

Homophobia and Sport Experience: A Survey of College Students

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Athlete (n = 246) and nonathlete (n = 135) students from a mid-sized, rural university completed the Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG; Herek, 1984). Average ratings for attitudes toward and perceptions of gay men and lesbians ranged from negative to mixed. Females scored significantly lower on homophobia than males, while athletes rated significantly higher on homophobia than nonathletes. The results suggest that athletes, at least those from primarily rural areas, have less tolerance for lesbians and gay men than nonathletes. Results and implications for counselors are discussed in the context of the conservatism of athletics, sport as an arena of masculinity, heterosexism, lack of knowledge about lesbians and gay men, and other sociocultural influences.

Historical Context

Attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and homosexuality in general have received considerable attention in the current sociological and social psychological literatures. Kinsey's pioneering studies (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) were the first major attempts to scientifically and statistically describe homosexual behavior, but studies on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men did not begin in earnest until the 1970s. Studies on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men have proliferated during the past 25 years (e.g., Beach, 1977; Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Brown & Amoroso, 1975; Dunbar, Brown, & Amoroso, 1973; Glassner & Owen, 1976; Gurwitz & Marcus, 1978; Henley & Pincus, 1978; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Laner & Laner, 1979; Levitt & Klassen, 1974; MacDonald & Games, 1974; Nyberg & Alston, 1976; Weinberg & Williams, 1974) and currently continue to grow and expand (e.g., Herek, 1988, 1991, 1994; Herek & Glunt, 1991, 1993). Since the emergence of AIDS, research on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians has become even more widespread. Rudolph (1990) reported that from 1974 to 1985, the period in which the AIDS outbreak occurred, the number of respondents who believed that lesbian and gay male relationships are "always wrong" increased from 67% to 73%. Further, there was a reported increase in the number of violent attacks on lesbians and gay men

over a similar time period. It is not clear whether these changes represent true increases in homophobia or a greater willingness to voice homophobic attitudes and more reporting of violent homophobic acts, crimes most assuredly underreported in the past.

Homophobia and Heterosexism

Schreier (1995) defines homophobia as the "illogical fear (of)... people who are gay, lesbian, or homosexual" (p. 19). The word "homophobia" has entered, and is firmly established, in the social psychology lexicon. In some ways it is an unfortunate word in that it emphasizes fear. Fear is only one of the many negative cognitive and emotional responses people may have to lesbians and gay men; other reactions include anger, dislike, disgust, and even pity. Because homophobia is the accepted term, we will use it in this paper with the qualification that it covers the broad range of negative reactions and attitudes people may have toward those with gay and lesbian sexual orientations. Such fears and attitudes can lead to intolerance, hatred, and violent acts against lesbian and gay individuals.

Homophobia is a common and inimical result of a heterosexist world view. Heterosexism is the belief that the only proper intimate sexual behavior for humans is between members of the opposite sex, and that other types of intimate behavior are wrong and even punishable. "Love" is not a gender-free term for the heterosexist, in that expressions of romantic and physical love are reserved for only one type of coupling: male-female. Any other types of romantic couplings are perverted and forbidden. Lesbians and gay men threaten the heterosexist position along with threatening basic heterosexist beliefs about what it is to be a man or a woman, and to be masculine or feminine (Schreier, 1995). This threat can lead to retaliation against lesbians and gay men in the form of prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Much of the sport world remains a bastion of heterosexism (Messner & Sabo, 1994; Pronger, 1990a).

Homophobia in Sport

Recently, a great deal of media attention has been dedicated to the examination of homophobic attitudes and homophobic acts (Seltzer, 1993). Television talk shows, popular magazine articles, and nationally-circulated newspapers commonly feature stories about anti-gay attitudes and violent "gay-bashing" incidents. In the socially conservative realm of sport, however, limited focus has been placed on the lives of gay and lesbian athletes. A few personal accounts of gay and lesbian athletes—and the prejudices they faced—have appeared in the popular press. For example, David Kopay (football; Kopay & Young, 1977), Martina Navratilova (tennis; Navratilova & Vecsey, 1985), Dave Pallone (baseball; Pallone & Steinberg, 1990), and Greg Louganis (diving; Louganis & Marcus, 1995) have discussed their personal experiences and the homophobic atmosphere of professional and international sports. These accounts provide an enlightening glimpse into the lives of gay and lesbian athletes.

Aside from the few examples mentioned above, the scholarly inquiry into competitive sports has, for the most part, remained relatively limited in discussing

homophobia. This suggests a few possible conditions: Homophobia does not exist in sport to the same extent that it exists in the general population; the level of homophobia in sport is comparable to that of society in general, but the topic is avoided for some reason; or that homophobia is an extremely powerful force in sport, keeping men and women "in their places" and pushing lesbian and gay male athletes to stay in their closets (see Griffin, 1992). Given the limited, yet dramatic nature of the discussions that do exist about homophobia in sport (e.g., Kopay & Young 1977; Navratilova & Vecsey, 1985), the last suggestion seems most probable.

Social psychology and sociology researchers are forging ahead in studies of lesbians, gay men, and homophobia. The subject of lesbians and gay men in sport has also received some attention in fields of sport psychology and sport sociology. Recently, there have been discussions related to gay and lesbian athletes at Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) conferences, American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD) meetings, American Psychological Association (APA) Division 47 programs, and other national and international meetings (e.g., Aker, 1993; Bailey, Anderson, & Pacheco, 1994; Butki, Andersen, & Heyman, 1996; Genasci, Genasci, & Griffin, 1994; Greendorfer, 1991; Griffin, 1987; Heyman, 1987; Heyman, Butki, & Andersen, 1994; Krane, 1995, 1996; McConnell, 1995).

Book chapters and published accounts of research on lesbian and gay athletes and homophobia in sport have appeared, but are not plentiful (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992a, 1992b; Griffin, 1989; Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Lenskyj, 1991; ni Cobhan, 1982; Pronger, 1990a, 1990b). Garner and Smith (1977) conducted the first study on the prevalence of lesbians and gay men in sport, but attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and homophobia were not central concerns in that study. Homophobia in sport received some consideration in the late 1980s (e.g., Harris, 1987; Heyman, 1987) but was not extensively examined. Rotella and Murray (1991) wrote the first article in the mainstream sport psychology literature that focused specifically on homophobia in sport. The article may have helped alert sport psychologists to an area of practice and research in need of attention, but it was anecdotal, cited no references from the large literature on homophobia, and appeared to represent primarily the opinions of the authors.

In 1992, in a special issue of *Quest* on women in sport, Griffin (1992) directly addressed the issue of homophobia and lesbians in sport. This work provided an excellent introduction to the roots and problems associated with homophobia. The reference section of this paper offered a glimpse at the state of the discussion of lesbians and homophobia in sport. Many of the references came from conference presentations, the more general feminist literature, and the popular press. This raises a striking question: In light of the large literature on lesbians, gay men, and homophobia, why, until recently, has there been so little published in the sport and athletic counseling literature? We can only speculate, but a tentative suggestion might be that the subjects of lesbians, gay men, and homophobia in sport have only recently gained acceptance as areas of serious inquiry and that their "taboo" and stigmatizing status has only now started to fade. Maybe we are beginning to realize that homophobia is part of sport, a part that helps taint the at-

mosphere of sport with fear, suspicion, innuendo, alienation, and threatened violence (Griffin, 1992).

Herek (1988) has found that several psychosocial and demographic variables (e.g., sex, education, religion, political ideology, past experiences with lesbians and gay men) may influence prejudicial and homophobic reactions to gay men and lesbians. We would like to add the variable of organized sport. Organized sport is a stronghold of heterosexism, exemplified by the title of Garner and Smith's (1977) article "Are there really any gay male athletes?" [sic]. Sport is a major arena for exhibiting masculine behavior (Whitson, 1990) and is also a place where homophobia and the fear of being labeled a "faggot" or "dyke" is pervasive.

Another factor that may have an influence on homophobia is geography. In urban settings, the chance of coming in contact with gay men and lesbians, hearing about local gay events, and having generally a greater exposure to a variety of human behavior is probably higher than in rural America. Along with assessing differential levels of homophobia in athletes and nonathletes, demographic variables, and past experiences with gay men and lesbians, the present study chose participants from a predominantly rural area. Because this study took place at a university serving a primarily rural population in the middle of the United States, we did not believe any results would necessarily generalize beyond rural North American populations. Nevertheless, rural populations comprise significant parts of the American population and American student-athletes, and their attitudes are worthy of investigation. In an attempt to begin to expand the range of studies on homophobia in sport and to conduct data-based research, this study sought to examine if there were differences in the levels of homophobia among athletes and nonathletes.

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of college students ($N = 381$) enrolled in introductory psychology courses. Participants formed four groups: female nonathletes ($n = 85$), female athletes ($n = 107$), male nonathletes ($n = 50$), and male athletes ($n = 135$). A participant fit into the "athlete" category if he or she had participated in at least one varsity sport in college (participation in a varsity sport implied at least a high school career in organized sport, and probably longer). Four participants did not state their gender or athletic history and were excluded from the analyses. Another participant was also excluded (see below), resulting in a total of 376 analyzable records.

Questionnaires

The demographic questionnaire contained items related to age, sex, ethnicity, major, year in college, participation in high school and college sports, type of sport (contact, noncontact), and sexual orientation. The sexual orientation item was a checklist ranging from *exclusively heterosexual* to *exclusively homosexual*.

Herek's Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG; 1984) was used to measure students' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Herek designed

the ATLG primarily as a measure of heterosexual people's attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. It contains 20 items that express different attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (e.g., "Female homosexuality is a sin"; "Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human men"). Participants respond to each item on a three-point scale (i.e., 1 = *agree*, 2 = *mixed*, 3 = *disagree*). The ATLG produces three scores for these 20 items (i.e., homophobia for gay men, homophobia for lesbians, and a total homophobia score). The ATLG also contains three other items; the first item concerns whether the participant personally knows gay men or lesbians, and if so, how many of each. The final two items concern perceptions when meeting gay men or lesbians (i.e., how the gay man's or lesbian's sexual orientation affects perception of that individual positively or negatively). Participants rate these two items on a five point scale, ranging from 1 (*I see them very negatively*) to 5 (*I see them very positively*).

The ATLG has undergone extensive development, testing, and refinement. Herek (1994) has reported alpha coefficients for the gay male homophobia and the lesbian homophobia subscales of .91 and .90, respectively, with an alpha of .95 for the total scale. Test-retest reliability coefficients have ranged from .83 to .90.

Procedure

The volunteer participants completed standard consent forms that assured anonymity. After brief instructions (e.g., "please answer the items as honestly as possible") and clarifications (e.g., responses were anonymous and that individuals would not be identified), participants completed the demographic questionnaires and the ATLG. The experimenter then collected all the surveys, answered any questions the participants had, and thanked them for taking part in the study.

Results

Description of the Sample

Participants averaged 20.6 years of age ($SD = 4.5$) and were predominantly Caucasian (90%). They represented a variety of majors, with many psychology students (50%) and a substantial number with undeclared majors (24%). Most of the participants were freshmen and sophomores (79%). The majority of the sample had organized athletic experience (64%). All but one of the participants described themselves as exclusively heterosexual; that participant was not included in the analyses. For the total sample, 40% reported that they knew gay men or lesbians. For those reporting knowing gay men or lesbians, the mean number of gay men and lesbians known was 2.2 ($SD = 2.5$) and 1.7 ($SD = 3.2$), respectively.

Analyses of Variance

Two-by-two (Gender x Athletic Status) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted on the dependent variables of gay male homophobia, lesbian homophobia, total homophobia, perception of gay men, and perception of lesbians. Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Lesbian, Gay Male, and Total Homophobia, and Perceptions of Gay Men and Lesbians for Males, Females, Athletes, and Nonathletes

	Homophobia						Perceptions			
	Gay Male		Lesbian		Total		Gay Male		Lesbian	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Females	19.8	2.6	19.2	3.2	39.1	5.1	2.4	.80	2.3	.85
Males	21.3	2.2	20.8	3.3	42.1	5.0	1.7	.81	2.1	.92
Athletes	21.0	2.4	20.5	3.2	41.6	5.0	1.9	.80	2.1	.88
Nonathletes	20.3	2.6	19.8	3.4	40.1	5.4	2.5	.89	2.4	.88

Note. For homophobia, higher scores represent greater homophobia. For perceptions, higher scores represent more positive perceptions.

There were main effects for gender, with males rating higher than females on homophobia for gay men, $F(1, 372) = 37.58, p < .0001$; lesbian homophobia, $F(1, 372) = 16.88, p < .0001$; total homophobia, $F(1, 372) = 28.91, p < .0001$; and negative perceptions of gay men, $F(1, 273) = 39.72, p < .0001$ (99 participants did not answer this item). The athletic status (athlete/nonathlete) variable also produced several main effects. Athletes had greater homophobia for gay men, $F(1, 372) = 4.68, p < .03$; homophobia for lesbians, $F(1, 372) = 4.66, p < .03$; total homophobia, $F(1, 372) = 4.60, p < .03$; and more negative perceptions of gay men, $F(1, 273) = 24.27, p < .0001$; and lesbians $F(1, 273) = 6.18, p < .02$ than nonathletes. None of the ANOVAs produced significant interactions.

Males in noncontact (e.g., swimming, track and field) sports were no different than males in contact sports (e.g., wrestling, football) on any of the attitude and perception measures. Finally, for all of the homophobia measures, those participants who personally knew a gay man or a lesbian rated no differently than those with no personal acquaintance. Table 2 presents the effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for the ATLG and the perception items.

TABLE 2

Effect Sizes (Cohen's *d*) for Lesbian, Gay Male, and Total Homophobia, and Perceptions of Gay Men and Lesbians by Sex and Athletic Status

	Homophobia			Perceptions	
	Gay Male	Lesbian	Total	Gay Male	Lesbian
Female/Male	.58	.50	.59	.88	.24
Nonathlete/Athlete	.27	.21	.28	.67	.34

Discussion

It was surprising that all but one of the participants claimed they were exclusively heterosexual. We were interested in heterosexual attitudes towards gay men and lesbians and would have eliminated any gay participants from the analyses, but having to eliminate only one participant was unexpected. The exact prevalence of lesbians and gay men in the general population is debatable, but it is quite likely greater than the 0.4% represented here. It may be that the homophobic atmosphere is so pervasive (and internalized) in the part of the country where this study was conducted that denial has become a major defense, for some, as a response to a perceived hostile environment. In light of the highly negative perceptions of gay men and lesbians found in this study, this result may not be so surprising. Fear of stigmatization and the exposure of one's sexual orientation can be particularly strong in this age group (Martin & Hetrick, 1988), and may be even stronger in rural settings where "everyone knows everyone."

Scores on the ATLG can range from 10 to 30 for gay male and lesbian homophobia and from 20 to 60 for total homophobia. Table 1 shows that average scores for gay male and lesbian homophobia ranged from 19.2 to 21.3 for all participant groups: females, males, athletes, and nonathletes. Many of the differences between males and females, and athletes and nonathletes for homophobia were statistically significant, but the actual differences between groups appear rather small. These "middle mean" scores represent predominantly mixed or ambivalent attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

The perceptions of gay men and lesbians data, however, offer a clearer picture. Average scores for perceptions of gay men and lesbians among the four groups of participants ranged from 1.7 to 2.5. These scores represent much more negative reactions than the ATLG scores on attitudes. The differences between the attitude scores and the perception scores may be due to the more abstract and general nature of the attitude items and the more personal nature of the perception items (e.g., "Female homosexuality is a sin" versus "When you meet a lesbian, how does her sexual orientation affect your perception of her?" [italics added]).

The effect sizes in Table 2 reveal that gender is the stronger variable when considering attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Males have more negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, with effect sizes in the moderate or medium range. For perceptions of gay men, however, males have substantially more negative perceptions than females, and the effect size is in the large range. Males and females, on the average, have negative perceptions of gay men, but among males, the negative reactions appear stronger. These results follow previous patterns of homophobia found among males and females (Herek, 1988; 1994). Males also had more negative reactions to gay men than to lesbians. It may be that gay men represent more of a threat to beliefs about masculinity than lesbians do.

For athletes versus nonathletes, all of the differences, except for perceptions of gay men, fall in the small effect size range. The effect size of .67 (medium range) for athletes having more negative perceptions of gay men than nonathletes may be confounded by there being 135 male athletes and only 50 male nonathletes. Thus, this medium effect size may be due in part to differences between males

and females in athletic status.

Personally knowing a lesbian or gay male was not a factor in levels of homophobia or perceptions of lesbians and gay men. This somewhat surprising result could be due to how the question was asked. The question was: "Do you personally know a lesbian or a gay man?" "Knowing" does not necessarily mean "associating with." Thus, one could know lesbians and gay men but really have nothing to do with them. The results would probably have been different if we had asked "Do you have a friend, relative, or acquaintance who is a lesbian or gay man?"

The results of this study seem to indicate that ambivalent attitudes and negative perceptions of gay men and lesbians remain fairly strong among college students at this school. This university serves a predominantly small town and rural population; a similar study at a large urban university might produce different results.

As in previous research with the ATLG, females exhibited less homophobia than males (Herek, 1988; 1994). The athlete/nonathlete variable, while significantly different on all the attitude and perception variables, did not produce effect sizes outside the small range except for the perception of gay men variable. Thus, it appears that participation in organized sports has a small influence on homophobic responses, but one's gender, or more likely, the different socialization patterns experienced because one is male or female, have a greater influence on how one views gay men and lesbians.

The present results suggest somewhat higher levels of homophobia than Herek's (1994) major study, which found that males were more homophobic than females and that participants from the central part of the United States were more homophobic than participants from the northeast and the west coast. For example, Herek found that males had mean total homophobia scores of 40.1, and for females the mean was 32.2. It seems then, that homophobia among athletes at this school is at least as strong, if not stronger, than homophobia in the general society.

A variety of factors may contribute to homophobic attitudes and perceptions. Herek (1994) found that homophobia is sometimes related to demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, education, age, geography, religion, and political ideology. We might now add that participation in organized sport (at least in the region of this study) may account for a small portion of the variance in homophobia. Why might this be so? Sport, in the area served by the university, plays a central role in communities and embodies conservative and traditional American values (e.g., the central role of the family, sturdy religious ties, patriotism, strong work ethic). Bonded firmly to those traditional American values is a heterosexist world view. Also, knowledge of, and encounters with, gay men and lesbians may be more restricted in rural America than in urban areas.

This is one of the first data-based studies examining homophobia in athletic populations. As a first study it has some weaknesses, but those weaknesses point to future directions in this line of inquiry. For example, the term "athlete"—which has always been associated with operational definition problems—was rather broadly defined as participation in organized college sports programs. Future re-

search may want to define athlete more restrictively (e.g., four years in organized college sports) to determine if extensive involvement in sport truly does influence homophobic attitudes. Almost half the participants were psychology majors, and this may have affected the results in that psychology students might be more liberal than college students in general. Thus, it is possible that we have underestimated the extent of homophobia at this university. This study also involved a predominantly small town and rural population. Future comparisons between urban and rural populations, different ethnic groups, and different political ideologies might give us a better picture of homophobia in the sport environment.

Implications for Athletic Counselors

This study probably confirms what many academic athletic counselors already know: The world of intercollegiate athletics is an area where homophobia is alive and well. Combating homophobia in intercollegiate athletics is a daunting and threatening undertaking. In many cases, the hint that someone in intercollegiate athletics is a lesbian or gay man is enough to be dropped from a team, not have a contract renewed, or be fired outright (Squires & Sparkes, 1996). For the academic athletic counselors who push for diversity education and foster the confidences of athletes suspected of being lesbian or gay, suspicion may descend on them concerning their own sexual orientation. Athletic counselors may wish to familiarize themselves with the concerns of lesbian and gay male athletes and consult with the main student counseling centers on programs and workshops available for lesbian and gay male students. They may also wish to add books (e.g., Kopay & Young, 1977; Navratilova & Vecsey, 1985) that could serve as valuable reading material for lesbian and gay male intercollegiate athletes to their professional libraries.

What else can athletic counselors do? Whether athletic counselors like it or not, they do become role models for athletes. Modeling an intolerance for all the "isms" (e.g., sexism, racism) and homophobia may help communicate to athletes that it is just not acceptable to be prejudiced. One athletic counselor we know, in her first meetings with new athletes under her care, specifically mentions that racism, sexism, and homophobia are not going to come into her office. She then talks about women athletes, athletes of color, and even brings up Greg Louganis as an example of excellence. Her modeling of tolerance for all athletes and intolerance for prejudice probably helps some athletes get the message that accepting diversity in athletics is also a way of encouraging excellence.

Most athletic departments are probably not ready for a "Combating Homophobia in Sport" workshop. Combating homophobia is more likely to occur at the individual and personal level as athletic counselors work with athletes. In terms of working with lesbian and gay male athletes, athletic counselors do not usually have the level of confidentiality that a clinical psychologist has, but the message can be given to athletes that they are welcome to discuss anything with the athletic counselor and that personal information will be kept confidential. The athletic counselor we mentioned above says to her athletes: "In my office we can talk about anything on your mind, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, your family, and whatever we discuss in those personal areas will not go outside my office walls.

If, however, you start telling me about the \$1,000 you got from a booster, then I am going to have to be talking to someone else about it." Many times athletes just want, and need, someone to talk to, and often that will be the athletic counselor. Sending out the message of tolerance and confidentiality opens the door for athletes to discuss important personal issues such as sexuality. The athletic counselor's office can become a place where lesbian and gay male athletes can feel safe and can also be a place where heterosexual athletes can learn from a model of tolerance and acceptance.

Conclusion

Athletic counselors in intercollegiate athletics departments work with lesbian and gay male athletes on a regular basis whether they know the athletes' sexual orientations or not. Anyone working in such departments would recognize that open discussion of the problems and concerns of lesbian and gay male athletes is not in any way common. The problems of lesbian and gay male athletes usually have less to do with their sexual orientations and more to do with the homophobic environment in which they find themselves. Many lesbian and gay male athletes are quite comfortable with their sexuality, but the problems that occur for them are connected to negative attitudes in the athletic community. For example, if it were revealed that an athlete was lesbian or gay, the results of that knowledge could lead to less playing time, being removed from the team, and even violence from other teammates. Thus, fear of being "outed" could be a strong concern of lesbian and gay male athletes, and this is not a problem of sexual orientation. Rather, it is a problem because of the attitudes towards lesbian and gay men in society in general, and in the world of sport in particular. Understanding homophobia in sport, its prevalence, its correlates, and its effects will help us begin to start change in sport aimed at moving from intolerance to acceptance (the loftier goal of celebrating diversity in sport seems quite a long way off). Academic athletic counselors are in a unique position to influence the growth of tolerance among athletes and athletic department staff, and where that growth can start is with academic counselors as models themselves.

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