The Lesbian Label as a Component of Women’s Stigmatization in Sport Organizations: An Exploration of Two Health and Kinesiology Departments

Melanie Sartore
East Carolina University

George Cunningham
Texas A&M University

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the meanings and organizational implications of lesbianism and the lesbian label within the sport organization context. Fourteen faculty members from two health and kinesiology departments were asked how they, their colleagues, and their departments defined, responded to, coped with, and managed the lesbian label. First and foremost, the words of these faculty members identify the lesbian label as a component of a lesbian stigma at both the individual and departmental levels and within the field of health and kinesiology as a whole. The consequences of the stigma, however, varied by department suggesting the importance of departmental culture and atmosphere. Implications of these findings, as they pertain to sport managers, are discussed.

Some 45 years after Erving Goffman penned his seminal piece, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, contemporary researchers continue to draw upon his conceptualizations (Link & Phelan, 2001; Jones et al., 1984). While the predominance of works on the topic of stigma have been housed within the realms of sociology and social psychology, organizational researchers have begun to follow suit (e.g., Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, 2008; Ragins, 2008). For instance, a series of articles surrounding the topic of stigma within the organizational setting recently appeared in a special topic forum of the *Academy of Management Review*. The necessity of the forum, as suggested by Paetzold, Dipboye, and Elsbach (2008), was the recognition of stigma as a “natural component of sensemaking in organizations” (p. 187). Indeed, the presence and subsequent effects of a stigma can be felt by individuals, organizations, and industries alike; particularly to the extent that personal, social, and organizational
identities increasingly intertwine (Paetzold et al., 2008; Ragins, 2008). It is with these insights in mind that we extend this line of inquiry to sport organizations.

Theoretical Framework

Human differences can elicit emotional responses that lead to stereotyping, labeling, differentiation, devaluation, prejudice, discrimination, and status loss (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984; Link & Phelan, 2001; Link, Yang, Phelan, & Collins, 2004). Simply put, differences can lead to stigmatization. Individuals elicit stigmatization on the basis of visible characteristics (e.g., age; see Rupp, Vodanovich, & Creed, 2006) as well as marked deep-level or invisible characteristics (e.g., sexual orientation; see Lewis, Derlega, Clarke, & Kuang, 2006). Stigma is “a matter of degree” dictated by dominant belief systems and contextually-salient individual and group characteristics (Link et al., 2004, p. 513). As such, stigmatization occurs across a variety of settings; however, the characteristics that elicit stigmatization contextually vary. Further, the process and consequences of stigmatization can range from blatantly overt to markedly subtle and have the potential to compromise one’s physical, psychological, and professional well being (Clair et al., 2005; Crocker et al., 1989; Krane & Barber, 2005).

Stigmatization communicates a devalued social identity by linking contextually salient beliefs, attributes, and characteristics to negative stereotypes (Crocker et al., 1998). As such, members of social groups who possess higher levels of power are less likely to be stigmatized than are members of social groups who are accorded low levels of societal power (Link & Phelan, 2001). A power-dependent process, stigmatization enhances the in-group/out-group distinction, constructs an “us”—“them” dichotomy, and maintains social structural hierarchies (Herek, 2007; Link & Phelan, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This integral role of power carries important implications for persons within contexts rich in ideological beliefs. The stigmatization of women within sport organizations represents one such context.

Sport Organizations

In general, women who exude confidence, competence, and fortitude risk compromising their femininity and (hetero)sexual desirability (Lips, 2005). Within organizations, the gendered structures that place women in the precarious situation whereby they must adopt masculine (i.e., traditionally male) and feminine (i.e., traditionally female) behaviors simultaneously exacerbate these risks (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). This is particularly the case in the upper echelons where various discourses of managerial masculinities are dominant (Collinson & Hearn, 2001). Amid such discourse, women who act too masculine (e.g., strong and authoritative) and those who succeed in male-dominated contexts are perceived as violating socially constructed gender norms and thus risk social rejection, negativity, and stigmatization (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Such negativity may take the form of sexist labels such as ‘bitch,’ ‘ice queen,’ and ‘dragon lady,’ the likes of which communicate unattractive and unfeminine characteristics that subvert a woman’s accomplishments, competencies, and power.
and impede her professional advancements (Heilman et al., 2004; Lee, 1998). Thus, the gendered discourse that shapes the structure of organizations operates to reinforce and maintain gendered structures. The “bitch” label has been identified as being used in much the same way within sport organizations (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003).

There exists little doubt that sport organizations are gendered entities (for review, see Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). Shaw and Frisby (2006) located gender at the axis of power that shapes the interactions, practices, and structures of sport organizations. Identifying gender inequities in sport organizations as institutionalized, Cunningham (2008) postulated that there exists a confluence of gender norms and rules that preserve and promote negativity toward women. Similarly, Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) found that the practices of male-dominated sport governance boards excluded women who possessed stereotypically feminine characteristics from occupying high-power positions, actions that in turn maintained and reproduced gender disparities and male control. Knoppers and Anthonissen’s (2005, 2008) identification of multiple intersecting masculinities (i.e., athletic and managerial masculinities; see Connell, 2005; Messner, 1988) within the discursive practices of sport organizations further eludes to the presence of negativity toward women.

Acker (1990) noted gendering of organizations is partially a result of the activities in which the organization engages. Likewise, she identified sexuality as implied during the gendering process such that male (hetero)sexuality is dominant and reinforced. These suggestions carry important implications for sport organizations, as the multiple masculinities to which Knoppers and Anthonissen (2005) referred suggest a confluence of gendered and heteronormative practices that may subject women to multiple gender-based labels and stereotypes. Specifically, women may elicit labels of bitch and/or lesbian within sport organizations, as they encounter both the prevailing discourse of managerial masculinity within organizations and the profound heteronormative and masculine discourse of the sport context (Connell, 2005; Griffin, 1998; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Elling & Janssens, 2009). Thus, to some extent whereas the gendered discourse of organizations possesses implicit assumptions of heterosexuality (see Pringle, 2008), the multiplicative discourse (i.e., masculinity and heteronormativity) within sport organizations may possess more explicit assumptions of heterosexuality. With regard to women, they may elicit the assumption of lesbianism.

Whereas several authors have discussed how assumptions of lesbianism and the lesbian label operate to devalue, stigmatize, and control women in sport (e.g., Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1987; Wright & Clarke, 1999), few researchers have extended this line of inquiry to sport organizations (for exceptions, see Shaw & Frisby, 2006). This research gap exists despite the indication of a pervasive stigma that may serve as a regulatory control mechanism that informs and shapes the structures and practices of sport organizations (Paetzold et al., 2008). As such, the purpose of this investigation was to explore the assumption of lesbianism and the lesbian label within the realm of health and kinesiology academia. Specifically, we set forth to investigate if, and to what extent, the assumptions of lesbianism and lesbian label were associated with a stigma. In the presence of a stigma, the secondary purpose was to examine how each department’s faculty members responded to, coped with, and managed any identified stigma. The specifics of our inquiry are presented below.
Method

The coupling of asymmetrical power relations that envelop gender-related issues within sport organizations with the fundamental role of power in the formation of stigma led us to operate from the critical perspective (Frisby, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2001). As Frisby (2005) noted, employing a critical paradigmatic lens to the study of organizations requires that organizational structures and practices be examined in relation to the broader cultural, economic, and political environments in which they exist. The assumption is made that challenging dominant organizational discourse is best accomplished by considering the deeply-ingrained and historically constructed asymmetrical power relations that benefit those with power. Thus, we employed insight, critique, and transformative redefinition throughout the research process by examining and questioning contextual assumptions, the manner to which these assumptions were formed and whom they served, as well as opening dialogue about a topic not often discussed, but perhaps implicitly used to inform managerial actions (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Frisby, 2005). The specific nature of our inquiry is presented below.

Setting

The setting for this study was college and university health and kinesiology department academia. In an effort to capture divergent perspectives, two universities were chosen on the basis of their contrasting environments. One setting is well-known for its strong, and often gendered, traditions and conservative atmosphere, whereas the other is known for its free-thinking environment and propensity toward progressive ideals. Substantiating these differences were both the characterizations of participants as well as documented Republican and Democratic Party alliances, respectively. The rationale for choosing contrasting environments comes from a 2005 United States telephone survey that found the endorsement of antigay policies among heterosexuals was predicted by their “egalitarian values, moral traditionalism, and political conservatism (Herek, 2007, p. 914). Further, the selection of these universities on the basis of their contrasting environments is consistent with our adoption of a critical paradigm (Frisby, 2005).

Participants

Eight heterosexual female health and kinesiology department faculty members, two lesbian health and kinesiology department faculty members, and four male (assumingly heterosexual, unless otherwise stated by them) health and kinesiology department faculty members took part in the process of investigating our research questions. Participant characteristics varied by self-reported demographic information, age, and relationship status. Specific characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

E-mail solicitations were sent to health and kinesiology department faculty members at both institutions. The e-mail contained a detailed description of the purpose of the study as well as an assurance that the study had received approval from the Human Subject Review Board. In addition, it was communicated that should they
choose to participate, all information would remain confidential. Those willing to take part responded via e-mail, after which face-to-face interview appointments with the first author were scheduled. Individual interviews with 14 faculty members were completed. Interviews involved a series of semistructured, open-ended questions and ranged from 30 min to 2 hr in length.

**Analysis**

Interviews were performed, transcribed verbatim, and inductively analyzed by the first author alone. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to maintain confidentiality. The data were analyzed throughout the entire research process and interview transcripts were analyzed both individually and collectively. Each interview was first read numerous times in its entirety. After this first step, the paragraphs, sentences, and words of each interview were combed through in great detail with the purpose of identifying emerging themes and subthemes. After the individual experiences of each faculty member were uniquely explored and analyzed, all of the faculty experiences were integrated to produce a broader, yet contextualized, understanding. During this process, data segments were constantly compared and contrasted to one another to generate categories (Glaser, 1965; Schwandt, 2007). This technique allowed us to determine relevance and similarity of data segments in relation to each other (Glaser, 1965).

The issue of “validity” was addressed by employing a number of procedures throughout the research process. Specifically, rapport-building, peer review, reflective journaling, and memoing were used to establish trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2007). These techniques required us to examine our own biases as researchers and beyond, as well as allowed our inferences to be viewed from multiple vantage points (Schwandt). Further, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
information generated from these procedures was incorporated into our overall analysis of interview data, observations, field notes, and self-reflection thus aiding in refining category formation. These categories and themes are discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

Assumptions and Labels

Overall, faculty members made an association between women in the health and kinesiology field and assumptions of lesbianism. The assumption was not automatic, however, as women in heterosexual relationships and those possessing traditionally feminine characteristics were not ascribed the label. Thus, the contextual saliency of gender and heterosexuality were evident. Edwin, a physical activity instructor, spoke about his own experiences as follows,

. . . the area of athletics, physical education, there are some perceptions that there’s probably a higher percentage of lesbians in that field than in other fields. And maybe, in some cases, the presumption is that some people are lesbians that [sic] maybe aren’t.

Emily, a professor of dance also acknowledged assumptions of lesbianism. In her words,

Yeah, I think there are assumptions made. I think a woman being in kinesiology is an assumption in itself, like the P.E. [physical education] teacher. Just like in dance, if the man dances he’s gay and if the woman dances, she’s straight. So, there are those assumptions in dance. I think there are assumptions in kinesiology with P.E. teachers and if she’s a woman P.E. teacher, she’s gay.

Elise, a professor of Sport Management spoke to a stigma as follows,

. . . there is an assumption that, that you know, you’re fit, you have short hair, you’re a P.E. teacher . . . hmmm... you must be a lesbian.

Finally, Yvonne, a faculty member in physical education discussed the stereotypes held toward women within the health and kinesiology field in a similar manner.

I would say they automatically . . . if we’re in health and kines [kinesiology] that they automatically stereotype us as . . . homosexual. And many people are surprised to find out that you’re not. I know that when I was applying for grad [graduate] school here and I met with some of the professors, umm . . . when I met with Dr. X, his grad student took me to lunch and apparently he felt really comfortable because he was like, wow, we were expecting some big ol’ bull dyke lesbian.

On the basis of these assumptions of lesbianism, the thematic findings of our inquiry indicated that the lesbian label exists as a component of a lesbian stigma. Specifically, the label co-occurred with separation, stereotypes, status loss, and discrimination, the likes of which relied on cultural and contextual gendered power structures (Link & Phelan, 2001; Link et al., 2004). The lesbian label was
associated with the perceived necessity for self-protection among lesbian faculty members, notably influenced interpersonal and departmental relationships, and affected professional experiences and work outcomes. Thus, the meaning of the stigma was congruent to its meaning within other sport contexts (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005). The following sections discuss the specific thematic findings, their variability between departments (i.e., progressive vs. conservative), and the implications of the lesbian stigma within the field of health and kinesiology as a whole.

**Relationships, Openness, and Atmosphere**

Whereas organizations have traditionally discouraged employees from integrating their work, social, and personal identities (e.g., Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998), the extent to which these identities intertwine and influence each other has become increasingly evident. Thus an individual’s work or organizational identity is shaped by his or her personal identities and vice versa (Paetzold et al., 2008). This complex interplay between identities can present challenges, as the quality of relationships between colleagues, as well as with patrons, is affected by contextual and social status (Kulik et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The manner to which a lesbian identity shaped the interpersonal relationships within the confines of health and kinesiology departments is discussed below.

Erin, a heterosexual faculty member within the progressive department, spoke of swapping funny stories about her husband and children with other married, heterosexual coworkers. Yvonne discussed similar exchanges with colleagues and students within the conservative department. Also in the conservative department, Edwin stated that,

> . . . if you have a family you kind of hang out with the family people.

Across departments it was communicated that married heterosexual faculty members had strong interpersonal relationships with other traditionally married colleagues. Lesbian and presumed lesbian faculty members, on the other hand, appeared to not be members of this in-group (i.e., labeled as different). Partially their own doing, the lesbian faculty members interviewed discussed how they kept their distance from other faculty members and chose to be selective in their interpersonal relationships and sharing of personal information. For example, Elizabeth acknowledged that she, on occasion, had referred to her female partner as her husband in an effort to avoid revealing details of her personal life. In her words,

> No, I don’t ever let it come out, or I haven’t yet that I have a female partner. I’ve had some classes that have gotten really close.

Elizabeth justified her decision to avoid her personal life in the classroom setting, and thus adopt the strategy to “pass” as a heterosexual (e.g., Button, 2004; Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008) to her students as follows,

> I think that given this university, sometimes it is important that our students see us as neutral or as heterosexual in the manner that if they think that we are lesbians or that somebody’s gay that they might not take you as seriously or take your information as true.
A member of the conservative department, Elizabeth’s words express her concern with the devaluation of a gays and lesbians (Herek, 2000a, 2007). Yvonne’s statement that openly lesbian teachers within the field of health and kinesiology are perceived as lacking legitimacy substantiated her colleague Elizabeth’s rationale. Specifically, Yvonne spoke to the ascription of negative attributes and loss of status that accompany women labeled as lesbian and/or possessing a lesbian identity (Link & Phelan, 2001; Link et al., 2004). In her words,

I’d say in the experiences that I’ve had, until then they pretty much have to prove themselves to be a good teacher. Because I think they automatically, or I’ve seen them be treated as less than an ideal teacher because of them being lesbian.

Taken together, Elizabeth and Yvonne identified components of a stigma within their department. Once affixed, the lesbian label led to stereotyping, status loss, and prejudice in the form of differential treatment. These components of stigma were also identified in the progressive department. Elise spoke of how students selected classes based on gendered lesbian assumptions and stereotypes.

... we have like three women, three main women in that [physical education] program, so, and the most feminine looking and acting as well, dressing, all those kinds of things, is a lesbian woman. The students all think that the others are. They’ll come and they’ll say, well, I’m not going to take her [the lesbian’s] class ... ‘cuz you know ... and it’s hilarious because that’s exactly what they’re choosing.

Elise added that conversations like these were not unique and she “heard it all of the time.” She also found it quite humorous and ironic that by basing their class selection on gender stereotypes, the students were enrolling in a class that was indeed taught by a lesbian. Elise had also encountered assumption of lesbian herself. She noted that by being fit, unmarried or divorced, and having short hair, the assumption was automatically made. This is consistent with the strict definitions of femininity and heterosexuality consistently enforced within sport-related climates (Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 2001; Wright & Clarke, 1999). Interestingly, Elise opined that, in general, the assumption of lesbianism was more prevalent in the physical education realm of kinesiology than in her field of sport management.

The result of labeled differences, the level of “outness” among lesbians across both departments ranged from counterfeiting and passing as heterosexuals to revealing and integrating (Button, 2004; Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008). On one end of this spectrum were faculty members like Emily who displayed numerous pictures of her partner and daughter in her office and expressed great pride in her family. At the other end of the spectrum were those completely closeted lesbian women whom every faculty member speculated as being present within their respective departments. There were also women who fell in between these extremes. Across departments, these women were characterized as being selectively forthcoming about their sexual identity, limited in their discussions of their personal lives, and generally withdrawn. For example, Laura spoke of a lesbian friend who disclosed her sexual orientation to only a few faculty members and not to the department as a whole. Despite this disclosure, Laura’s friend rarely discussed her personal life
or her partner. Laura and others suggested that the guardedness among their lesbian colleagues was a result of the departmental atmosphere.

Griffith and Hebl (2002) noted that the most conducive work environment in which sexual minority employees can reveal their sexual identity is that which consists of a supportive infrastructure that values diversity and actively protects sexual minorities. Nondiscrimination policies are one specific way for an organization to communicate their support of sexual minorities. As Button (2001) noted, “statements of non-discrimination represent the only tangible indication that the presence of sexual minority members will be tolerated” (p. 17). Beyond their presence, however, nondiscrimination policies must be maintained, upheld, and clearly communicated to all members of an organization to effectively create safe and protective work environments (King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Thus, organizations possessing nondiscrimination or diversity statements that have been forcibly imposed, fraught with litigious debate, and/or half-heartedly enforced by administration, fail to be seen as legitimate protectors of sexual minority persons and their rights. Within these organizations then, possessing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity can be particularly cumbersome (Clair et al., 2005; King et al., 2008; Ragins, 2008).

It emerged during the interview process that the conservative department was subsumed under a college that, amid impassioned contention, and backlash, included sexual orientation in their diversity statement only after the President of the university stepped in and mandated it as such. The controversial inclusion to the statement created palpable tension as well as perceptions of the department as being unsupportive of openly lesbian faculty members. As characterized by Amy, the department possessed a “good ole boy” network with a “don’t ask, don’t tell” atmosphere. Other faculty members shared this sentiment. It was also conveyed that the strongest opposition to the inclusion of “sexual orientation” to the diversity statement came from some of the most senior and highest ranking faculty members (i.e., possessed a great deal of status and power; see Link & Phelan, 2001; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Further, as many of these faculty members were still present in the department, it appeared as though the overall atmosphere continued to reflect their ideals. For instance, Holly believed that prejudices stemming from the department’s administrative level forced many of her lesbian colleagues to hide. In her words,

... they’re not publicly open about it for fear of, I think, the higher administration within the department. Not just the division, but at one point, that’s what I heard it was because of just the overall department and higher up administration.

Laura also noted the influence of departmental administration in the openness of her lesbian colleagues,

... I know there’s some definite people that [sic] are higher up in our department that [sic] have said they disapprove of this and it’s wrong, you’re going to hell, I mean, that’s not a nice safe environment.

Also reflective of this environment, Elizabeth spoke to how faculty at the administrative level, as well as her fellow teaching faculty members within the department responded as they discovered that her “spouse” was another female.
She discussed her experience with slowly being seen differently as her same-sex partnership became known.

I think for a while most people didn’t know for a year or two and then they started finding out and I think that, even though it might be just so completely subtle, I think that people look at you a little differently.

While not explicitly stated, Holly, Laura, and Elizabeth discussed several interrelated components of the stigmatization process. Specifically, they identified an atmosphere where contextually salient (hetero)gender roles and beliefs led to the labeling of differences, perceptions of devaluation, and separation. Perhaps most notably, they also identified the dependence of this process on power (Link & Phelan, 2001). Indeed, faculty members possessing the most social and political power within the department established and maintained a climate that allowed the stigmatization process to occur. As a result, lesbians and unmarried women were often guarded about their personal lives. Remaining guarded within this department, however, did little good, as it only led to increased curiosity and speculation that took the form of departmental gossip. Yvonne recalled that she and some of her fellow faculty members had occasional discussions about the sexual orientation of her female colleagues. On one occasion, she and a colleague “actually sat down with the staff listing once and went, yes, no, yes, no, really...are you sure?” when speculating who was and who was not a lesbian.

Other faculty members identified themselves as advocates for, and good friends with, their lesbian colleagues and did not take part in discussions of this kind; however, they were aware that they occurred. Laura, who quickly identified herself as having many close gay friends, discussed being “pegged a friend of gay people in the department” and not being privy to such discussions. She asserted, however, that she was 100% certain that negative comments and discussions occurred outside of her presence. Emily, a lesbian, conveyed a similar sentiment sharing that she felt an “energy” that made her suspect that negative comments were made toward lesbians. Nancy, an outspoken advocate for her gay and lesbian colleagues also suspected that comments were made, but again, outside of her presence. In her words,

. . . I have to say that it would probably be surprising if anybody let slip at least negative comments around me because, at least the folks that [sic] have been here at least five years now I was pretty outspoken and very upset with a certain lack of acceptance of gay and lesbian colleagues. So it’s unlikely that people would let slip negative comments around me.

Despite the presence of faculty members like Laura and Nancy within the department, there was an overwhelming awareness of informal and evaluative talk, or departmental gossip. Further, gossip appeared to be generally accepted as a departmental norm that subsequently shaped relationships, coworker appraisals, and work-related interactions (Kulik et al., 2008; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). For instance, Yvonne reported rarely interacting, both personally and professionally, with faculty whom she identified as, or speculated to be, lesbian. Others also identified this apparent divide between faculty members. The divisive nature of gossip works much the same way in other sport-related contexts, as covert discussions,
speculations, and rumors about female sexual orientation can result in labeling among and separation between women (Krane, 1997; Link & Phelan, 2001).

It is worth noting that no faculty member within the progressive department could recall a discussion pertaining to the sexual orientation of a colleague ever taking place. It was repeatedly communicated that the topic “had never come up” and, as such, interpersonal relationships were not perceived to have suffered. Departmental social gatherings were provided as an example of this, as two faculty members within the department who were in an openly lesbian relationship regularly attended departmental functions together. In fact, every faculty member interviewed communicated that this was a common occurrence and that their relationship was accepted among the department as a whole and that sexual orientation in general was of little concern. As stated by Nicholas,

You know, I don’t think that people should go around advertising, you know, I don’t go around advertising that I’m heterosexual. But you know, we have a couple in the department and they come to the functions that we have and it’s no big deal.

Such was not the case regarding social gatherings within the conservative department, as the lesbian faculty members interviewed recalled past comments being made about partners not being welcome at department gatherings that were “family events.” As such, these comments resulted in lesbians reportedly never attending with their partners.

The reported differences in behavior between departments suggest differences in the construction of the lesbian identity with the individual departments. Further, they suggest differences in the attitudes held toward lesbian colleagues. This is consistent with Herek (2000b) who noted that an object’s socially constructed meanings are embedded in the relationships and interactions with individuals, groups, and society-at-large. Thus, within the progressive department, attitudes toward lesbian colleagues appeared to reflect the meanings of the faculty-identified “enlightened community” of which it was a part. Attitudes toward lesbian colleagues within the conservative department also reflected its corresponding community ideals. This is not to suggest that each individual faculty member within these respective departments held the same corresponding attitudes, however, as attitudes are multidimensional and thus influenced by individually-held values and beliefs (Herek, 2000b). Indeed, this was recognized by the health and kinesiology faculty members interviewed and discussed in terms of the various types of conflicts that emerged as a result.

Value and Belief Systems

The issue of sexual orientation within these two departments was discussed in a variety of ways. Most notably, faculty members across departments discussed their perceptions of how and why the topic of sexual orientation elicited conflicts. Specifically, they spoke to how the interactions between personal, social, and organizational identities created internal and external emotional conflicts within and between their colleagues (Paetzold et al., 2008). External conflict arose when religious and political beliefs were made salient. Perceptions of internal conflict were observed when relationships between heterosexuals and lesbians served
to break down societal stereotypes and form friendships between persons who, according to their belief systems, should not be friends. Holly, a member of the conservative department, spoke to observing a heterosexual colleague’s internal conflict toward her lesbian colleagues. In Holly’s words,

. . . she’s such a good friend and such a good person, umm, but at the same time I think she feels torn because she loves some of them but you know, oh, so and so did this or did that and you know, just says great things about them, but at the same time I can tell that she feels conflicted.

Holly went on to discuss how she believed the source of her colleague’s conflict to be the result of a clash between religious beliefs and the formation of friendships with some of her lesbian colleagues. Amy discussed witnessing a similar occurrence among the student body. Specifically, she referred to the confusion she observed when students learned that their instructor was a lesbian. As stated by her,

I find that they are extremely conservative and umm, shocked when they find out that she is a lesbian and they’re like, well I don’t understand, I’ve been taught my whole life that this is not good and these people are bad and, but I like you and you’re a lesbian. I don’t understand how that works. So, they kind of have to question what it is that they’ve been taught their whole life and I think that sometimes that can be very difficult for them.

Beyond these internal conflicts, beliefs and belief systems also led to external conflicts. For instance, Nancy discussed how her colleagues’ beliefs about homosexuality led to contention and divisiveness within the conservative department. Specifically, Nancy had colleagues who cited their religious and political beliefs as well as legal rights as the bases for objecting to the inclusion of sexual orientation into a diversity statement. In fact, these faculty members were so adamant about their opposition that they took the matter to the highest ranks of the university. From their perspective, the inclusion of sexual orientation into a diversity statement was tantamount to the university condoning something that they believed to be sinful and immoral; homosexuality. Indeed, this is consistent with a great deal of literature that identifies conservative religious and political beliefs as predictors of prejudice toward nonheterosexuals (e.g., Herek, 2000a, 2006; Stoever & Morera, 2007). It is important to note, however, that the influential role of religious and political beliefs identified by the faculty members within the conservative department, were likely more pronounced, as conservative belief systems were more salient. According to Nancy,

We’re here in the south. A conservative area with a lot of folks who just down . . . will outright say that they view it as sinful, you know, homosexual behavior is sinful.

Thus while research suggested that political and religious beliefs influence attitudes homosexuality, it is the strength of which people identify with, and the saliency of, such beliefs that is of greater importance (Herek, 2000a, 2006). This appeared to be the case across departments, as the conservative department was characterized as more prejudicial and discriminatory toward nonheterosexuals than progressive department.
Another factor influencing conflict was that of interpersonal contact, as faculty members with gay and lesbian family members, friends, former teammates, and so on, expressed very little negativity toward sexual minorities. Time and time again, those faculty members with the closest relationships with gays and lesbians exhibited little to no prejudice at all. For example, when asked why, as a heterosexual woman, she was an outspoken advocate for her gay and lesbian colleagues, Nancy stated the following,

Why? I have a lot of friends, I have a brother who is gay, it, it’s unjust, it’s unfair, and it makes me very angry.

Others expressed similar relationships suggesting that beyond merely having contact with gays and/or lesbians, a factor that can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Herek, 2000a), faculty members who had strong interpersonal relationships with gays and lesbians, appeared to empathize with their plight, and exhibited little to no prejudice. This is consistent with the literature that identified empathy as a strong mediator between contact and prejudice reduction (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Also influencing the level of negativity expressed toward gays and lesbians were the etiological beliefs about the origin of homosexuality. Specifically, the attitudes of individual faculty members were influenced by beliefs of homosexuality as innate or homosexuality as a choice (see Herek, 2000a; Stoever & Morera, 2007). Again, these beliefs varied a great deal, as some academicians opined that homosexuality was a lifestyle choice, while others questioned this belief by calling attention to the societal and interpersonal hardships that can accompany identifying as a homosexual. Carl, for instance, discussed his experiences with “people with homosexuality” in terms of choice. When asked if he believed it was a choice, he responded with the following,

For some I believe it’s choosing and for others I don’t feel that it’s choosing, I think it’s within the individual but I do know of one person who has dated guys before and kind of gone back and forth.

Laura, on the other hand, adamantly refuted the position of choice by asking the question,

If you could choose, why would you choose for people to make fun of you and have to hide? And you know, if they ever do find somebody that they fall in love with, they can’t even get married, they can’t bring that person home for Christmas, you know, they can’t, they’re always lying. Their whole life is a lie.

Amy recalled that many of the homosexual people she knows have claimed to be homosexual since birth and that it was an absurd notion that there is a way to “breed those things into your kids.”

The notion of choice continues to greatly inform attitudes toward sexual minorities and the rights that are afforded them (Herek, 2000a; Stoever & Morera, 2007). Likewise, the origin and nature of sexual orientation have become increasingly present issues in the struggle for the protection of sexual minorities (Berkley & Watt, 2006). While many organizations have chosen to implement policies that support equal treatment of their sexual minority employees (Lubensky, Holland,
Wiethoff, & Crosby, 2004), the specifics of such policies within these departments were illusive, at best. As an example, Emily, a lesbian and mother to her and her partner’s young daughter, discussed the difficulties she experienced in attaining spousal and familial rights within her department. Upon taking her job, she did not find departmental aid in assisting her partner with finding employment, a service that she asserts takes place rigorously for heterosexual married couples. Emily also discussed departmental support in relation to her daughter. She first acknowledged, with great concern, that she had no biological connection to her daughter and as such, lacked the same legal rights as other parents within the department (Palmer, 2003). Currently, the majority of political and legal communities view and treat individuals in same-sex partnerships as single persons (Riggle, Rostosky, & Prather, 2006). Despite this, Emily’s department worked with her, recognized her daughter as her own, and granted her many of the same parental rights accorded to heterosexual faculty members with children. Such consideration, however, did not negate the issue in her eyes nor in the eyes of others.

Amy discussed situations like Emily’s as representing a discriminatory “double standard.” Amy expressed her belief that parental rights should not only be accorded to opposite sex couples, further adding that the roles and duties of a parent are no different for couples in same sex relationships. She spoke specifically to Emily’s parental duties as follows.

She’s still the one that’s [sic] up at one o’clock in the morning, three o’clock in the morning, four o’clock in the morning . . . you know, having to drive her around the block, I mean you know, she’s still the parent regardless of the fact that she wasn’t the one that [sic] actually had the child.

Laura spoke to additional familial struggles that she witnessed within same-sex partnerships.

Well, how do you handle it with your kids? I mean, so you’ve got to tell your kids and it’s a great situation because they’re honest with their kids but they know that their kids are going to get made fun of. You know, they have two mommies or they have two daddies, you know, and they’re not normal like other kids and people question whether their kids will be gay because they were gay.

Laura added,

Yeah, so, but they struggle with, you know, like I said about their rights, their insurance, taking vacations, and just people staring at them or introducing themselves to somebody that [sic] you haven’t met when you have your significant other and your two kids. The kids have to deal with that and how do you handle that with the kids. Then families, you know, some of their families don’t agree and so how do you handle Christmas and so on?

Indeed, the issues surrounding same-sex partnerships and same-sex couples as parents were not lost on those interviewed. Much like the trends of society in general, faculty members across departments expressed their perceived necessity for legal recognition of same-sex marriage, as they believed that opportunity to benefit financially, psychologically, and physically from the institution of marriage should be accorded to all (Herek, 2006). While noteworthy, these sentiments only
rarely translated into outspoken advocacy for equality. Perhaps in fear of eliciting the lesbian label and/or the accompanying prejudice and discrimination and thus being stigmatized themselves, very few faculty members sought to actively engage in change (Goffman, 1963; Kulik et al., 2008). As Krane and Barber (2005) noted, however, advocating social change within the sport context need not be compromising to one’s sexual identity nor must it take the form of a mass effort. Change can occur through the actions of a lone person.

Faculty members discussed how they challenged homophobic discourse within their classrooms and encouraged the contextualization of conversations between and among students and by doing so, were advocating change (Krane & Barber, 2005). Change can also occur by creating respectful and inclusive environments where equal rights are accorded to everyone (Krane & Barber, 2005; Kulik, et al., 2008). Faculty members expressed the necessity for such environments across departments, as they discussed their disdain for the prejudices observed against their lesbian colleagues, friends, and acquaintances.

Indeed, the behaviors of the faculty members who advocated for change interviewed subtly abetted the progress of social justice. Other faculty members, however, were more blatant in their supportive actions. Nancy, aware of the powerful influence and emerging presence of majority member support for minority member rights (e.g., Lassiter & Barret, 2007), spoke of her aforementioned involvement in her college’s nondiscrimination statement issue as follows,

"But, I’m also safe, you see. I was, well tenured, I wasn’t a full professor then, but I had tenure. I was married with two kids and you know, I could speak out without ever anyone questioning … oh, you’re just saying that because you’re a lesbian too. Well, obviously not (laughs), I had other motivations. But if the heterosexuals among the crowd can’t speak out . . . it’s . . . an essential approach.

Indeed, recognizing that speaking out against prejudice and discrimination toward lesbians often elicits assumptions of lesbianism, her words reflect the importance of majority group advocacy in establishing social justice for minority group members. More succinctly, her words represent the importance of power and status.

**Power**

Link and Phelan’s (2001) conceptualization of stigma suggested a stigma’s complete dependence on power. While often taken for granted, the high levels of social, cultural, economic, and political power and majority status afforded to members of certain social groups dictates the extent to which members of other social groups are stereotypically labeled as different and subsequently separated as “others” or outsiders. Power and status differences also dictate the extent to which expressions of prejudice and discrimination toward these “others” upholds status hierarchies. Specifically, members of majority groups have the ability to label and separate themselves such that subsequent expressions of prejudice and discrimination maintain their majority status through stigmatization (Link & Phelan). Minority status group members, conversely, are unable to effectively carry out this process. Thus, characteristics such as gender, sex, and sexuality do not only take the form of identities, but also social positions that possess societal status and
power (Burman, 2002). The singular and multiplicative effects of one’s status and power can impact and influence members of minority and majority groups and to some extent circumvent the stigmatization process. Nancy, for instance, identified herself as possessing characteristics which allowed her to “safely” advocate for her lesbian colleagues. Specifically, Nancy’s was a married, heterosexual female with two children. These contextually salient characteristics afforded her majority status relative to her lesbian counterparts and, according to her, freed her from pre-suppositions of lesbianism. Nancy also possessed the status and power of a tenured, full professor that led her to advocate without fear of professional consequences. In sum, her majority status, coupled with her aforementioned strong relationships with gays and lesbians, compelled Nancy to advocate for equality within her department. Further, it set the stage for her to occupy a position that would allow her the opportunity to permeate the boundaries between those possessing minority and majority status (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Indeed, the role of heterosexual allies is integral to sexual minorities’ fight for equal rights (Herek, 2000a; Human Rights Campaign, 2009).

**Stigma**

First and foremost, all of the faculty members within this study identified a lesbian stigma within the field of health and kinesiology. Specifically, gender stereotypes and assumptions led some women to be labeled as lesbians and separated as “others.” Women labeled as lesbians were identified as occupying minority status and suffering prejudice and discrimination at the individual and group levels. Likewise they identified prejudice in the structural practices at the departmental and university levels. Thus, the stigma was multidimensional, as were its consequences (Paetzold et al., 2008). At the individual level, the lesbian stigma limited the degree to which lesbians felt they could be open with their colleagues. This is consistent with the “norm of silence” that surrounds lesbians in other sport settings (e.g., Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005). To the extent that adhering to this norm becomes an excessive burden and/or disclosure (i.e., involuntary or voluntary) results in strained working relationships, stigmatized individuals may experience negative psychological, physical, and professional outcomes (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins, 2008). Indeed, both the lesbian and the heterosexual faculty members who advocated for social justice spoke to these outcomes.

As Link and Phelan (2001) noted, discrimination must be addressed at not only the individual level, but also in relation to the structural practices of specific contexts. Indeed, the presence and effects of the lesbian stigma within these departments call attention to their structures, practices, and cultures (Paetzold et al., 2008). For instance, the progressive department rendered the most positive outcomes for lesbian faculty members, as there appeared to be support for sexual minorities at all levels (i.e., coworker, supervisor, organizational; see Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King 2008). Likewise, other faculty members and the department as a whole seemed to benefit through the fostering of relationships and cohesiveness (Kulik et al., 2008). Relationships were also formed within the conservative department, but an overall environment of inclusiveness was not evident. The belief that the administration would disapprove of lesbians disclosing their sexual orientation identifies the crucial role of administrative support in creating change. As noted
by Cunningham (2008), top management support is an integral factor in fostering overall organizational support for diversity initiatives. Likewise, Ragins (2008) identified institutional support as an environmental buffer that allows individuals to disclose stigmatized identities without suffering inimical ramifications. Thus, within the conservative department, the administration’s failure to promote the ideals of an all-inclusive department to the entire department may have subverted the progress of change.

The vital roles that interpersonal contact, power, and status play in mitigating the stigmatization process and its effects cannot be overstated within this study. Specifically, these factors carry important implications for establishing departments where members look beyond gender stereotypes to view colleagues as possessing valuable skills and abilities that contribute to the fundamental departmental mission of educating students (see Cunningham, 2004; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Pettigrew, 1998). To some extent, all of the faculty members within the progressive department indicated that their department operated in such a manner. Perhaps more importantly, faculty members within this department did not compromise their individual identities to do so. Such was not the case within the conservative department; however, as clear group boundaries had been established. Indeed, the advocating role of those possessing departmental status and power is paramount to deconstructing established boundaries and reconstructing new ones by influencing others (see Barnum & Markovsky, 2007).

It is important to note that despite the presence of a lesbian stigma across both departments and within the field of health and kinesiology as a whole, women were not viewed as powerless, passive victims. Rather, the faculty members who had not been ascribed the lesbian label sympathized with those who encountered the lesbian stigma. Likewise, they expressed admiration of their fortitude and resilience. Further, and consistent with Reissman (2000), it was recognized that both heterosexual and lesbian women were resisting the lesbian stigma and challenging the gendered order of health and kinesiology departments through a variety of covert and overt mechanisms. Namely, they spoke out and acted up, refused to accept the connotation of deviance that stereotypically accompanied the lesbian label, selectively avoided confrontational situations, and persevered when faced with prejudice and discrimination at the individual, group, department, and organizational levels (Reissman; Zajicek, & Koski, 2003). Further, the female faculty members interviewed women expressed how they lived happy and healthy lives, thus suggesting that rather than merely coping with the lesbian stigma, they may have found ways to be empowered by it (Shih, 2004). Indeed, this notion of empowerment warrants further inquiry.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, the health and kinesiology faculty members in this study identified the lesbian label as a component of a lesbian stigma that operated much the same way as in other sport-related contexts; as a control mechanism (Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005). Further, the existence of the lesbian stigma informed the individual, group, departmental, and organizational identities of the faculty members interviewed (Paetzold et al., 2008). The stigma was based on contextually-salient meanings that led to labeled differences, separation, prejudice, status loss,
and discrimination (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Jones et al., 1984). Despite its presence, however, the extent to which the actions of department members and departmental practices were informed and shaped by the stigma was influenced by the climate and culture of the department. This insight substantiates previous literature (e.g., Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Herek, 2007; Kulik et al., 2008; Ragins, 2008; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003) as well as suggests the potential mitigating effect of an inclusive work environment on the effects of stigmatization within sport organizational settings. Future works are needed to explore this topic within additional health and kinesiology departments, as well as all other sport organization settings. Likewise, the individual, group, departmental, and organizational outcomes related to the lesbian stigma offer potential avenues of future inquiry.

References


Krane, V. (2001). We can be athletic and feminine, but do we want to? Challenging hegemonic femininity in sport. *Quest, 53*, 115–133.


