did not view their sexual orientation as morally wrong, but did describe times when they felt guilty for being a lesbian. As Cori said, “My sister cried when I told her (pauses), that made me feel terrible. I’m sure it was hard for her to deal with.”

Some research suggests that sexual minorities who feel guilt or shame
because of their sexual orientation are more likely to experience poor mental or physical effects (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003). Given the qualitative nature of the study, it was difficult to assess the participants’ psychological or physical health, but analysis of the data did illustrate how these women expressed regret for being a lesbian, and at times, showed depressive symptoms. For instance, though some might have reacted with anger if their parents had stopped providing them with financial support, Natalie's comments seemed to reflect feelings of remorse and sadness:

I know it (her sexual orientation) kills my parents . . .  I hate myself for telling them. You should never make your mom cry, you know. I’d give anything to take it all back . . .  I don’t know, maybe if I was straight life would be better. I know my life would be better.

**Signs of Resilience**

As is evident, the woman experienced each form of sexual prejudice outlined in Herek’s (2009) theoretical framework, and experienced significant stress due to their multiple minority statuses. However, and as Allport (1954) contends, minority members respond to prejudice and discrimination with coping and resilience. Indeed, the comments, feelings, and stories the athletes shared revealed how the women drew from social support and a common identity to cope with and reduce multiple minority stress.

**Social support.** As previously mentioned, individuals having multiple marginalized identities (e.g., lesbian athletes of color) can face prejudice, discrimination, and minority stress in a number of ways. However, minority stress literature suggests social support can be essential to enhancing the satisfaction and well-being of these individuals (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Huffman, Watrous, & King, 2008), and data in the current analysis supports this contention. Specifically, participants relied on social support provided by their teammates (who were LGBT and heterosexual) and academic advisors to help them cope with negative consequences associated with their multiple minority status. In general, the actions and attitudes of teammates assisted in creating a more supportive and accepting environment for the athletes—something these athletes did not experience at home, in the local community, or in the larger African American or Latino community. These safe spaces, which are comparable to the safe havens Ragins (2004) discusses in work settings, allowed these athletes to express their true selves. As Shana describes, “my teammates don’t care if I’m gay or straight. They love me for me.” Stefanie also discussed her supportive team environment, “it’s like the only place I just feel like I’m completely comfortable being me.” In addition, other lesbian teammates were also invaluable allies for some participants as they came to terms with their sexual orientation. In Ravin’s words, “Kalie
(pseudonym for teammate) was like the best thing I could’ve asked for. She had been through it (coming out process), she understood what I was going through (pauses) um, she just helped me get through everything.”

In light of the benefits outlined above, it is unfortunate that the athletes only mentioned two athletic department employees who had displayed acceptance and affirmation regarding their sexual orientation. However, the support these staff members provided was tremendous for the student-athletes. Cori explains, “You can just talk to her (academic advisor) about anything thing. She acts like it’s just normal.” Similarly, Ashley expressed, “She (academic advisor) really helped me when I was figuring everything out. You know, realizing I was actually gay.” It is also worth noting, the players believed that some of their coaches would be more supportive if it were not for the sport culture. As Natalie’s contends:

She (assistant coach) is okay with it (lesbianism), and she would be there for us more if she could be. I think she just feels like she can’t get involved with it. She’s single so I don’t think she wants people to think she might be gay or something like that. But she was there to recommend we go talk to (athletic department psychologist) when we had a problem, and that really helped.

**Common identity.** Finally, some participants also used their collective LGBT identity to cope with their minority status. According to minority stress literature, affiliation with one’s minority group allows stigmatized persons to experience accepting social environments, and offers support when these individuals receive negative evaluations from non-stigmatized group members (Hereks & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003). Having a strong sense of community cohesiveness with one’s minority group also allows persons who are LGBT to evaluate themselves in comparison to similar others, rather than dominate group members (Huffman et al., 2008). Furthermore, forming this in-group status encourages positive self-evaluations and may enhance self-esteem (Meyer, 2003). Ashley was one participant who noted the advantages of having a common LGBT identity:

I’m good, but I’m not the best (athlete). I was never picked last, I just wasn’t a standout, you know. I never really felt special. But, when I figured out I was gay it made me feel like I was finally a part of something (pauses) that I belonged. It made me feel like I was different. In a good way.

In addition, just knowing that there were others like her helped Michelle come to terms with her sexual identity and deal with difficult situations:

Knowing that there are other people like me really helped. It made me feel like it was okay. In college, we were known as the 'straight' team. So I couldn’t talk with my teammates, they didn’t understand.
Multiple Marginalized Identities

Finally, as noted earlier, some literature suggests that people with multiple minority statuses (e.g., African American lesbian woman), may be better equipped to handle, and strive in spite of, social oppression (Herek & Gar-\text{-}nets, 2007; Meyer, 2003). Specifically, this literature proposes that these individuals gain resources from other social group memberships that help them cope with the negative situations they encounter because of their sexual orientation. However, findings in the current analysis did not support these conclusions. In contrast, the data revealed how participants responded with greater resilience when they encountered discrimination based on race, and were least resilient when faced with sexual prejudice—a finding consistent with recent empirical research (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Szymanski & Gu-\text{-}pta, 2009). For example, Jade commented, “My mother taught me to be proud that I was a black woman . . . I guess no one like teaches you to be proud that you’re gay, you know?” Stefanie furthers Jades comments by explaining:

I feel like, um, it’s easier to like take a stand when you’re talking about the Black community or women’s rights. Like, with the Black community, they’ll get behind you and fight for justice. And if I did have a problem (because of racial discrimination), I’d know people to go to for help. But they’re not gonna (sic) fight for gay rights . . . They might tell me to just go back in the closet . . . And seriously, who are you supposed to go to if you have a problem?

Stefanie’s final question addresses one the most significant issues pertaining to athletes who are LGBT—irrespective of their race or gender. Specifically, what resources do athletic departments offer these athletes, and do these resources provide adequate support? Findings from the current analysis suggest much work remains; several steps still need to be taken toward creating a more accepting sport environment.

Conclusions

More often than not, diversity researchers neglect to consider how various forms of diversity interact and their resultant outcomes (Bruening, 2005). This study fills this gap in the sport and general literatures by exploring the unique experiences of LGBT athletes of color. Specifically, the participants’ words revealed how certain aspects of their identity (i.e., sexual orientation) were devalued, while others (i.e., athletic, race) were more welcomed in the athletics setting. In addition, the participants noted several instances in which athletic department coaches and staff members displayed overt forms of sexual prejudice—compelling many of the participants’ to conform to heterosexist ideals in sport settings. Furthermore, the negative reactions
these athletes received in sport and family settings led many of them to feel socially isolated and experience feelings of guilt and shame because of their sexual orientation. Fortunately, many of the athletes were able to use social support and a common LGBT identity to cope with these negative situations.

The findings in this analysis suggest athletic departments still need to take several steps to ensure sport teams, and college athletics in general, do not continue to be places where prejudice and discrimination are accepted. First, offering LGBT-support, or ally, training for coaches, administrators, staff, and players may enhance the experiences and well-being of minority student-athletes who are LGBT, which can relate to improved physical and mental health (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Huffman et al., 2008). Second, considering sexual minorities are given few opportunities to embrace their sexual orientation identity, and many face rejection from the African American or Latino community, it may be beneficial for athletic departments to establish LGBT social networks or mentor programs for these athletes. Forming relationships with similar others allows sexual minorities to view their devalued social identity more positively (Herek & Garnets, 2007). This type of support can reduce minority stress and increase the likelihood that sexual minorities will feel confident to disclose their sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003).

Although this study provides several contributions, it is not without its limitations. Given the study’s qualitative design, these findings are not expected to generalize to all settings. However, the insights gleaned from this analysis can enhance understanding regarding the unique experiences of African American and Latina sexual minorities in sport, and may help athletic departments become environments that are more welcoming for these student-athletes. Future research should continue to explore specific ways athletic departments can support all voices in intercollegiate athletics so that students may realize success on and off the playing field.

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