Two examples from February 2017 illustrate the equivocal state of affairs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) athletes in sport. The first occurred in Cypress, Texas, where Mack Beggs won the 110-pound division of the Class 6A wrestling championship (Floreck, 2017). Although winning a state title is noteworthy in itself, what made this achievement particularly striking is that Beggs is a transgender boy, meaning he was assigned the sex of female at birth but his gender identity and gender expression are that of a boy. At the time of the event, Beggs was taking testosterone as part of the transition process. His testosterone treatment was permitted under University Interscholastic League rules, which offer a provision that students are permitted to take steroids so long as they are “dispensed, prescribed, delivered and administered by a medical practitioner for a valid medical purpose” (as cited in Floreck, 2017). Beggs’s transition comes under this valid medical purpose. Further, although Beggs preferred to compete against other boys, University Interscholastic League rules stipulate that athletes must participate in sports based on their sex assigned at birth (Buzuvis, 2011). Thus, although Beggs identified as a boy, preferred to compete against boys, and was taking testosterone to transition, he was required by state guidelines to compete against girls. The wrestling meet and Beggs’s accomplishments occurred against the backdrop of a lawsuit brought by a competing school’s wrestling coach, who was seeking to prohibit Beggs from participating.

The same month, Braden Holtby, of the National Hockey League’s Washington Capitals ice hockey team, wore a You Can Play–themed goalie mask. You Can Play is an organization whose mission is to create a sport environment that is safe, respectful, and inclusive of all persons, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity (see http://www.youcanplayproject.org). The organization partnered with the National Hockey League in 2013 to begin promoting an LGBT-inclusive space for all athletes seeking to play hockey. In February 2017, the National Hockey League promoted the slogan “Hockey is for Everyone” as a way of promoting diversity and inclusion in the sport. As part of those efforts, the Capitals engaged in several LGBT-inclusive activities, including Holtby’s wearing of the equality-themed mask and several other players using rainbow-colored Pride Tape on their sticks during a practice. The helmet and the sticks were then signed and auctioned to raise money for You Can Play (Gulitti, 2017).

1The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) commonly are considered together. According to the American Psychological Association (http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx), lesbians are women who have emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions toward other women. Gay men have emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions toward other men. Bisexual refers to women or men who have emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions toward both women and men. Finally, transgender does not refer to attraction and emotions toward others. Instead, this term refers to individuals whose gender identity or gender expression does not match their sex assigned at birth (http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx).
These two cases illustrate the unbalanced and sometimes contradictory state of affairs for LGBT athletes in sport today. In some cases, a host of barriers serve to detract from LGBT athletes’ quest to be active and excel. In other cases, LGBT athletes operate in a welcoming environment, where organizations and supportive others seek to promote principles of respect and inclusion. Given the seemingly equivocal nature of LGBT athletes’ experiences, my purpose in this chapter is to explore these issues in greater depth and, in doing so, offer an integrative, explanatory framework outlining the various multi-level factors influencing LGBT athletes’ experiences in sport. I first highlight key terms, then follow with an overview of people’s attitudes toward LGBT persons and athletes. I also provide demographics on the LGBT community, with a particular focus on the North American context. Given this foundation, I then describe a multilevel model for understanding LGBT athletes’ experiences in the sport and physical activity context.

BACKGROUND: TERMINOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Before introducing the multilevel framework, I first outline basic terms surrounding LGBT individuals, including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Additionally, I discuss the demographic characteristics associated with the LGBT community.

Sexual Orientation

The American Psychological Association (APA; 2008) has defined sexual orientation as “an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes,” as well as “a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions” (p. 1). Although some might consider sexual orientation to be a binary construct—either heterosexual or homosexual—there is considerable evidence that people actually think of sexual orientation as a spectrum (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Sell, 1997). In this way, sexual orientation is not a dichotomous variable but can operate along a band, in which exclusively heterosexual and exclusively gay or lesbian serve as the endpoints, and there are several intervening points, such as being bisexual or pansexual.

Savin-Williams and colleagues (Savin-Williams, 2014; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013) have illustrated these complexities. They observed, for instance, that a small but statistically meaningful proportion of women (between 7.6% and 9.5%) and men (between 3.6% and 4.1%) consider themselves to be mostly heterosexual. In this way, they do not consider themselves as exclusively heterosexual, nor do they think of themselves as bisexual. Age effects are also present: the percentage of those with a mostly heterosexual identity increases during the teen years, peaks during the 20s, and then remains stable thereafter.

Finally, in addition to operating along a spectrum, sexual orientation is a multidimensional construct. Ragins and Wiethoff (2005) noted that sexual orientation moves beyond sexual behavior to also include self-image, fantasies, and attractions (see also the aforementioned APA definition). As Savin-Williams (2014) illustrated, although the various dimensions of sexual orientation frequently align, congruity does not always occur. It is possible for a woman, for example, to identify as exclusively heterosexual and engage in sexual activities with men only, yet also be attracted to and have fantasies about both women and men. The hypothetical woman’s self-image, fantasies, attraction, and behaviors represent just one of many potential combinations. The lack of alignment is because of the conceptual uniqueness of one’s dimensions, social constraints, and personal development during life.

Two studies further illustrate the complexities and multidimensionality of sexual orientation. First, Korchmaros, Powell, and Stevens (2013) asked participants about three parts of their sexual orientation: identity, preference for sexual partners, and actual behaviors. Although these dimensions aligned for some of the participants, for many others (23% of men and 41% of women), they did not. The investigators found, for example, that some women identified as bisexual but preferred to engage in sexual activities with women exclusively. In other cases, participants rejected the classifications imposed on
them by the research team; illustrative of this, some preferred queer, as opposed to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. Other participants were asexual; thus, matching their identity with sexual partners was nonsensical.

Anderson's (2008) work offers another example of how identities, attractions, and behaviors might not align. He collected observational and interview data from collegiate male cheerleaders. Although all of them self-identified as heterosexual, 40% had engaged in sexual activities with other men. Anderson identified a number of reasons why these behaviors occurred. Some of the participants considered sexual interactions with men as a means to an end, such that they resulted in further intimate contact with women. Others saw sex with men as a form of sexual recreation. The participants did not see either of these cases as challenging their identity as heterosexual, nor did they detract from their attraction to women. Thus, similar to the findings of Korchmaros et al. (2013), Anderson's data illustrate the construct's complexity and the fact that dimensions of sexual orientation frequently do not align.

Gender Identity and Expression
Gender identity and gender expression also are relevant to a discussion of LGBT athletes and are conceptually distinct from sexual orientation. Gender identity refers to how an individual identifies as a woman or man, or what Beemyn and Rankin (2011) referred to as an individual’s “sense of their own gender” (p. 20). Gender identity is distinct from the individual's sex assigned at birth, which is determined by a medical professional and usually based on external genitalia. Gender expression reflects “how one chooses to indicate one's gender identity to others through behavior and appearance, including clothes, hairstyle, make-up, voice, and body characteristics” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 21). The expression of gender can vary over time and may also be context dependent. For example, an athlete might cross-dress in some situations (e.g., when with friends in social situations) but not in others (e.g., when competing on the tennis or basketball court).

Gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth all inform discussions of transgender, intersex, and cisgender persons. As Carroll (2014) explained, transgender, or trans for short, “describes an individual whose gender identity (one's psychological identification as a boy/man or girl/woman) does not match the person's sex at birth” (p. 368). The story of Mac Beggs offers an illustration. Beggs was assigned female at birth yet identifies as a boy; therefore, he is considered trans. It is also worth noting that trans and transgender are umbrella terms used to reflect a wide variety of ways in which people might describe themselves. In fact, Beemyn and Rankin (2011), in their study of trans individuals, found that participants used 479 unique descriptors when referring to themselves.

Cisgender, on the other hand, is used to describe an individual whose sex assigned at birth is congruent with that person's gender identity and expression (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). The term comes from the Latin cis, meaning “the same side as.” As an example, a person who is assigned male at birth, who identifies as a man, and whose gender expression is also that of a man would be considered cisgender.

Finally, transgender and cisgender should not be confused with intersex. People with an intersex condition have “atypical combinations of chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and other physical features” (Buzuvis, 2011, p. 11; see also Richardson, 2013). For the majority of people with an intersex condition, they identify as a female or male and are not aware of the condition unless they learn about it while undergoing a medical procedure.

Demographics
Given this foundational understanding, it is also useful to consider the demographic characteristics of persons in the LGBT community. The percentage of LGBT individuals in the United States varies based on measurement. Focusing on LGB individuals, Savin-Williams (2006) showed prevalence rates ranged from as low as 1% (if considering identity among adult women) to as high as 13% (if considering attraction among women who are young adults). Most estimates suggest LGB individuals represent about 10% of the U.S. population (Cunningham, 2015b). To put this percentage in perspective, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the U.S. population in 2017 to be about 324 million people; thus, there were approximately 32 million people who were
gay, bisexual, or lesbian in the country at that time. For comparison purposes, the proportion of LGB individuals is larger than that of Asian Americans, slightly less than the proportion of African Americans, and less than the proportion of Latinos. These figures suggest sexual minorities—that is, persons who are LGB—represent a sizeable portion of the U.S. population.

The PEW Research Center (Taylor, 2013) offers additional data, obtained from its nationally representative study of 1,197 LGBT adults in the United States. Their data allow for the exploration of how LGBT status intersects with other identities, including gender, age group, race, educational attainment, and annual income. Demographics of those who participated in the PEW study closely mirrored the U.S. population demographics, though there were some differences. The proportion of women and men in the United States (51% women and 49% men) was roughly the same as in the PEW study (49% women and 50% men). Relative to the overall U.S. population, more young adults (ages 18–29) in the PEW study identified as LGBT (30% vs. 22%) and fewer adults ages 65 or older did (9% vs. 17%). In terms of race, LGBT participants in the PEW study were more likely to be Hispanic (17%) and less likely to be Black (10%) than the corresponding proportions in the U.S. population (15% Hispanic and 12% Black). Further, LGBT individuals were more likely to have some college (36%) or at least a bachelor’s degree (32 percent) than the overall U.S. population (31% and 26%, respectively). Finally, LGBT individuals were less likely to have an annual family income of $75,000 or more, relative to the U.S. population (20% vs. 34%). Note that the income data seemingly refute stereotypes about LGBT individuals’ wealth, and similar patterns are evident in Canada (Waite & Denier, 2015). The differences almost disappear, however, in public sector jobs, where there are more regulations governing what individuals are paid.

ATTITUDES TOWARD LGBT INDIVIDUALS AND LGBT ATHLETES

Across the United States, attitudes toward LGBT individuals and the rights afforded to them have improved over time. For decades, Gallup (2017) has surveyed Americans about everything from the acceptability of being gay or lesbian to civil rights of the LGBT community, and tracking their data offers an illustrative example of the increasingly inclusive attitudes among Americans over time.

Consider first the opinion as to whether gay or lesbian relations among consenting adults should be legal. In 1986, fewer than one in three Americans (32%) agreed with this sentiment, but by 2016, that figure had increased to 68%. Gallup also asked adults whether they thought being lesbian or gay was morally wrong, irrespective of their thoughts about the legality of the topic. In 2002, 38% of Americans believed being lesbian or gay was morally acceptable, but this figure had increased to 60% by 2016. Finally, in 1996, only 27% of Americans believed that same-sex marriage should be legal, but this figure had increased to 61% by 2016.

These more accepting attitudes observed in the Gallup data are echoed by LGBT individuals’ perceptions. Returning to the PEW Research Center study of LGBT individuals (Taylor, 2013), 92% of the respondents who were asked about society now compared to 10 years ago indicated that society was more accepting, and they also anticipated subsequent improvements 10 years from now. They attributed these more positive attitudes to an increase in the number of people who know someone who is LGBT, the presence of public figures who are LGBT, and advocacy for inclusiveness among heterosexuals and cisgender individuals.

The improved, more favorable attitudes toward LGBT individuals have carried over to the sport world as well. For example, there is growing evidence that athletes express more inclusive attitudes toward gay athletes, and the more positive attitudes stem from an embrace of inclusive masculinity in the team sport settings (Anderson, 2011; McCormack & Anderson, 2014). Increasingly, lesbian athletes who disclose their sexual orientation to their teammates are met with support and encouragement (Fink, Burton, Farrell, & Parker, 2012). Athletes who are LGBT also use sport as a space where they can contest traditional norms and resist prejudice against sexual minorities (Ravel & Rail, 2008). They do so by creating LGBT-centric sport spaces, reframing popular discourses in
sport, and ensuring sport is a safe space for sexual minorities. Finally, change advocates working in sport organizations suggest that while cultures that privilege heterosexuals and cisgender persons are still prevalent, the sports world is becoming more inclusive and accepting. Griffin (2012), for instance, pointed to the following: the increased number of LGBT athletes disclosing their sexual orientation at younger ages; increased awareness of LGBT issues by coaches; organizations that focus on LGBT equality, such as You Can Play; and sport governing bodies, such as the NCAA, developing LGBT-inclusive policies.

Although the aforementioned research suggests explicit attitudes toward LGBT athletes have improved, there is also evidence that prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination persist. Cunningham and Melton (2014) observed as much in a qualitative study of parents, all of whom had expressed support via a questionnaire for LGB coaches. Only 30% offered unequivocal support for LGB coaches. Others were either indifferent or expressed prejudice in nuanced ways. Specifically, the parents expressed support “but they did so in ways that (a) were qualified, (b) served to perpetuate underlying stereotypes about sexual minorities, including those that sexual minorities have ulterior motives . . . promote their sexual orientation to others . . . and are sexual predators” (p. 392). The authors suggested that parents may openly express support for LGB coaches because they do not want to appear discriminatory; however, when bias can be attributed to sources other than the self (e.g., child protection), parents are likely to express anti-LGB attitudes.

A MULTILEVEL MODEL EXPLAINING THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT ATHLETES

There are a number of factors influencing the experiences of LGBT athletes, and these operate at multiple levels of analysis. Therein lies the importance of multilevel conceptual models, or frameworks, that explain phenomena by considering influences from the macro (i.e., societal), meso (i.e., team or organizational), and micro (i.e., individual) levels of analysis. Sport organizations, after all, are complex, multilevel systems (Chelladurai, 2014), and explanations that focus on one level to the exclusion of others necessarily tell a partial story (Dixon & Cunningham, 2006). Kozlowski and Klein (2000) further noted that “fundamental to the levels perspective is the recognition that micro phenomena are embedded in macro context and that macro phenomena often emerge through interaction and dynamics of lower-level elements” (p. 7). Recognizing and embracing this complexity, I expand on my previous work in this area (Cunningham, 2012a, 2015b) to present a multilevel model explaining the experiences of LGBT athletes (see Figure 19.1).

Macrollevel Factors

Macrollevel factors operate at the societal level, and they represent the larger, institutionalized activities and practices that influence the opportunities and experiences LGBT athletes might have. I draw from Herek’s (2007, 2009) notion of structural stigma to further illustrate. He suggested that structures, systems, and practices in society serve to privilege some—heterosexuals and cisgender individuals—while marginalizing others—sexual minorities and trans individuals. Macrollevel factors serve to place heterosexuality and cisgender status as the norm or expected standard, and as a result, those who vary from the standard are necessarily cast as “other” and subsequently marginalized. Systems privileging dominant groups are reinforced through prevailing laws, rules, and customs. All serve to promulgate a state where LGBT persons “are presumed to be abnormal and unnatural and, therefore, are regarded as inferior, as requiring explanation, and as appropriate targets for hostility, differential treatment and discrimination, and even aggression” (Herek, 2007, pp. 907–908). In the context of the current model, I highlight three macrollevel factors influencing the experiences of LGBT athletes: laws, governing structures, and institutionalized norms in sport.

Laws. The laws protecting LGBT rights have the potential to influence all LGBT individuals. Unfortunately, many states in the United States lack basic protections for LGBT persons. According to the Movement Advancement Project, in 2017, only 21 states had employment protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression,
and another two states had such protections based on sexual orientation only but not gender identity and expression (Non-discrimination Laws, 2017). Thus, in the majority of states, it is permissible to deny employment or to fire someone because they are LGBT. Similarly, in 2016, North Carolina passed a law that, among other things, limited trans individuals to using public bathrooms that are consistent with their sex assigned at birth. At the time of this writing in 2017, similar legislation had been proposed in 11 other states (Cunningham, 2017). The passage of these laws would mean that trans athletes would not be permitted to use facilities consistent with their gender identity and expression.

When it comes to LGBT-related laws, one might question the degree to which such mandates influence the well-being of LGBT athletes, especially younger competitors. But, empirical evidence shows that state and federal mandates do affect people's psychological and physical health. Trans individuals who face structural forms of discrimination in college (e.g., bathrooms, housing) are more likely to attempt suicide later in life, relative to trans individuals who do not face such biases (Seelman, 2016). Furthermore, 70% of trans individuals in Herman’s (2013) study reported being harassed or abused in public restrooms. Finally, Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, and McConnell (2017) drew from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System data (representing more than 762,000 individuals) to examine the influence of the 2015 Supreme Court decision permitting same-sex marriage on suicide attempts among youth ages 15 to 24 years. The researchers observed a 7% relative reduction in suicide attempts following the Supreme Court ruling. This collective evidence shows that LGBT-related laws create structural forms of stigma that have serious health and well-being ramifications for LGBT individuals, and when laws are passed that support LGBT individuals, positive health-related outcomes emerge (see also Hatzenbuehler, 2017).

**Governing structures.** How sports are governed also influences LGBT athletes’ experiences and opportunities. Opportunities for trans athletes to participate provide an illustrative example (Buzuvis, 2012; Carroll, 2014; Krane, Barak, & Mann, 2012; Love, 2014; Travers & Deri, 2011). For years, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) policy was considered most restrictive, as trans athletes could only participate if (a) they had transitioned via sex reassignment surgery; (b) they had at least 2 years
of hormone treatment; and (c) they could provide legal documentation concerning their transition. These conditions were onerous to the athletes and lacked medical evidence supporting their necessity. In essence, the rules served to exclude, rather than include, trans athletes. Recognizing these policy shortcomings, in November 2015, the IOC implemented new policies (IOC Consensus Meeting, 2015). Trans men in sport, defined as athletes assigned female at birth whose gender identity and expression are that of a man, can compete without restriction. Trans women, defined as athletes assigned male at birth whose gender identity and expression are that of a woman, can compete as long as they are on hormone treatment and their testosterone is below 10 mmol/L.

The National College Athletic Association (NCAA), which governs intercollegiate athletics in the United States, also has policies governing trans inclusion (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011). This policy allows for trans women to compete as long as they have undergone at least 1 year of hormone treatment. In this way, potential added effects of testosterone in the body are nullified. The policy allows trans men to participate on women’s teams until hormone treatments commence. Similar to the revised IOC policy, there is no need for sex reassignment surgery or legal documentation.

Both the revised IOC and the NCAA policies take needed steps to inclusion, as they eschew past mandates that lacked medical evidence and placed undue burden on the athletes. Some scholars, such as Buzuvis (2012), have argued that mandating hormone treatment is also unnecessary and serves an exclusionary purpose, especially for NCAA athletes, whose participation is time-bound. The NCAA seemingly acknowledges these contradictions, too:

A male-to-female transgender woman may be small and slight, even if she is not on hormone blockers or taking estrogen. . . . The assumption that all male-bodied people are taller, stronger, and more highly skilled in a sport than all female-bodied people is not accurate. (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011, p. 7)

Finally, interscholastic governance of trans athletes runs the inclusionary gamut. Some states, such as Texas, require athletes to compete on teams that match the athletes’ sex assigned at birth. If they are transitioning, they must also possess a doctor’s note specifying that the hormones are needed for medical reasons. The opening example in this chapter illustrates the complexities associated with such policies.

On the other end of the spectrum are states such as Washington, where athletes can engage in competitions in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity and expression. The focus in these states is on ensuring that all persons can engage in sport and physical activity, and when there are questions concerning the legitimacy of claims, eligibility committees are frequently in place to hear the case and make a determination. (See https://www.transathlete.com for a listing of each state’s policies concerning trans participation in interscholastic athletics.)

Institutionalized norms. The third macrolevel factor influencing LGBT experiences are institutionalized norms. Institutionalization refers to the process whereby “social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). In the current context, institutionalization occurs when activities, mind-sets, or ideals surrounding LGBT athletes become taken for granted, in which case people come to accept the practices without question. As these practices and rituals are repeated over time, they become entrenched (Oliver, 1992). People and organizations within a given setting will subsequently reinforce the practices and beliefs because there is legitimacy associated with doing so (Washington & Patterson, 2011). These dynamics have been observed in women’s sports, for example, where gender discrimination prevails because of the history, tradition, stereotypes, and lack of legal consequences from failing to do so (Cunningham, 2008). Finally, institutionalized norms and practices are context specific: what is taken for granted in one setting might be antithetical in another. For example, LGBT-inclusive softball leagues are common in the northeastern United States but comparatively rare in the southern United States (see also Buzuvis, 2012).
The context-specific nature of institutionalized norms and practices surrounding LGBT individuals is evidenced in a number of ways. McCormack and Anderson (2014), for example, contended that more inclusive forms of masculinity are likely to emerge when homohysteria (i.e., men’s fear of being thought gay) is low. When such fears are allayed, men feel free to embrace inclusive masculinity and the consequent behaviors, including the acceptance of gay and bisexual peers, increased emotional intimacy and physical tactility, rejection of the “one-time” rule of homosexuality, and a refutation of violence toward LGBT individuals. Related work, much of which is set in Europe, has largely supported the basic principles of inclusive masculinity (Anderson & McCormack, 2015; Cleland, 2018).

Of course, if more favorable beliefs about LGBT status are associated with less prejudice, the opposite is also true: as negative attitudes toward LGBT identities increase, so too do exclusionary polices, practices, and norms. Though certainly not the case for all intercollegiate athletics in the United States (e.g., Fink et al., 2012), much of that context is characterized by less inclusive institutionalized practices and norms. Melton and Cunningham (2012) have shown, for example, that athletes fear disclosing their sexual orientation to their teams for fear of negative reprisal from their coaches. The threat of reprisal from supervisors and key stakeholders appears to also curtail the sexual orientation disclosure of many coaches (Griffin, 2012). Given that coaches, in many ways, set the tone for their players—wherever they are on the LGBT spectrum (Cunningham, 2015a)—such restrictive forms of identity maintenance can be deleterious for all team members. Finally, Staurowsky (2012) has shown that the media portray traditional forms of femininity and cisgender status as the norm, and deviations from these are met with skepticism by consumers.

Summary. These collective data show that macrolevel factors have the potential to affect the experiences of LGBT athletes. State and federal laws, governing structures and policies, and institutionalized norms and practices have the potential to shape the stigma, or lack thereof, around LGBT status. Importantly, the extant research also shows that sexual stigma is not simply conceptual; rather, it has real effects on real people, influencing their physical and mental well-being (see also Hatzenbuehler, 2017).

Mesolevel Factors
Mesolevel factors are organizational or group-level factors that have the potential to influence the experiences of LGBT athletes. Mesolevel factors necessarily operate within a context shaped by macrolevel factors, though they are not necessarily constrained by them. Rather, even within an exclusionary environmental context, organizations can employ inclusive practices (e.g., including diversity and inclusion in the mission), and they are frequently rewarded for doing so (e.g., Lee & Cunningham, 2015; Pugh, Dietz, Brief, & Wiley, 2008). Salient mesolevel factors affecting LGBT athletes include leader behaviors, organizational culture, education and programming, and the presence of allies (i.e., people who champion inclusion in the workplace or on their work teams).

Leader behaviors. Leaders play a critical role in developing an inclusive space for LGBT athletes. From a social learning theory perspective, “virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (Bandura, 1986, p. 19). That is, people look to others—frequently those in leadership positions—to understand how to act and the acceptable attitudes to hold. Illustrative of these dynamics, Cunningham and Sartore (2010) observed that employees whose supervisors held prodiversity attitudes were themselves likely to advocate for diversity and inclusion.

When it comes to LGBT inclusion, athletes are likely to look to leaders, whether teammates, coaches, or administrators, for acceptable modes of behavior. Fink et al. (2012) observed as much in their study of women’s athletic teams, where players, coaches, and team assistants modeled inclusive behaviors when team members disclosed their lesbian sexual orientation. The support occurred despite antagonism from external stakeholders. As a result, others on the team also offered support and encouragement to those who disclosed their lesbian identity. In a collective case study of leadership among coaches and athletic directors...
in LGBT-inclusive athletic departments, Cunningham (2015a) found a similar pattern. In this case, the leaders openly advocated for LGBT inclusion, both in their departments and in the broader athletics context, and they clearly set expectations for others to follow. The end result was an organizational culture in which all people could excel, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Organizational culture.** According to Schein (1990), *organizational culture* refers to the values, assumptions, and beliefs within an organization that are developed over time and widely followed by organizational members. Culture not only helps shape behaviors of current members but also is taught to newcomers as the acceptable modus operandi. A number of scholars have suggested that organizational culture is a key driver of diverse, inclusive sport organizations (Chelladurai, 2014; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999).

Organizational culture also affects the experiences of LGBT athletes (Fink et al., 2012; Melton & Cunningham, 2012). For example, Cunningham, Pickett, Melton, Lee, and Miner (2014) collected data from members of NCAA women's basketball teams, asking players about their sexual orientation, the degree to which their sexual orientation was an important part of their identity, and the psychological safety on their team. Kahn (1990) suggested that psychological safety represents “feeling able to show and employ one's self- without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (p. 708), and it can be considered as reflective of an inclusive, supportive culture. The researchers were interested in sexual orientation personal identity because of the many positive psychological and behavioral outcomes associated with it among LGBT individuals (see Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Krane et al., 2002). They found that lesbian and bisexual athletes participating on teams with high psychological safety expressed a strong sexual orientation personal identity, and likewise, when the climate was not psychologically safe, bisexual women and lesbians had depressed levels of sexual orientation personal identity. The psychological climate was immaterial for heterosexual players' identity.

Organizational culture also has the potential to influence the success of athletes and athletic teams. In Cunningham's (2015a) study, participants noted that LGBT inclusion meant that people could bring their “whole selves” to the athletic department; that is, they did not need to hide part of their identity and could instead focus on the team-related tasks at hand. For athletes, bringing the whole self to the team meant they did not have to manage concealing their sexual orientation or gender identity around their coaches and teammates and could, instead, focus on performing to the best of their ability.

An earlier empirical study of NCAA athletic departments offers support for these qualitative data (Cunningham, 2011). Specifically, athletic departments that coupled sexual orientation diversity among the employees with an inclusive organizational culture outperformed their peers on Director's Cup points—an objective measure of athletic departments’ performance (for more information, see https://thedirectorscup.com). These data collectively show that inclusive organizational cultures have a meaningful, positive effect on LGBT individuals' identity and performance, as well as on organizational effectiveness.

**Education and programming.** In addition to leader behaviors and organizational culture, education and programming can positively influence the experiences of LGBT athletes. These efforts frequently take the form of more formal diversity training. These developmental activities are commonplace in many organizations but are less frequently observed in sport (Cunningham, 2012b). For those organizations that do offer diversity training, the material is most likely to be applied beyond the training setting when the training is (a) explicitly linked with the sport organization's strategic plan and (b) used as a way of improving performance, as opposed to fulfilling compliance requirements (Cunningham, 2012b).

Education and programming directed toward increasing LGBT-related acumen can pay dividends for LGBT athletes. Barber and Krane (2007), for example, suggested that coaches and administrators should attend LGBT-themed sessions at conferences and read popular-press books on the topic. Doing so, they argued, will demonstrate support
for the LGBT athletes on the team and provide new insights into their experiences. Research in LGBT-inclusive athletic departments has confirmed these positions (Cunningham, 2015a, 2015c). As agents of change, these entities enhanced capacity within their own units by offering book clubs on difficult topics, showing documentaries to athletes, and aligning with national advocacy groups (e.g., You Can Play) to create a culture of inclusion. These efforts improved the awareness and understanding of LGBT issues among coaches, and because of these gains, LGBT athletes also reported positive experiences and growth.

Allies. Finally, the presence of supportive others can also positively influence the experiences of LGBT athletes. Formal leaders are not the only organizational or team members who can work to create and reinforce an inclusive climate. Allies, or “individuals who offer support for diversity initiatives, social justice causes, and people from underrepresented groups” (Cunningham, 2015b, p. 280), can play such a role, too. As members of majority groups, these individuals typically have more power and privilege than do LGBT individuals, and they can use these forms of capital to support diversity-related causes and initiatives (Cunningham, 2014; Martinez & Hebl, 2010).

Athlete Ally, founded by former collegiate wrestler Hudson Taylor, represents an exceptional example of the power of allies. According to Taylor (2015), an Athlete Ally is “any person—regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity—who takes a stand against homophobia or transphobia in sports and brings the message of respect, inclusion and equality to their athletic community” (p. 40). Athlete Allies create inclusive spaces in many ways, including through the Campus Ambassador program. In this initiative, ambassadors start the conversation about the mission of Athlete Allies with coaches, players, and administrators. They also engage their peers and prompt them to combat prejudice and discrimination against LGBT individuals. Finally, ambassadors use social media and other outlets to spread the Athlete Ally message. The end result is thousands of athletes, coaches, and teams who have all pledged to make sport an inclusive space for LGBT athletes. As Taylor observed, “it sends a powerful message when a head coach, team captain, or entire team publically states that they will respect and welcome everyone on their team—no matter how they identify or [to] whom they are attracted” (p. 40).

Summary. This review of mesolevel factors suggests that leader behaviors, organizational and team culture, education and programming, and the presence of allies can all influence LGBT athletes’ experiences. The data suggest that coaches, administrators, and teammates can all contribute to positive experiences. They do so by openly advocating for and modeling inclusive behaviors; shaping and reinforcing respectful, inclusive cultures; engaging in development activities; and serving as allies for LGBT diversity and inclusion, among other behaviors.

Microlevel Factors
Finally, microlevel factors are those operating at the individual level. Importantly, a focus on individual-level influences should not be associated with a blame-the-victim approach. Instead, and consistent with the multilevel perspective, factors at the mesolevel and macrolevel of analysis necessarily influence individuals, their well-being, their attitudes, and their behaviors. In this section, I highlight three such microlevel factors: LGBT status, personal identity, and demographics.

LGBT status. In many cases, including the discussion within this chapter, all people in the LGBT community are considered as a single group. The implicit assumption underlying this practice is that the experiences of, opportunities for, and attitudes toward lesbians (for example) are the same as they are for bisexuals, gay men, and transgender individuals. Although this might hold in some instances, in others it does not.

The differences among members in the LGBT community are perhaps most salient when comparing attitudes toward trans individuals relative to sexual minorities. These differences likely manifest from the assumptions people hold about gender binaries. When expectations about congruence between gender identity and sex assigned at birth are not met, people are likely to react negatively and express bias (Cahn, 2011). Such a position is in line
with Sykes (2006), who suggested that opposition toward trans inclusion is rooted in fears about the destabilization of cultural norms around gender and gender identity. Indeed, despite people’s preference for clearly organized and neatly aligned categories, such categories do not always exist. As Alice Dreger correctly noted, “humans like categories nice and neat . . . nature is a slob” (as quoted in Clarey, 2009, p. B3).

The preference for clear binaries is all the more salient in sport, where teams, championships, record books, and events are demarcated by sex. In many youth sport leagues, children as young as 5 years compete exclusively against same-sex athletes—boys against boys, and girls against girls. This pattern continues and becomes more deeply ingrained and accepted as athletes mature and progress through the sport system. There is little tolerance for or acceptance of athletes who do not fit into the rigid gendered system. Concerns about fairness and undue advantage only serve to augment these negative reactions (Buzuvis, 2012; Tagg, 2012). Empirical support for these dynamics is seen in a longitudinal study by Cunningham and Pickett (2018), in which people in a sport and physical activity setting expressed more prejudice toward trans individuals than they did toward sexual minorities—a pattern that held over time.

**Personal identity.** Although the focus of this chapter has been on athletes who identify as LGBT, people actually have multiple, frequently intersecting identities. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), one’s personal identity constitutes the identity that the individual holds as important to self-concept. It represents a key element of one’s self-image, is reflective of who one is as a person, and informs how one feels about oneself (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Randel & Jaussi, 2003). Brewer (1991) highlighted that personal identity represents characteristics that help differentiate people within a particular context, such as while engaging in sport.

Being able to express one’s personal identity as a member of the LGBT community is important for professional development (Ragins, 2004), and when others fail to recognize this identity, psychological withdrawal can ensue (Pinel & Swann, 2000). Furthermore, people who feel compelled to suppress their LGBT identity are likely to feel guilt and shame (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrypek, 2016; Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016), as well as internalized stigma (Herek, 2009). Recognizing these dynamics, a number of researchers have begun to explore how and when athletes express their LGBT identity. For example, Melton and Cunningham (2012) interviewed lesbians who were competing in collegiate basketball. These athletes reported that their LGBT identity was frequently devalued, whereas other identities, such as their racial identity or athlete identity, were respected and esteemed. These patterns influenced their behaviors, including how they dressed (i.e., to emphasize femininity and presumed heterosexuality) and whether they tried to hide their lesbian identity. Whereas an oppressive environment might force one to feel she must squash her identity as a lesbian, the opposite is also true. In Cunningham et al.’s (2014) study, personal identity as a lesbian was salient when the athletes participated on teams with a psychologically safe environment.

Finally, from a different perspective, Bush, Anderson, and Carr (2012) examined the intersection of athlete identity and prejudice expressed toward gay teammates. They observed that when athlete identity was high, so too was prejudice expressed; however, athlete identity decreased during one’s time at university, and the athletes’ sexual prejudice decreased with it.

**Demographics.** Finally, athletes’ demographics can influence their experiences as LGBT sports competitors. Much of the research in this area has focused on sex, though the findings are somewhat equivocal. On the one hand, stereotypes about gay men position them as being feminine or flamboyant (Bernstein, 2004). Such perceptions run counter to much of the thought about men in sport, where they are expected to be tough and exude traditional forms of masculinity. These conflicting stereotypes result in dissonance and bias toward gay athletes. Supportive of these dynamics, a number of researchers have observed that gay men engaged in sport experience more prejudice than do lesbians (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009).
Although there are demonstrated cases of bias against gay men in sport, there is also emerging evidence of more inclusive attitudes. As previously noted, Anderson’s (Anderson, 2011; McCormack & Anderson, 2014) work has suggested there has been a decrease of hegemonic forms of masculinity in the sport context, in favor of more progressive forms. Alongside this inclusive form of masculinity is a corresponding decrease in prejudice expressed toward bisexual and gay men. From this perspective, prejudice toward gay men is on the decline and might even be less than that expressed toward lesbians. Though she approached the topic from a different perspective, Griffin (2012) seemingly arrived at a similar conclusion. She argued that these biases are rooted in sexism and male privilege, as evidenced by the silencing of athletes, coaches, and administrators who are lesbian.

Race represents another demographic characteristic that influences the experiences of LGBT athletes. Researchers have shown that LGB status is associated with Whiteness (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Whitley, Childs, & Collins, 2011), and as a result, simultaneously being a racial minority and a sexual minority is likely to result in dissonance and bias. Researchers who have examined these dynamics have predominantly focused on the prejudice people express. Southall, Anderson, Nagel, Polite, and Southall (2011) collected data from athletes and observed that African Americans expressed more sexual prejudice than did Whites. Cunningham and Melton (2012) analyzed responses from parents of youth sport participants and observed that Asian parents expressed more sexual prejudice than did their peers, and correlates of sexual prejudice (i.e., contact with other sexual minorities, sexism, and religious fundamentalism) varied by race. Collectively, these data suggest that racial minorities who identify as LGBT are likely to experience more prejudice and discrimination than are their White counterparts.

**Summary.** The three microlevel factors—LGBT status, personal identity, and demographics—and their influence on LGBT athletes’ experiences highlights two points. First, ceteris paribus, LGBT athletes are likely to have different experiences, depending on their individual-level characteristics.

Thus, although it is tempting and perhaps expedient to consider these athletes as a homogeneous group, they most likely are not homogeneous. Second, researchers would do well to more intentionally consider intersectionality, or the degree to which various characteristics and identities interact with one another to inform one’s experiences in the world.

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this chapter was to offer an overview of the experiences of LGBT athletes. The cases of Mack Beggs and the National Hockey League (described in the introduction) illustrate that trans individuals and sexual minorities do not have a common set of experiences. Instead, LGBT athletes’ experiences in sport are dependent upon a host of factors, all of which can result in positive or negative sport involvement. Thus, researchers and sport psychology practitioners need to understand the experiences of LGBT athletes from a multilevel conceptual model perspective, which I outlined in the sections on the macro-, meso-, and microlevel factors that shape the sport’s inclusiveness.

The different levels, however, should not be considered as operating in isolation. A key element of multilevel theorizing is the recognition that levels are embedded in and influence one another (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Klein, Dansereau, and Hall (1994) outlined four types of multilevel models: (a) cross-level, where independent and dependent variables reside at different levels; (b) mixed effects, where a single variable or intervention at one level affects outcomes at different levels; (c) mixed determinants, where predictors at various levels influence a criterion at a single level; and (d) multilevel, where patterns observed at one level of analysis are replicated at other levels, too. Each of these relationship types is possible in the current model.

The foregoing review also brings to light several avenues for future research. Cunningham (2015a) conducted a multiple case study of NCAA athletic departments, illustrating the various ways in which they achieved LGBT inclusion. This work represents the exception, however, rather than the norm. Future researchers thus would do well to understand
how sport organizations in other sectors, including recreational sport, high school athletics, and professional sport, create inclusive and welcoming spaces. Additionally, my review shows that trans athletes face unique barriers to their participation, both in terms of governance structures limiting their involvement and interpersonal prejudice and discrimination. LGB individuals also experience many of these barriers, albeit not to the same degree (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018). Research is needed to understand how biases against trans individuals can be reduced. Furthermore, researchers have generally focused their LGBT-related studies on coaches, players, or parents. Largely missing from these analyses are sport psychologists (Krane, 2016). Additional inquiry is needed to understand sport psychologists’ competencies and deficits when supporting and interacting with LGBT coaches and players.

Finally, the multilevel conceptual model has practical implications and offers cues for action. Coaches, administrators, athletes, psychology consultants, and parents all have the potential to positively affect LGBT athletes’ experiences in sport. State and federal laws are macrolevel factors that might be difficult to influence, but the governing structures of sport, particularly at the community level, and the institutionalized norms within those settings can be contested and altered. Similarly, at the mesolevel of analysis, leaders can model inclusive behaviors, organizational and team members can help create a welcoming culture, coaches and administrators can commit to LGBT-focused training for themselves and their teams, and people of all sexual identities can serve as allies for equality. Training and education on creating inclusive teams benefits athletes and coaches alike (Taylor, 2015). And at the microlevel, it is important to recognize the diversity of the LGBT community and the experiences of community members. As Krane (2016) noted, sport psychologists can mentor team leaders to model inclusive behaviors. Recognizing and valuing varying identities, including people’s sexual orientation personal identity, can foster individual growth and well-being among LGBT athletes. Given the value of LGBT diversity and inclusion, and the obligation to ensure sport is accessible to and can be enjoyed by everyone, such efforts are sorely needed.

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